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GENERAL OVERVIEW & KEY OBJECTIVES

Miles recently undertook an in-depth audit to provide Explore Minnesota Tourism with a comprehensive assessment, analysis and strategic recommendations for various elements of its existing digital assets and marketing channels. This report encompasses the findings and recommendations from that audit.

This audit focused on:

- **Creation of a performance and analytics framework** – Using information gathered from Minnesota’s internal team and evaluating the organization’s strategic priorities, recommend a prioritized performance framework to help focus and align efforts across the organization. We also include feedback about the organization’s current analytics and reporting setup.

- **Content & SEO audit** – A top-level review of major content areas and critical content units across leisure, international, meetings, sports, travel trade and other B2B sections of the site. Evaluating content performance against a range of content metrics, from brand voice, topic and structure to bounce rate, pageviews and other traffic/engagement data.

- **User experience and user interaction audit and recommendations** – Conducted in tandem with the content & SEO audit, a review of the overall user experience of the site, including recommendations for specific pages’ user interface design and interactive experience.

- **Partner program analysis and strategy** – Current performance assessment, revenue potential, marketplace assessment and strategy for addressing website opportunities, sponsored content, email and mobile considerations.

- **Systems & technology recommendations** – A review of the current platforms in use, including CMS and caching technologies, and a summary of opportunities and considerations for Explore Minnesota Tourism regarding its technology stack.

The objective of this document is to deliver assessment results and recommendations to Explore Minnesota Tourism that are actionable, practical and achievable.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Miles has audited five areas of Explore Minnesota Tourism’s digital marketing strategy that contribute to its marketing success. The following bullet points summarize key findings and opportunities from each area of the project.

Goals & Analytics Framework

Explore Minnesota Tourism has a robust tracking setup on the website and the team has good visibility over a broad range of metrics relevant to marketing and operational data points. The challenge is that this data is not compiled and distributed in a way that socializes the information across the departments within the organization. Instead, information is siloed within the departments dealing most closely with that aspect of the organization’s operations, and opportunities to create complementary strategies that move everyone in the same direction under a shared understanding and prioritization of goals are missed. A summary of findings and recommendations is below, with detailed analysis and practical advice available in later sections of this report.

- Focus marketing activity on what the overall team agrees to be the most important web marketing goals for the organization. The top 3 goals, starting with the most important, are: generating destination awareness, destination affinity and travel intent.

- Align organizational investment, marketing tactics and resource allocation with the priorities above. All other objectives are secondary to these priorities and should be considered in the context of their overall required investment vs. impact in supporting the goals above.

- Socialize a shared framework of key performance indicators (KPIs) or metrics that reflect the key goals listed above across all tourism departments. It should serve to clarify each individual marketing channel/platform’s role and align tactical priorities for supporting the greater goals. Include third-party vendors in this process, and update analytics setup and organization-wide reporting documents to align with this framework.

- Consolidate and enhance referral event setup and reporting in Google Analytics by pooling all partners under two event categories: “Listing Results” and “Profiles.” Under the Action parameter, use a pipe to group “site section | action” together, e.g. “Places to Stay | Book Now” and keep the label as is, using the partner’s business name.

- Tweak goal and event setup for a number of goals to enable more detailed reporting as well as easier aggregation of certain behavioral data, e.g. adding publication names as labels for PubOrder, and limiting PubOrder goal completions to view, downloads and form completions, removing additions to the order form from the goal tally.
• Include section or page names in page- and section-specific events to make them easier to find. These include homepage-specific events and events that are contained within the Pedal MN section of the site.

• Include a number of additional best practices in the event tracking setup on the site. These include setting up outbound link tracking sitewide, video tracking for all videos, download tracking for all downloadable files and scroll-depth tracking for specific types of pages.

• Continue the current practice of reporting on campaign performance “beyond-the-click” using Google Analytics. This is an ideal way to understand the quality of campaign traffic as it relates to supporting Explore Minnesota’s overall online goals.

• Consider weighting goals using “goal value” in Google Analytics to reflect how these analytics goals correspond to how the organization prioritizes and views ROI in the overall marketing goals framework.

• Create or update a central electronic dashboard report that can be accessed and shared among the various teams involved in Explore Minnesota Tourism’s digital marketing efforts. In addition to creating sections for the detailed information included in the current Colle McVoy and Excel Activity Reports, include a simplified top-level report that summarizes performance against the highest priority KPIs. Use this dashboard to share insights and facilitate regular check-ins that create complementary alignment of effort across departments.

• Use the data currently housed in the more detailed Colle McVoy and Excel Activity Reports to proactively refine programs, platforms and campaigns, focusing effort and investment on those areas delivering significant ROI. Cull the programs, platforms and campaigns where trends show a continued lack of performance in favor of testing investments in new areas that are closely aligned with high-priority goals and deliver significant ROI.

Content & UX

An area where Explore Minnesota’s digital marketing platform, specifically its website, could use significant improvement is in serving the higher-funnel stages of the travel planning cycle – from awareness of the destination to generating interest and influencing affinity.

Visitors to a local CVB site or other more conversion-oriented travel web experience like an online travel agency site are more likely to have already decided where (and even when) they are traveling than visitors exploring at the state level. State-level DMOs have broader reach and are well-positioned to build awareness and educate travelers about what the state has to offer. As anyone reading this report is likely aware, the role of a state-level DMO has evolved well beyond being the keeper of a state travel directory. Its role is to be a demand generator for travel to the state, and its website platform should reflect that position.
Given the Explore Minnesota Tourism team’s top three goals, the website’s heavy emphasis on partner listing data early in the user flow and the shortage of immersive imagery and inspirational content that tells the story of Minnesota’s travel experiences presents an opportunity. A positive here is that a wealth of quality storytelling content already exists on the site. The challenge comes in surfacing that content in a discoverable and immersive way at the right places along the journey, and in using natural connections between content to create an organic experience that leads the traveler from inspiration to interest and affinity, and then to intent. Editors and site visitors would benefit strongly from greater flexibility in the presentation of content on the site – especially on editorial and landing pages.

- **Homepage** and #OnlyinMN pages feel fresh and modern and communicate a sense of the destination’s personality. Travelers want to see more pages in this style throughout the site.

- Mobile users on the smallest devices lose some fresh, seasonal interest-based content on the homepage, and there isn’t a way to dig into more content about a particular interest from that feature. **Consider including a link to access more seasonal interest-focused content**, e.g. “More Culinary Trip Ideas for Summer.”

- After leaving the homepage, the immersive, curated feel of the site all but disappears, skipping from high-funnel inspiration straight into partner-level planning. **Revisit landing page layout and content to incorporate large, high-quality photography and include content that bridges the user more gently from awareness of Minnesota into interest and affinity.** **Prioritize editorial storytelling and voice** over the low-funnel referral actions that belong deeper in the journey and do not correspond as strongly to Explore Minnesota Tourism’s highest priority goals.

- While the editorial features at the top of many interest-based landing pages make up some of the highest-value content on the site, their clipped labeling (“Inspiration”), equal weight, and the quality of the imagery they receive on the page makes them easy to overlook. There is an opportunity for more impactful, engaging storytelling through photos and headlines that could be well supported by incorporating Travel Ideas more integrally into landing pages. Image choice, image quality and general presentation on the page are currently limiting the impact of this feature.

- **Eliminate generic stock photography** wherever possible. Use photography to paint a picture of the region and to highlight what makes a particular place special vs. other similar places a visitor may be familiar with.

- On landing pages, **include a link as part of the “Inspiration” section that allows visitors to dive deeper into more content that is related to the topic on the page** – either the interest or the region. This will help surface more editorial content and support the needs of higher-funnel visitors, who may not yet be ready to start searching for information partner by partner.

- On interest and geographic landing pages, the **brand voice is often lost to somewhat generic intro copy and practical category labels**. Headings on landing pages are often
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redundant instead of adding to the experience, and the intro copy lacks specificity. In some cases, like on the subpages of the “Places to Stay” section, there is no intro copy present at all. Vivid details describing specific sounds, colors, senses and experiences would help bring this copy to life and create a unique sense of place.

• Line length of the intro copy on landing pages makes it difficult to scan and read, which makes it unlikely that many readers are paying attention to it. When designing for reading on the web, aim for an ideal character count per line between 45 and 85 characters. Use headings, pull quotes, informative captions and other details to enhance readability and readership.

• Integrate a broader range of curated social experiences like #OnlyinMN into the user flow in a more visible way – on landing pages like Places to Stay, Things to Do, Drink & Eat and on regional landing pages under Where to Go. Consider ways to make the calls to action that link to editorial content more prominent. Find out: are people clicking on these and can anything be done to deepen engagement and optimize for this behavior?

• Focus article / travel ideas content tagging more discriminately to sharpen and diversify content presentation across landing pages. This will also meet visitor expectations more effectively.

• Infuse the brand voice into feature articles. Revisit articles like “International Flavors Spice Up the Twin Cities” to add richer detail and specificity that shifts them from newsy and fact-focused to experience-focused.

• Review the Travel Ideas article collection for outdated articles and duplicative content. Consolidate this content and continue to use tags to surface it in relevant places, especially on landing pages and editorial. Focus content efforts on developing a strong base of evergreen content and consider a feature that expires timely content and presents it in a list for editors to revisit after the timely event has passed.

• Explore whether it is possible to refine article presentation within the current constraints of the CMS. Some quick wins might include: reducing line length for copy but leaving the container width the same to allow right-aligned images to “break the grid” and create visual interest; incorporating stylized “intro” and/or blockquote styles to help break up copy and make it easier for visitors to scan the content; including large, high-quality hero images at the start of articles to draw the reader in; including informative and easy-to-read captions on all images shown within the body of the article; adding a map that plots partners mentioned in the article; incorporating a second tier of headings to help break up long content sections.

• If possible within the constraints of the current CMS, move away from boxy, prescriptive page presentation and introduce a range of flexible, modular layout elements that can be mixed and matched to support the story of a page in ways that are optimal for the content available for that specific page.

• Work with partners to improve the depth and quality of partner photography on the site.
• **Include regional filters on partner listing search results.** Visitors less familiar with the destination and/or higher in the decision-making funnel may not know the names of all the towns in a particular area and will benefit from more general filtration options, while visitors who are familiar with where they are going and already have strong travel intent are more likely to use specific city and town names.

• **Revisit or clarify the Events listing search sort logic.** Events calendars are typically chronological, so the current sort order is challenging to navigate.

• **Consider aligning event dates on the left side of the result,** where they are more easily readable. This could have the added bonus of allowing the region labels to go back to the right corner where they appear on other listing results.

• **Show venue names on events listing search results.**

• On partner listing pages, respond to the insights from Phocuswright’s “funnel revolution” research by **providing links back up the traditional funnel to editorial pages where a partner is highlighted.** This closes the loop that connects the inspiration and planning behaviors that visitors often cycle between when planning a trip.

• The **guide order form** is very long and complex. We have **concerns about conversion rates** but given the way events related to the goal and the goal itself are configured it is **difficult to draw any conclusions at this time.** We recommend revisiting this question after analytics concerns described in the analytics section of this report are addressed.

• The **“Add to Favorites” tool has a very low rate of use** by site visitors. This is **not unusual for this sort of tool,** but we have seen some limited instances where use is higher. If overhead for maintaining this tool is low, we suggest testing adding it to editorial content pages as well. This, combined with improved visibility and placement for editorial content on the site, could increase use of the tool by visitors. If rebuilding the site, consider dropping the tool from the features list if cost vs. benefit concerns are an issue.

• Considering the high priority given to partners as the top B2B audience of the site, the **website content on the industry site is thorough and deep.** The **interface and formatting need updating,** however. This site section’s front end should be updated to align with the leisure site’s styling and should be converted to a responsive design.

• The **Media Room’s landing page** is the most successfully presented of the B2B landing pages on the site. **Line length on the Press Release list** on the landing page should be shortened for easier reading. Look to **incorporate a more visual, photo-rich feel into similar B2B audience landing pages.**

• On B2B landing pages like **Meetings and Sports,** incorporate more imagery and visual cues that show off the personality and feel of the destination. Meetings and Sports planners are increasingly behaving like leisure travelers, so greeting them with a basis of visually appealing and inspirational content to help them plan their events is important when they arrive on the site. The **same holds true for the Travel Trade** landing page.
• **Review the usability of the Meetings-specific filters on the site.** Entering sleeping room counts and/or meeting facility capacity resulted in no results for our team.

• If referring to local CVBs is the goal for the Sports and Meetings sections of the site, there is an opportunity to **prioritize CVB contact and referral information** in a user-friendly and informational manner across venue listings and the landing page itself.

• **All of the interface notes** about prioritizing and breaking up copy, shortening line length, using headlines and other styling tools to format information to make it more consumable, and providing visual cues to steer visitors into pathways to the information they are interested in on the leisure site also **apply on the B2B sites.**

• **B2B sections should have dedicated navigation** to make it easier for these audiences to navigate their section of the site, and pages should be revisited to align the content presentation with the highest priority KPIs for each section of the site.

• Metadata on Spanish-language pages cites the page language as English, sending mixed messages to Spanish-language search engines. If available, **activate multilingual/internationalization features within the CMS that allow for translation of the interface and provide proper language cues** to search engines.

• Given the existing investment in Spanish-language content, **develop a landing page for Spanish-speaking site visitors** that presents the content and interface in Spanish and organizes the content in a more curated and experience-driven way.

**SEO**

Explore Minnesota’s CMS has the **fields in place to support basic on-page meta tagging** for SEO, including title tags and meta descriptions, but it’s evident from the content in place in those fields that **SEO has not been a focus** for site editors. Despite this circumstance, analytics data for the site tells us that organic traffic to the site has increased year-on-year since 2016. This indicates that there is a **strong opportunity for increased organic traffic growth** if focus is put on organizing an SEO strategy for the site, with technical and content best practices implemented.

• **Conduct keyword research** to identify the highest-volume, highest-opportunity keywords for any given page, and use this information to **customize title tags** and optimize on-page content for a focused set of keywords.

• **Use the keyword reports included in the appendices of this audit to identify high-opportunity keywords** that Explore Minnesota can capitalize on with content. The organization has the opportunity to understand current page performance and develop and optimize high and mid-funnel inspirational content to support travelers searching for “road trip ideas,” “weekend trips,” “girls trip ideas,” “bicycle trips,” “things to do in Grand Rapids” and more.
• **Optimize heading tags for commonly searched keywords** to enhance discoverability of content in search. Leverage a hierarchy of heading tags to help organize content and make it easier for the reader to scan. This makes key messages easier to digest – for search engines and for people.

• **Increase the use of internal links in articles dramatically.** Link to the profile pages for partners when they are mentioned in editorial features, allowing the reader to dive deeper into the planning process in an actionable way. Also link to regional landing pages and related article pages where relevant.

• **Avoid “click here” links.** Use descriptive keywords in anchor text instead.

• **Ensure that every page on the site** that search engines should be able to detect is included in the site’s **XML sitemap.** We see two sitemaps loaded in Google Search Console, neither of which contains the site’s editorial “Trip Ideas” pages.

• Include **OpenGraph and Twitter card metadata** on every page. This is not SEO-specific, but social sharing optimization is a related topic and the improvement is easy to implement if the CMS supports it. Adding well-optimized social metadata will improve click through rates on shared content by improving the presentation of shared content on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

### Partner Program Strategy

In reviewing Explore Minnesota’s current partner content programs, we found **opportunities to expand and diversify** the options partners have to promote their businesses on the site, **create more equity** in how partner advertising content is delivered, and **provide greater value to partners while enhancing the visitor experience** through contextually delivered content. There is also some opportunity to streamline programs to simplify administration. The recommendations below involve refactoring and optimizing existing partner content programs as well as developing additional features and functionality on the website to service these programs.

• **Use context cues** from your users to deliver advertising content effectively across a diverse portfolio of advertising products. Ads can be trafficked on a page, channel or behavioral basis to open up flexibility in inventory management.

• **Articulate the value of Explore Minnesota’s audience** in creating a qualified advertising opportunity for partners in sales communications. As the state DMO, Explore Minnesota Tourism has a uniquely qualified pool of potential customers that is unmatched in other advertising outlets.

• **Educate partners about how to measure the quality of advertising traffic** vs. the quantity using simple attribution techniques, which generally reveals the comparably high conversion rate of DMO audiences versus other digital channels.
• **Move to a tiered impression-based banner advertising model.** This will allow more equitable distribution of advertising and more control for partners to optimize their investment while opening up opportunities for increased revenue.

• **Shift to a native-focused advertising strategy.** Maintain user experience while integrating ads more deeply into pages and content on the site, allowing for improved performance.

• **Re-evaluate ad placement on the page.** Ad units placed at the bottom of a page will rack up impression count but will not perform optimally for the advertiser.

• **Analyze the added engagement value of the Enhanced Listing product** and evaluate whether to combine it with the Featured Search Results product or allow all partners to take maximum advantage of site content offered to visitors by way of more photos and referral opportunities. A combined product sold on a quarterly or annual basis may streamline program management and technological considerations.

• **Introduce an opt-in leads program,** where website visitors who have recently ordered a visitor guide or signed up for your newsletter can opt in to receive more information from specific partners participating in the program.

• **Offer native content and sponsored video development programs** to tier-one partners who could benefit from content developed and published on Explore Minnesota’s channels.

• **Expand and diversify email newsletter advertising options** to accommodate a range of price points and share-of-voice options for the advertiser.

## Systems & Technology

A critical requirement of a **modern enterprise website platform** is to ensure it is **architected and configured for flexibility.** Tourism organizations like Explore Minnesota Tourism frequently face new market and technology developments, and they **need to be able to respond to these changes with agility.** The website CMS and Tourism Manager system that Explore Minnesota is currently using is a **heavily customized boutique proprietary system** developed by a vendor who has since retired the REIgnition CMS, and many of its user interface characteristics and underlying assumptions about how it organizes and presents content are outdated.

As an organization aiming to position its technology platforms for the future, Explore Minnesota should **evaluate its current position** based on **current web and digital standards, emerging technologies, its organizational goals** and the **technical requirements for delivering on those goals.** The following findings and recommendations concern the systems that support Explore Minnesota’s website CMS and Tourism Manager as well as the front-end website integrations supporting social tactics, content tactics and customer service efforts.
Back-End Systems

- The last release notes for the CMS were posted over two years ago. This is concerning from a security and stability perspective.

- The CMS’ admin user interface approach is showing its age. Newer systems tend to favor a component-based page layout vs. strict page templates, which gives editors superior flexibility and control over the presentation of content to suit its audience and the unique characteristics of each on-page experience.

- The CMS’ current configuration presents some problems for caching and for use of content delivery networks, which are recommended for improving site speed. Explore whether it is possible to allow specification of cache lifetime headers for content, work with a front-end caching layer like Varnish, and replace generic image and video URLs that use query strings to improve caching and CDN use.

- The proprietary and boutique nature of the current CMS means that Explore Minnesota is reliant on the platform vendor’s internal team to innovate on the platform, discover and develop patches for security holes, develop custom integrations for external platforms, and modernize the platform as time passes. An established and widely used open-source platform has a community of users and vendors contributing to the CMS, and any vendor can use those contributed improvements. This often results in superior security, stability and speedier innovation than is possible in proprietary environments, especially concerning boutique proprietary products.

- The boutique proprietary nature of the current CMS also ties the fate of Explore Minnesota’s underlying systems architecture to a single technology vendor, while the use of a more widely adopted open-source CMS platform would allow access to the source code and would allow the organization to access a wider vendor and user community in the case of a vendor being sold or going out of business, or in the case of a need to shift vendors for whatever reason. The same is true of more widely adopted proprietary platforms, typically with the exception of access to source code.

- Optimize server loads and site speed by integrating a content delivery network and web application firewall service.

- Minimize the use of redirects on the site in places where they are not necessary, especially when loading the homepage. The URL http://www.exploreminnesota.com/ should optimally return a 200 response, and all other related URLs for the homepage would serve 301 redirects to that address. Currently, the main URL redirects twice before landing the user at http://www.exploreminnesota.com/index.aspx

- Move the admin and www sites to HTTPS/SSL status as soon as possible.

- If not already hosting on cloud-based virtual machines deployed with load balancers configured for a failover scenario, move in this direction as soon as possible to ensure redundancy and stability in the face of potential failures.
• **Incorporate a combination of traditional full weekly and incremental daily backups combined with virtual machine snapshots** to allow for various recovery options when the unexpected happens.

• **Consider the benefit/value vs. failure risk and maintenance overhead of having Explore Minnesota’s entire architecture integrated into a single system.** Separation of systems can create a more modular architecture that allows for faster and less complex shifts in strategy and/or technology.

**Front-End Systems/Integrations**

• **Chute social integration on the #OnlyinMN page is well curated and presented.** Chute’s features for linking socially curated content to a DMO’s own content via CTAs is leveraged here in alignment with best practice.

• **Sharing tools are present on appropriate pages, but social metadata is not.** At minimum, **include OpenGraph and Twitter card tags** that will lend to well-optimized social posts, including cards that employ attention-grabbing images, headline and descriptive copy that is suited to social sharing, and proper links back to the original content.

• **Consider integrating a content-targeting/personalization platform or features** to more effectively tailor the website experience for visitors in certain segments: in-state, out-of-state, Canadian, repeat visitors, etc.

• **Evaluate the current cost vs. benefit of the Live Chat feature.** One-to-one customer service, while a nice value-add if done well and heavily adopted by users, is not a top priority according the organization’s goals. Based on current usage statistics, it’s possible the time and money dedicated to managing this program could be focused on supporting higher priority goals.
GOALS & ANALYTICS FRAMEWORK

Organizational Goals

An organization’s goals are the North Star that should guide all decision-making, so Miles’ first objectives during this audit were to assess:

- the Explore Minnesota Tourism team’s interpretation of the organization’s goals,
- the team’s view on the relative prioritization of those goals in relationship to one another,
- and to understand the degree of alignment (or lack of alignment) that exists among those perspectives.

Starting with a clear consensus about organizational goals and their relative importance to one another creates a framework within which a productive audit can be conducted and ensures that Explore Minnesota’s unique context is taken into consideration when making strategic recommendations for the future of its digital marketing platforms and tactics.

Goals Exercise

Starting from the assumption that the Explore Minnesota Tourism team agrees that the most important mission for the DMO is to attract people to visit, Miles facilitated a team exercise that breaks that broad mission into more specific goals a DMO might consider part of its role. The purpose of this activity was to uncover current beliefs and work toward a shared view of what types of activity are most important for the DMO to be successful in achieving tourism goals at the state level.

The range of potential goals presented in the exercise included some that would position the DMO to engage in travel-services-style activities and others that focused on higher-level destination marketing functions related to reaching and influencing visitors at various stages in the travel cycle.

Top-Priority Goals

Through the exercise, Miles found that Explore Minnesota Tourism’s team members are well aligned on the most important goals for the organization’s web-based marketing efforts. The team agrees that the primary goals for the organization’s web marketing platforms should be:

- supporting and developing high-funnel destination awareness and affinity for travel to Minnesota,
- followed by influencing and supporting intent-based behavior with content that assists in turning inspiration into action.
TOURISM-INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Miles is in agreement with Explore Minnesota’s prioritization of its top three goals. Creating storytelling experiences that inspire and meet the needs of travelers in the dreaming and researching phases of travel is a sweet spot for DMOs, with state-level DMOs being ideally positioned to succeed at the highest stages of the funnel – generating destination awareness, destination affinity and influencing intent to travel.

With their partner relationships and listing databases, DMOs are also able to support lower-funnel activity including detailed planning and partner-level research, but the closer a visitor comes to booking their travel, their accommodations and/or their experiences, the more noisy and competitive the travel space becomes, with diminishing returns on attempting to buy share of voice in a space dominated by information aggregators like Google, and OTAs and review sites that travelers are already accustomed to using to plan travel to anywhere. In attempting to deliver content that would compete for eyeballs in spaces like these, the DMO needs to consider the cost/benefit ratio of investment and make a commitment to providing enough content done well enough to be useful and engaging, while leveraging partnerships and interactions with content at this level to draw visitors into what DMOs can do best – curate great stories about the destination, and connect potential visitors to the places that can help them make those stories realities in their own lives – increasing length/frequency of stay and total travel investment wherever possible.

Lower-Priority Goals

On the other side of the goals prioritization spectrum, the team did not rate lead generation, guide distribution and bookings as important goals in themselves and Miles would agree. At the same time, conversion metrics on these activities via Explore Minnesota Tourism’s online marketing platforms are valuable signals of intent to travel — key indicators that these platforms are succeeding in converting inspiration into intent, or at the very least are supporting visitors who already intend to travel with information that will help them shift from intent into planning and booking travel, accommodations and activities in ways that support the DMO and its stakeholders’ objectives.
The detailed results of the goals prioritization exercise are included in the appendices to this report, as part of a mid-process deliverable that summarized the outcomes of the first phase of work on this subject.

Performance Measurement Framework

The purpose of the performance measurement framework is to create a system that aligns tactical decisions around content, design and performance measurement with Explore Minnesota’s strategic priorities, and therefore can serve as a touchstone for prioritizing process development and resource allocation at an operational level.

The approach starts by referencing the high-level organizational vision, mission, vision and values, and works downward through strategic goals into more granular channel-specific goals, KPIs and tactics to create a performance measurement framework that should ultimately influence decisions around content strategy and content relationships, UI and visual presentation and analytics configuration.

The proposed key performance indicators outlined on the next page represent the core metrics Miles proposes Explore Minnesota use to track the website’s success in supporting the organization’s overall strategic goals and program objectives. In addition to these KPIs, we expect that Explore Minnesota will also likely track other events and metrics on the site for various reasons of analysis and reporting. We recommend that Explore Minnesota Tourism develop a framework like this one for each of its B2B platforms as well.
## WEBSITE MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BUSINESS GOAL</th>
<th>Destination Awareness</th>
<th>Destination Affinity/Interest</th>
<th>Travel Intent</th>
<th>Partnerships &amp; Advertising Revenue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WEBSITE GOALS</td>
<td>Website Traffic</td>
<td>Content Engagement</td>
<td>Partner Referrals &amp; Signals of Intent to Travel</td>
<td>Partner Advertising Engagement</td>
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<td>KPIs</td>
<td>Total sessions</td>
<td>Avg. pageviews per visit</td>
<td>e-News signups</td>
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<td>Unique sessions</td>
<td>Avg. time on site</td>
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<td>Outbound listing referrals</td>
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<td>Scroll depth – report total pageviews of all pages with scroll tracking and # of 75% scroll events</td>
<td>Outbound profile referrals</td>
<td>Cost per page view for native content (sitewide avg.)</td>
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**Please note:** The KPIs listed in the table above are initial recommendations and are open for discussion and revision by the Explore Minnesota team. The primary objective here is to communicate the recommended approach for creating a performance measurement framework for a given marketing channel and, on later pages in this section, to provide a model for converting that framework to a top-line report in a digital dashboard.
Review of Current Analytics & Google Tag Manager Setup

Miles also reviewed Explore Minnesota’s goals and custom events – from their setup in Google Tag Manager to the final data results in Google Analytics – as well as the overall GA and GTM structure and organization for best practices and adherence to the spirit of the tracking plan described on the previous pages of this document.

Explore Minnesota is doing a great deal of custom event tracking with a focus on interactions on profiles (business, events and deals) and listings, in addition to measuring user interaction with homepage components, the Pedal MN section, customer service features, guide orders/views/downloads and e-newsletter signups.

Explore Minnesota also has a number of goals set up within GA that reflect a focus on profile interactions and listings for businesses, along with goals for guide orders, e-newsletter subscription, customer service and TripAdvisor engagement.

As part of this audit, Miles will provide recommendations for these custom events and goals as well as best practices to close some tracking gaps that will enhance Explore Minnesota’s understanding of user behavior on the site and provide further informative detail for website performance reporting.

Custom Events

In this section, Miles will detail a number of the custom events, what they are tracking and any recommendations that could improve the tracking and data provided.

Referral

This is one of several custom events that focus on collecting data about user interaction with profiles and listings for businesses, events and deals. Referral tracks clicks on “view website” buttons on listings and profiles. The event includes the location on the site of the button click (i.e. places-to-stay, deals, etc.) and the name of the business.

- Tracking user interaction on business listings and profiles provides both Explore Minnesota and its partners with valuable information about user interests and behavior. Listings and profiles bring together users and industry partners to help craft travel plans for potential visitors.
RECOMMENDATIONS: As mentioned, Referral is one of several custom events that focus on user interaction profiles and listings. The others include Map It, Email, Book Now, Call, Deal and Social. All of these are separate custom events.

- We recommend that Explore Minnesota create two custom events to encompass all of these, such as one for Listings and one for Profiles, and name them Listings Referrals and Profile Referrals. Use the event action to combine, using a pipe, the location of the interaction as is done now with the type of interaction, such as view website, Map It, call and book now. The event label would continue to be the business name.

  - By combining these profile interactions into two custom events – one for listings, one for profiles – the data will be easier to find within GA and similar information will be grouped together.

  - By breaking these down by Listings and Profiles, it will be easier to understand interaction with Listings vs. Profiles and easier to provide that data to industry partners.

- Make sure to include the business name in the label for all listing and profile interactions. Some events currently do, and some don’t. Having the business name included on all listing and profile interactions will provide more complete and accurate information about these interactions for both Explore Minnesota and its partners.
This recommendation applies to all of the separate profile and listing custom events: website referral, email, book now, call, map it, deal and social.

**Gallery**

This event tracks clicks on thumbnails in galleries in profiles, including clicks on video thumbnails and image thumbnails.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Track video plays within the gallery as well as the back/forth arrows.
  - Though the galleries are located within profiles, Miles wouldn’t recommend including them in the Listing/Profile referrals events outlined above. Those events are more about the business information and putting the user in touch with the business. The gallery is separate from these, keeping the user on the site.

**PubOrder**

Event for tracking views, downloads and guide orders.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- None of the print guides and most of the “View” guides and “Download” guides have “not set” as their event label, meaning there is no data indicating which of these guides were ordered, viewed online or downloaded. Miles recommends setting up tracking for these so Explore Minnesota can get a clear picture of which guides are ordered, viewed and downloaded.
  - The fulfillment house can also provide data about which print guides are ordered, but the viewed online and downloaded ones have no such backup data.
- Miles also recommends adjusting the “main” event action to only be when the form is submitted. As it is set up now, it fires twice, once for adding a guide to the form and again when the form is submitted. This leads to inaccurate data about the number of times the guide order form was submitted.
- Create a new event for adding guides to the form.
Map_engagement

This is one of several custom events around the Pedal MN section of the website. This event tracks interactions on map filters on the pedal-mn/all-bike-routes page.

- While the event does fire on filter interactions, the event also fires when the page loads and fires whenever a user clicks anywhere on the page and map.
- The event firing on page load and the clicks on anything but the filters result in an event label of “not set” and also artificially lower the bounce rate.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Adjust the custom event triggers in Google Tag Manager to only fire on clicks on the filters to remove any “not set” event labels.
- Rename this event and other Pedal MN events to be specific to the Pedal MN section so it is easier for those navigating Google Analytics for data to find it and other Pedal MN data.

Homepage Component Custom Events

These include Season Feature, Homepage Video Feature, #OnlyinMN Homepage Feature and MN Reasons. These track engagement with four homepage components.

- Season Feature event tracks clicks on the icons for season, topics and panels.
- Homepage Video Feature tracks engagement on the main hero on the homepage, whether clicks on play video or learn more for each topic.
- #OnlyinMN Homepage Feature tracks clicks on images in the #OnlyinMN component on the homepage.
- MN Reasons tracks interaction with bubbles in the lower component on homepage, “More Reasons to Explore.”
RECOMMENDATIONS: Tracking engagement on major components on the homepage (and other key pages) is definitely a best practice to understand user behavior. Miles recommends using this data to determine the page composition, the hierarchy of these components as well as which pieces of them get the most (and least) engagement.

- Miles also recommends renaming these events to specify they are homepage custom events, making them easier to find by the Explore Minnesota team and when reporting on homepage behaviors and engagement.

Other Best-Practice Recommendations

- **Set up outbound link tracking sitewide** – Only certain links that take a user off the site are tracked. Miles recommends setting up outbound link tracking for all URLs that take users off the site.
  - This will improve the overall bounce rate.
  - This will give Explore Minnesota more information about user engagement and which outbound URLs are the most popular.

- **Set up video tracking** for all videos.

- **Set up download tracking** for PDFs, word docs and any other type of downloadable content.

- **Set up scroll depth tracking** for (1) pages that get a lot of traffic from social media; (2) campaign landing pages; (3) content types such as lists, articles, blogs, itineraries or trip ideas.
o Scroll depth tracking will help Explore Minnesota understand how users engage with this type of content as well as understand which types of content and/or topics have more (or less) engagement.

o Explore Minnesota can set up custom JavaScript to fire an interaction event at a certain percentage scroll to mitigate the bounce rate for users that read a piece of content/visit a particular page and then leave the site.

- **Set up naming conventions in GTM** to separate analytics tags from advertising tags from tags different from both of those.

  o Label analytics tags, for instance 00 – Analytics – [tag purpose] make it clear to Explore Minnesota staff and agencies using GTM what the tag is for. Advertising tags could be 01 – DoubleClick tag or 01 – Adara pixel, etc.

- **Review tags older than 1 year** to determine whether they are still working or still needed.

  o GTM has made several updates in tag, trigger and variable types over the years, and those more than a year old could be outdated.

### Google Analytics Goals

In this section, Miles will provide recommendations for conversion goal setup in Google Analytics.

#### Business contact information and listing goals

There are a number of goals set up around the business profile and listing custom events discussed above. Based on Miles recommendations to update those events to combine and enhance the data available, these goals would need to be updated in GA.

#### E-newsletter subscription

Currently the goal is using the custom event category for “eNewsletter Registration.” However, it appears that the custom event includes not only signing up for the e-newsletter but interacting with a popup for going to the newsletter page.

- Adjust the goal to be signups only for a more accurate view of newsletter signups on-site.

#### Publication order

As with the “Enewsletter Subscription” goal, this goal is using the custom event category for PubOrder. That custom event includes not only adding a guide to an order, but submitting the guide order form, viewing a guide and downloading a guide.
• Adjust the goal to be only guide order form submissions. This will give the Explore Minnesota team a more accurate view of how many guide order forms were submitted.

• Create new goals for “view online” and “download guides” separate from the print guide order goal.

Other Goal Recommendations

• Add a “video play” goal to enable beyond-the-click conversion measurement on campaigns where video engagement might be considered a success metric. This would need to happen after video tracking is implemented on the site.

• Add engagement goals specific to editorial content to enable beyond-the-click success metrics on campaigns where content engagement would be considered a success metric, e.g. choose a minimum scroll depth percentage that would be considered a success metric for engagement from campaigns that land on pages where scroll-depth tracking is implemented.

• Consider weighting goals to ascribe relative value based on the priority of these actions in relation to website KPIs.

Reporting Recommendations

In this section, Miles will provide recommendations for reporting options to best gather and view website performance data as well as marketing strategy performance after reviewing report examples provided by Explore Minnesota.

Using spreadsheets, PDFs, PowerPoints and the like can lead to report overload (so many files!) and some staff members and agencies having an outdated report if another agency updates it.

Miles recommends using digital dashboards – interactive solutions that are pleasing to the eye, break away from the inundation of table data typical to spreadsheet/PowerPoint reports, and house current and historical data in one place, accessible by a login.

A centralized digital dashboard should be accessed and shared among the various teams involved in Explore Minnesota Tourism’s digital marketing efforts. It can then be used to share insights and facilitate regular cross-functional team check-ins that open opportunities for complementary alignment of effort across departments.

Miles uses Sweetspot, a robust platform that has several data source options that use APIs to automatically pull in data from Google Analytics, DoubleClick Media, Bing, AdWords and several others. For data sources that don’t integrate with Sweetspot, there are a number of custom data upload solutions. This platform, as well as others like it, can provide several key reports in one place, such as analytics, marketing campaigns, e-newsletter, social media and more.
Explore Minnesota’s dashboard reporting solution should include a simplified top-level report that summarizes performance against the highest-priority KPIs as defined by the performance measurement framework for each platform and should also include sections for the detailed information contained in the current Colle McVoy and Excel Activity Reports.

The automated nature of the recommended solution eliminates much of the work of updating spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations, leaving more time for analysis and updates to strategy based on data. We recommend using the information contained in the reports to proactively refine programs, platforms and campaigns. This includes focusing effort and investment on those areas delivering significant ROI, while also setting some portion of the budget aside to experiment with innovative and new strategies and tactics. For experimental and leading-edge programs, cull any that show continued lack of performance against goals despite continued optimization and testing in favor of testing investments in new areas that are closely aligned with high-priority goals.

The images below are of a demo dashboard in Sweetspot, displaying types of data presentations available. If a team member still needs a PDF or PowerPoint presentation, they can download one out of the platform.

This Sweetspot data presentation shows information from past month, year to date, trends, options for setting goals and more.
Another dashboard reporting option Miles would recommend is Google’s Data Studio, a free tool that Google has improved upon greatly over the past year. There are also companies that create paid connectors for this service that can assist in streamlining the process of importing the necessary data.

There are several types of data presentations available in Sweetspot, including tables, bar charts, lines, combo charts, images, text and more.
CONTENT & UX

Overview

Dollar for dollar, to make the greatest impact on influencing tourism to and within the state, Explore Minnesota should invest its digital marketing dollars into **storytelling and destination brand-building activity**. These efforts should aim to **crystallize the public perception of the state’s key differentiators into 2-4 pillars** Minnesota can own in ways no other destination can, and these pillars should be supported by an assortment of complementary and niche messaging platforms that incorporate wider interests.

Explore Minnesota should invest in a **converged media strategy** that includes a mix of paid, owned and earned content. The focus of these content marketing efforts should be on finding the unique stories that Minnesota can own and telling them in the places Minnesota’s visitors are likely to be, in the formats visitors are already consuming. The strategy should position Explore Minnesota as a **demand generator** for travel to the state. To do this well, the organization’s owned platforms need to be well-positioned to publish and promote that content.

The website is one piece of this puzzle, and its current strengths shouldn’t be overlooked. There’s a **high volume of content, a lot of substance and several bright spots in terms of good writing and strong brand voice**. The homepage and #OnlyinMN hub pages feel fresh and modern. Several key landing pages appear to be performing well in terms of activity and engagement.

That said, there’s also a lot of **opportunity to refine, enhance and optimize content** – and the **overall user experience** – and that is the focus of this section of the audit. As an example, key landing pages with high bounce rates include the “Adventure” landing page (75%) and deals results page (69%). Many of the most-viewed articles also had high bounce rates. Improving the site’s content and SEO will support increased activity, better site engagement and more goal completions.

**Key Opportunities**

Given Explore Minnesota’s top three goals, there is an opportunity to make changes to the site that will surface inspirational content more effectively.

- **Landing Pages** – They are currently heavily planning-oriented, but there are many opportunities for these top-level pages to offer a more immersive, inspiring experience that engages users:
  - Larger, more engaging photography
  - More feature content in a variety of formats (articles, lists, videos, etc.)
  - More emphasis on storytelling
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- Stronger brand voice
- Reducing high bounce rates
- Reducing line lengths on intro copy

- **Article Pages** – They are currently heavily focused on inspiration and ideas, but there are many opportunities for these deeper, lower-funnel pages to help facilitate travel planning:
  - Interactive mapping to help orient users and pinpoint locations
  - More links to (and access to) partner listings
  - More photo captions to help identify locations
  - Making content more scannable
  - Reducing high bounce rates

- **Listing Pages** – By introducing links to editorial content a partner is mentioned in on these pages, there is an opportunity to close the loop between the inspiration and planning behaviors travelers often cycle between when planning a trip.

- **User Interface** – Editors and site visitors would benefit strongly from greater flexibility in the presentation of content on the site.
  - Modular layouts suited to the unique content assets available for each story
  - Stylized copy treatments
  - Variation in photography and video presentation in relation to copy

**Photography & User Experience**

These two topics are intertwined because potential visitors first experience the website, and by extension the destination, through photography. The photos have a significant and immediate impact on the user experience.

**Best Practices**

Photography should be crisp, vibrant and engaging – a positive reflection of the destination and brand. A **critical part of storytelling and creating an emotional connection**, photos should be large and immersive whenever possible. Variety in subject matter and composition are important for visual storytelling. To be meaningful, photos should be contextually relevant to the text and be captioned.

Good page design in the world of travel calls for visual appeal, simplicity, clarity and ease of use. The user shouldn’t have to work to access content or guess how features are going to work – the site should anticipate and meet their expectations. The page hierarchy should be purposeful and guide users toward an action.
Findings & Recommendations

Low Quality Photos Feel Out of Alignment with Brand

- Much of the photography is washed out, dark or grainy, which gives a dated look. This feels out of sync with the brand, which is fresh and progressive.

- Partner listings often have low quality photos, graphics and logos, many of which contain small text that’s difficult or impossible to read. Consider business rules to govern what can be displayed. Many listing photos are missing; a black placeholder image displays for these. Consider changing the placeholder image to something that attracts less attention.
• About 70% of pages audited were marked “Needs Improvement” (NI) for photo quality.
  o Almost all landing pages were marked NI, including the main Things to Do page.
  o Article pages were mainly a mix of NI and S for Satisfactory.
  o Only 5 pages were marked G for Great (including homepage and #OnlyinMN hub).

• Poor quality images don’t reflect the destination, and they detract from the user experience on the website. Photos should be fresh, not faded – we recommend infusing the site with new imagery that supports the brand and shows off Minnesota’s great experiences.
Opportunity for More Immersive, Impactful Storytelling Through Photos

- Several pages, including key landing pages, are missing a **large hero image**. On many other pages, the photos appearing in the body text are small and relegated to the side of the page.

- Some of the subject matter in photos feels disconnected from the story’s main idea, or is not strong enough to support the messaging, which reduces relevance and impact.

- Some photos represent the places mentioned but aren’t ideal in terms of supporting the overall story. In the “What’s New at Mall of America” article, the header image looks like a typical mall and feels a bit lifeless. It doesn’t reflect new and exciting offerings at the country’s largest mall. A highly trafficked fall things to do article shows pumpkins but misses an opportunity to show visitors experiencing a Minnesota pumpkin patch.

- Many images are not captioned (such as the photos above). Captions are important not only for identifying photo locations but also for providing context and detail.

- Some pages feature **stock imagery**, including the Performing Arts landing page. This again is a missed opportunity to show off compelling images of Minnesota places and experiences. The regional landing pages also feature stock elements that could be customized to paint a picture of each region.
• Focus on enhancing (and if possible, enlarging) photos on key landing pages and top-viewed pages. Ensure the photos support telling a specific story. Ideally, decide the action the user should take on each page, and design with that top of mind. Modifying the page layouts to allow for more immersive storytelling will likely require design and development work, but if done well, it will deepen interest and engagement.

Listing Photos Disappear in Mobile View

• When listing results landing pages are viewed on mobile, the partner listing photos disappear (unless the user turns their smartphone sideways, in which case they reappear). A programming fix could resolve the photo display and avoid users having to scan text-only lists.
Opportunity to Refine Design & Usability

Some landing pages have high bounce rates, such as the Adventure landing page (75% BR) and Deals landing page (69% BR). Design and UX improvements could help improve engagement on key pages.

- **Things To Do Landing Page** – The page mixes inspirational and planning content in a way that could be unclear or confusing. The photo blocks link to a mix of different content types: landing pages, listing results, articles and even external sites. Only a small icon tips the user off to what type of content they’ll get (bulleted list icon = listing results; a square with an arrow = external site). Under Arts & Heritage, "Art Museums" appears in the photo block and is also repeated in the list of text links to the right – both places point to the same listing results page. All text is in all caps, making it less inviting to read and scan.

- **Regional Landing Pages** – The design feels boxy; all photos, maps and headings appear in a square or rectangle. By mid-page, the section headings get lost. The all-caps text is also blocky and feels uninviting to read/scan. There are several observations relating to mapping:
  - To better orient users, the main map should feature key places mentioned in the regional overview, such as the Mississippi River, Lake Superior, Duluth, etc.
  - Regional maps are static and largely unreadable as displayed (user must click to enlarge); consider incorporating responsive interactive maps to boost usability.
  - On the mobile view for the Northwest region, the unreadable map graphic is the first thing that displays on the landing page since there is no header image.
- **Travel Ideas Landing Page** – The design feels boxy. The all-caps text links at the bottom do not invite scanning/exploring; consider adding photography or an illustrated branded icon for each topic.

- **#ONLYINMIN Hub** – Many aspects of this page are done really well. The page is photo-rich and links to many pieces of content. Subtle icon animations add surprise & delight and entice users to click on the color blocks: For Places to Stay, puffs of smoke billow from a log cabin chimney; for Biking, the bike does a wheelie. Despite the visual appeal and interactive nature of this page, the bounce rates are very high (summer page = 76%, winter page = 85%).
There’s a lot to explore, but it also requires the user to do a lot of work to access content. On desktop, you have to hover over the color blocks before the text and buttons appear. You have to click each individual photo to get deeper info, and the link to related site content is at the bottom and easily missed.

On mobile, there is no way to access the different seasonal tabs; it defaults to summer. Also, the photos are very small on mobile, detracting from the experience. There are some design flaws in mobile (iPhone 7), such as lines going through text.

**Pre-Filtered Listing Results Pages** – Listing results such as “Deals” are promoted around the site under various categories (Deals for Lodging, Deals for Attractions, etc.) When a user expects a certain topic but lands on the pre-filtered listing results page with multiple topics represented, there is often a disconnect because the page seems irrelevant at first glance. The heading and content at the top don’t seem to match; it’s only after scrolling down that you realize the results have been pre-filtered to your specific category.

**Article Pages** – The layout is basic. Ideas for enhancing visual appeal (aside from improving the photos) include adding an enticing intro in a larger font to draw the reader in and adding a blockquote element to break up text and spotlight an interesting detail or influencer quote. To boost usability, add mapping that plots all listings mentioned in a story. The social share widget should be more connected with story instead of being under the right rail promos.
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- Article pages tend to have a higher bounce rate than landing pages, so along with adding scroll-tracking to understand user interaction with this content as described in the analytics section, improving the photography, design and usability could go a long way.

Feature Content Is Buried

- The site has a huge volume of feature content, but users have to work to find much of it. Landing pages only display four stories at a time. **Much of the content is “hidden” on the #OnlyinMN hub page and Travel Ideas section, which are not heavily promoted.** In the Travel Ideas section, searching for content is time-consuming due to slow load times.

We recommend **enhancing the site design and UX with the goal of boosting content discoverability.** Provide pathways to surface relevant content around the site through navigation, cross-promoting related articles at the bottom of pages, etc.

Editorial Copy & Brand Voice

Language brings meaning, insight and personality. A high volume of text isn’t always necessary, but copy should always aim for substance and specificity. Strong branded copy has high potential to inspire and influence.

Best Practices

Web writing should be tight and precise, giving concrete, vivid details whenever possible. Every page should be unified in reflecting the destination’s brand voice. Well-written, accurate, informative copy is the minimum standard. To elevate copy in the tourism space, write in the active voice and focus on what the visitor will experience. Always consider the audience, and address readers directly to help engage them.

Findings & Recommendations

Landing Page Copy Lacks Specificity and a Strong Brand Voice

- Specificity adds rich detail, but many landing pages fall back on generalities or clichés. The writing isn’t bad, but without specificity and a strong brand voice, it ends up sounding like everywhere else and falls flat.
- Regional map copy describes "attractive towns" and "distinctive accommodations." It states, "smaller towns here have some interesting finds," but doesn’t explain what those finds are. **Vivid detail** would help paint the picture.

- On the “Where to Go” landing page, there’s not enough copy to differentiate the Scenic Drives and add context; consider adding brief descriptions for each trail to entice users to click.

- On the Drink and Eat landing page, the approach is straightforward and general. This is a missed opportunity – on this top-level food page, users want to know: What is Minnesota’s food scene all about? What are some distinctive flavors or signature meals? What wine/beer/cocktails are the state known for?

  - In the #OnlyinMN hub, the Winter page has season-specific copy, but Summer and Fall do not. Also, the copy block at the bottom explains the purpose of page; consider moving this to the top of the page.

  - Some landing pages are missing intro copy altogether, such as the All Places to Stay page. We recommend revisiting all landing page intros to add or enhance the copy.

**Feature Articles Often Read Like Straight News**

- Many articles, including “International Flavors Spice Up the Twin Cities,” are well-written but read like news stories. This approach is fact-focused, not experience-focused. With some richer detail and specificity, this culinary story has the potential to make mouths water.

  - Injecting more of the brand voice would add personality and help set Minnesota apart from other destinations. We recommend avoiding language like “merely” and “additional variety,” which can sound stiff and old-fashioned. One of the brand personality pillars is “a breath of fresh air,” and the language should reflect that.

- Many articles have generic subheads or no subheads at all. Subheads are important for engaging the reader/scanner, for guiding the user down the page and for adding SEO value. Subheads should include specific detail and be keyword-rich.

**Headings Are Often Redundant**

- Several pages contain duplicative headings; these should be revisited to add value and avoid repetition. When there is no intro copy, the redundancy stands out even more.
Over-Tagging

- On the Travel Ideas page, which functions as a content library, some of the tags seem to be applied too liberally or broadly. As a result, many broad or loosely related topics are appearing in specific categories. We recommend re-evaluating and reducing the number of tags so that tagging can produce more content that’s specific user preferences. Specificity equates to relevance and engagement.

Articles Need Further Attention

- The audit uncovered some outdated articles, including “Your 2017 Minnesota Bucket List” and an article about Super Bowl 2018.
  - For the ‘bucket list’ content, we recommend turning it into an evergreen bucket list story to boost its shelf life. If need be, a reference to the year can be added in the intro paragraph, but the title and URL shouldn't have a year attached to them.
  - For the Super Bowl story, we recommend unpublishing or potentially converting the text to past tense and shaping the piece into a retrospective with photos.

- With the site’s high volume of content, there is most certainly duplicative content as well.
  - The following categories have over 70 content results: Arts & Culture, Biking, Food & Drink, Winter, Spanish content
  - The following categories have over 100 content results: City Life, Family Fun, Outdoor Recreation, Small Town Charm
  - The “Travel Idea Count by Category” tab of the audit spreadsheet provides more detail about the number of content pieces in each category.

- We recommend a deeper content audit to evaluate what needs to be updated, merged or retired to strengthen the site’s body of editorial content.
Consider Personalized Content to Boost Engagement

- Serving personalized content to key audiences is a proven way to boost engagement. Miles' programs consistently produce double- and triple-digit gains in metrics such as average time on site and average number of pages viewed for visitors exposed to personalized content.

- Below are a few initial ideas on a potential approach:
  - Target key geographic markets with seasonally appropriate, interest-based content on the homepage and/or key landing pages.
  - Implement behavioral targeting (for example, targeting repeat site visitors) to drive important goal completions such as guide orders or e-newsletter signups.

Listings Information & Data Display

Data listings are important for industry partners as well as readers, who seek out practical, logistical information when they’re deeper in the planning funnel.

Best Practices

Data should be visually clean and inviting, as well as easily searchable. Listings should have all appropriate fields filled out and amenities tagged to give users a clear idea of what is offered. The description should illuminate the USP for each business/point of interest.
Findings & Recommendations

Low-Quality Imagery & Missing Data

- As described in the Photography & User Experience section, many listings have low quality imagery or no images at all. Photos are a basic expectation for today’s users.

- Some listings are missing descriptions as well. This is a missed opportunity to entice users to click through and explore deeper. Partners should regularly be encouraged to add/update data and photography.

Formatting Errors & Inconsistencies

- Several listing descriptions contain text with inconsistencies or errors. For example, some descriptions have every word capitalized, missing spaces, inconsistent use of punctuation, inconsistent abbreviations or symbols that have defaulted to question marks. This can be distracting and interfere with readability; it can also diminish users’ trust in the website and Explore Minnesota Tourism. Managing partner data can be a time-consuming task and a sensitive issue. With some more understanding about Minnesota’s industry data, we could offer tips to help navigate this issue.
Opportunity for Functionality Enhancements

- Most listing results pages offer the option to search by city/town but not by region. Searching by region could be useful for visitors not tied to a particular city or unfamiliar with Minnesota cities – especially since the data is structured by region.

- Many filter/sort options exist in various tabs. Consider adding "clear" functionality to easily restart the search.

- Respond to the insights from Phocuswright’s “funnel revolution” research by providing links back up the traditional funnel to editorial pages where a partner is highlighted. This closes the loop that connects the inspiration and planning behaviors that visitors often cycle between when planning a trip.

- **Restaurant Data** – Observations and recommendations around dining listings include:
  - "International" is a broad category for a destination that prides itself on global food offerings. Users have to scan through a world of different food types to find something specific. Consider further segmenting this data category to include
more types of cuisine (whether general like East African, Asian, Central/South American, OR more specific like Somalian, Korean, Vietnamese, Mexican, etc.).
  o Sorting by price ($, $$, $$$) is a good feature, but to be most helpful to budget-conscious travelers, we recommend adding a key that explains what the pricing includes – is it based on the average price of an entree or the total meal cost? Does it include a beverage or tax?

• Events Data – Observations and recommendations around event listings include:
  o The event sort logic isn’t clear; dates don’t appear to be in chronological order.
  o The region labels display under the phone numbers on these results (since dates display in header bars). This placement makes the regions hard to scan at a glance.
  o Street addresses appear but venue names don’t. For example, Drake is playing at Xcel Energy Center but only the listing only gives the venue’s street address, not its name. The venue field shows on profile pages, so the recommended change here applies to results only.
B2B Content Recommendations

While the leisure site was the main focus of this audit, there are some important initial observations and recommendations relating to the meetings, sports, travel trade, media, partners and international audiences.

Meetings

The Meetings landing page feels stripped down when it comes to the “sell” – it’s a text-based page with no photography or rich, engaging content. The rest of the content in this section feels similar, although the Convention Centers page does feature an embedded video.

- We recommend **adding meetings-relevant photography** featuring meeting hotels, convention spaces and unique venues to support the messaging. The following pages should be top priority for adding photos:
  - Main landing page
  - Convention Center page
  - Meeting Destinations page
- While the copy is well-written and clean, we suggest incorporating a **stronger brand voice** to help set Minnesota apart from competing destinations. On the Convention Center page, add copy to give highlights of the various venues instead of just listing links.
- On the Meeting Destinations page, the static map of the five regions is functional from an overview perspective, but an interactive map would be more useful.
- On the RFP form, add a line of branded text at the top to entice the user to complete the action. Consider condensing/eliminating form fields if completion rates are an issue.
- **Consider adding editorial content** spotlighting unique meeting venues, teambuilding activities, Corporate Social Responsibility opportunities and other meeting-related topics.

Sports

The Sports landing page feels basic and a bit sparse, although there are some high-quality assets (including several photos and videos) in the carousel at the top. This section sometimes seems outdated and incomplete, but there is a lot of opportunity to amplify the experience here.

- **Update copy** on the “About Minnesota Sports” page – there are numerous references to 2014 and 2015, including in the logo at the top. Also, inject more of the brand voice so the copy has more personality and reads less like a fact sheet.
• **Add photography** to show off the sports-related offerings and entice planners. Aside from in the landing page carousel, the photos in this section are small or non-existent. The listing results are also missing many photos, causing the generic placeholder image to display instead:
  
  o Sports Venues results - 13 of 20 listings don't have a photo (based on Page 1 of results)
  o Sports Contacts results - 16 of 20 listings don't have a photo (based on Page 1 of results)

• The “Minnesota: Land of 10,000 Sports” PDF is a fun, branded infographic linked from the homepage. **Consider re-creating it on a live page with interactive elements and links** to the venues and cities mentioned.

![Minnesota Sports Infographic](image)

• On the RFP page, the Captcha form needs to be updated – it appears to be shut down and no longer functional.

![reCAPTCHA V1 IS SHUTDOWN](image)

**Travel Trade**

The Travel Trade landing page has a basic layout and features photos that are a mixed bag in terms of quality. This section appears to have more content than some of the other sections.

• **The photography needs attention.** A few photos in the carousel are vibrant and engaging, but the first one has a dark, outdated feel and there are several bad crops:
heads cut off, tops of buildings cut off and focal points snipped. The captions should be centered under the photo, not floating in the carousel box disconnected from the photos. On the Attractions page, the three photos featured could be larger and more engaging; the exterior shots don’t show off the experience.

- **The copy should be updated**: there’s at least one reference to a 2016 event. The copy does contain some Minnesota-specific detail but tends to be light on brand voice. It could also speak more directly to the tour operator audience; there were some missed opportunities to make mention of group-friendly attractions/experiences.

- The Events page links to a page carrying the Media Room navigation. Not only could this be confusing to users, but the formatting makes the experience even more jarring. At minimum, the tight, all-caps styling should be adjusted to eliminate competing headings.

- Consider **surfacing buried content** on key landing pages to make it more accessible.
  
  - **Service Providers page** – Includes links to five info-rich pages: Group Accommodations listing results, Motorcoach Operators listing results, Motorcoach Servicing listing results, Receptive Operators listing results, CVBs listing results and Performance Venues page
  
  - **Destination Info page** – Includes links to four info-rich pages: Group Accommodations listing results, Local Restaurants list, Transportation info page, Minnesota Basics info page and Maps info page

**Media Room**

The Media Room landing page has a similar layout to some of the leisure site landing pages – photos are featured in a block pattern with blue headers containing all caps text. This gives the Media landing page a more visual, photo-rich feel than the other non-leisure landing pages.

- The Media Gallery features some great assets but could use some organization; the placement of text and video feels haphazard and a bit overwhelming at first glance.

- The Media Kit could use some photo assets to break up the text and boost engagement.
As noted in the Travel Trade section above, some pages (such as the Facts & Figures page, Media Gallery and Media Kit) have crowded formatting at the top of the page. Revisit the font styles and placement so the page is inviting to readers and scanners.

The Media Request Form feels crowded and busy. Consider eliminating or reducing some fields and adjust the spacing and formatting to be more visually clean. (By contrast, the Photo & Video Request Form is much more streamlined.)

Partners

This industry-facing site is still in the old site shell; only a few logo updates give a glimpse of the current brand. While it houses a robust amount of information and seems to be functional, it doesn’t feel unified with the rest of the site.

As budget allows, it would be ideal to migrate all partner content into the current site shell to ensure a consistent brand experience across the board.
International Content Recommendations

While this audit does not cover a complete international content strategy, we have provided some initial observations and recommendations based on the existing international sites/content being presented on ExploreMinnesota.com.

Five of six international links point to external sites, which open in new windows.

The Spanish link (labeled “Mexico”) is the only one that directs users to ExploreMinnesota.com – it points to the Travel Ideas content library page, prefiltered to display Spanish content. 74 results display. **The recommendations below apply to the Spanish pages of the site only:**

- There are more than 20 countries whose populations speak Spanish, so while we understand the inclination to maintain consistency by naming the country whose flag is represented on the page, we suggest that unless the content on the site was specifically developed for Mexican audiences, that a **more neutral naming convention**, e.g. “Información en Español”, be used to denote the Spanish content on the site.

- The content library page, which functions as the main landing page for all Spanish content, does not offer the ideal user experience. There is no large header photo and no custom branded intro copy specifically geared to the audience. Searching this content would be time-consuming and possibly overwhelming, especially to users who aren’t familiar with the destination. **Develop a dedicated landing page for Spanish speakers** that can truly speak to this market – visually and in text – and design it so that all supporting content can roll up under it and be accessible through it.

- The metadata on the Spanish-language pages cites the page language as English. For optimal search performance, set the page **HTML lang attribute** to “es” and use the **href lang attribute** on Spanish pages that have English equivalents and vice versa.

- **Consider adding in-language video content** spotlighting key attractions and activities of interest to this audience. The current library page may not support video content, which would be all the more reason to pursue a dedicated landing page.

- On the current page, the article headings are formatted inconsistently, creating visual noise on the page. We recommend **editing all headlines to be in title case** instead of all caps.

- Personalization could also be applied to help target this market and increase engagement. Any visitors from IP addresses in Mexico could be served Spanish-language content geared directly to them. Or, any visitors with an IP address from Mexico could be prompted/invited to visit the Spanish-language section when they land on the homepage.

We believe there is a **significant need/opportunity to address Minnesota’s international audiences with a more holistic, integrated website strategy** in the future. Miles recommends that international websites be part of the core website structure and contain a mix of universal translated content and content created specifically for target markets.
Explore Minnesota should consider following a **three-tiered approach to content development aimed at top international markets**:

1. As a baseline, core information relevant to all international markets (getting here, climate, airports, geography) should be universally translated. Machine translations have progressed significantly in the past several years and can be used for this core content with a sense-check review from in-market contractors.

2. The second layer of content consists of taking existing site content that is highly relevant to the Minnesota experience (based on popularity and search demand), translating it for all audiences and then customizing it for specific priority markets (e.g. adding additional content to accommodations overviews to address Chinese travelers’ unique needs).

3. The third and final layer of the international content strategy is new content created specifically for these target markets.

Based on budget considerations and marketing priorities, the volume and depth of customization you choose to pursue for the second and third layers of the strategy can be adjusted.
SEO

SEO helps surface content in search results so users can find it and engage with it. SEO is a critical part of driving organic search traffic and boosting overall site performance.

Best Practices

Page titles (also known as title tags) and H1 and H2 subheadings should accurately describe the page content as well as align with the highest-volume keywords related to that content. In a basic sense, this helps Google recognize that your content is delivering a relevant answer to a user query. In addition, H1 and H2 heading tags and type styling help to support accessibility standards. **Keyword research** is needed to help ensure that page titles and heading tags are well-positioned to perform.

In addition to keyword-rich text and meta data, **cross-linking to other onsite content** is a solid way to boost SEO. It’s advisable to regularly update copy and have a substantial volume of copy (depending on the purpose of the page, of course). Duplicative content can negatively affect rankings.

Aside from keeping existing copy updated and optimized, **ongoing new content creation** is a critical part of a strong SEO program. It’s best practice to regularly add content to a site, and for the best performance, that content should **align with high-opportunity keywords**. These keywords have a combination of solid search volume and decent SERP (Search Engine Results Page) rankings – they are considered the “low-hanging fruit” since minimal-to-moderate optimization efforts can yield top rankings.

Findings & Recommendations

**Core SEO Elements Are Missing or Not Optimized**

- Almost all of the site’s title tags simply repeat the headline; it’s likely they are auto-generated. Following best practices, as many page titles as possible should be customized and optimized for relevant terms based on keyword research. Start with the pages corresponding to the highest volume, highest-opportunity pages on the site and work down the list over time. For example:
  - **Drink & Eat → Restaurants, Bars & Wineries**
    For the Drink & Eat landing page, consider changing the page title “Drink & Eat” to the more keyword-rich “Minnesota Restaurants, Bars & Wineries”
Along the same lines, most of the site’s H1 and H2 headings are not optimized for commonly used search keywords. Almost half of the pages audited did not include the use of H2s, generally because the volume of narrative content on the page is too thin to merit them. As with page titles, headings should describe the content that follows and align with the relevant keywords that have the most search traffic behind them.

- **Craft Beverages → Craft Beer or Craft Breweries**
  For the Craft Beverage Boom article, consider changing the H1 heading “Get a Taste of the Craft Beverage Boom” to something along the lines of “Get a Taste of Minnesota’s Craft Breweries, Distilleries & Wineries.” If the H1 heading can’t be changed, at least revise the page title (which appears in the browser tab, not on the page) to include some more highly searched terms.
Missed Opportunities with Linking

- Many pages have a very low number of links (this applies only to editorial content, not partner listings):
  - About 30% of pages audited did not include any links within editorial copy.
  - About 60% of pages included five or fewer links.

- **We recommend adding more links to onsite content**, whether it be listings or other editorial. This “cross-linking” will create more pathways to access content, reducing dead ends for visitors, and will also help inform SEO for linked pages.
  - Add links to welcome center locations (currently, none are linked).
  - Add links in the ice cream story below. There are 45 ice cream shops mentioned but none are linked. (There are a few links in the story, but none point to the actual ice cream shops.)
  - In the “How to Catch Walleyes” article, several lakes and cities are mentioned but none are linked. Add links to those specific locations, and also link back to the Fishing & Hunting landing page and other fishing articles, as appropriate. (There is one link in the story, but it links to an external site.)

- As part of the above, we also recommend enriching the link text. The actual words linked should ideally have solid SEO value. There are several instances where the site includes "click here" text, which isn’t geared to mobile users and doesn’t offer any SEO value.
  - **EXAMPLE:**
    Find more waterfalls across the state [here](http://www.exploreminnesota.com/about-minnesota/welcome-centers) --> Find [Minnesota waterfalls](http://www.exploreminnesota.com/about-minnesota/welcome-centers)

Create New Content Around High-Opportunity Keywords

Several keyword reports have been provided in the appendices of this audit to help identify high-opportunity keywords that Explore Minnesota can capitalize on with content. These should not be the stopping point for keyword research. They provide a start, but opportunities change over time and more topic-specific research can and should be conducted.

- For healthy SEO, we recommend instituting a plan – if one doesn’t already exist – to create new editorial content around high-opportunity keywords. For example:
We recommend adding a weather page to capitalize on high traffic around weather terms, which could generate upwards of 100,000 searches per month. This new page could include a forecast as well as a summary of typical conditions by season or by month. It could feature or link to “what to pack” information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Avg. monthly searches</th>
<th>Competition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>minnesota weather</td>
<td>10K – 100K</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minnesota weather forecast</td>
<td>1K – 10K</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also consider creating new editorial content around the topics below. Based on the audit performed, an initial gap analysis found that the categories below are the most under-represented on the site in terms of article pages devoted to these topics. For more details, see the second tab (Travel Idea Count by Category) of the audit spreadsheet.

- Golf
- Romance
- Team Sports
- Wildlife

In addition, consider adding content around weddings and reunions. Venues, especially, tend to have some value in terms of search volume.

XML Sitemaps

We see two sitemaps loaded in Google Search Console, neither of which contains Editorial pages. Explore Minnesota should ensure that every page on the site that search engines should be able to detect is included in the site’s XML sitemap.

Social Metadata

OpenGraph and Twitter card metadata is missing from pages on the site. Social sharing optimization is not SEO, but it is a related topic. Adding well-optimized social metadata will improve click through rates on shared content by improving the presentation of shared content on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.
PARTNER PROGRAM STRATEGY

The 2018 U.S. traveler is more informed and uses more media and sources of information than ever before. These hyper-informed travelers utilize 140+ websites in the research and booking phase and are using masses of additional media throughout the travel-planning lifecycle. Not only are American travelers utilizing a complex range of resources, they are constantly connected, with 60% indicating that they use two devices per day. It’s imperative that DMOs create partner programs that reach travelers all throughout the lifecycle; at the right time, with the right message, with the right media, on the right device. Multi-media partner programs are crucial.

Delivering partner messaging with context is key: Advertising delivered contextually is content. Advertising delivered without context is just advertising. And quality advertising delivered contextually becomes content that activates.

There are many layers of context, from implied context (opt-in to email, follow on social), to behavioral context, which can allow Explore Minnesota Tourism to deliver messages based on previous content engagements, to the real-time context of delivering partner messages within relational content. The program mix recommended in this document ensures that the user is being served relevant content aimed at activation throughout the travel-planning lifecycle.

The programs are segmented into core and destination-driver programs which are only offered to defined, tier-one partners.
Recommended Program Goals

Serve the User/Reader

- **Core Programs** – Deliver relevant, action-based partner messaging to convert more site visitors into destination visitors by helping them make travel decisions.

- **Destination-Driver Programs** – Create rich, inspiring storytelling opportunities highlighting experiences that influence travel to the destination, engaging users in the inspirational phase of the travel funnel.

- Utilize **ad units that have proven site user/reader adoption** that don’t hurt the user experience.

Serve Your Partners

- Create a **diverse portfolio of opportunities** that deliver on a range of partner goals such as branding, conversion and lead generation.

- Architect **multi-tiered options** with rate-entry points that are palatable for small to mid-size partners.

- **Articulate the quality/value of the audience** Explore Minnesota creates through all of its marketing efforts.

- Educate partners on how to measure the effectiveness of their own advertising through your channels.

Cooperative Marketing Partnership & Sales Philosophy

The cornerstone of a great sales approach is to create unique value for your customers. The pillars of that approach are to educate partners on tourism trends and how to track media effectiveness while architecting campaigns in a consultative sales role, building authoritative and intrinsic trust while adding value to their marketing efforts.

**Audience** – Your primary value proposition is offering access to an incredibly qualified and active travel-planning audience that your partners cannot access anywhere else. No other entity spends as much to promote travel to the destination, creating a uniquely qualified pool of potential customers for your partners. Communicating the importance of this pre-qualified audience in terms of visitation, spending, demographics and derivative geographies is a key first step.
Consultative Sales Approach – Smarter partner marketing translates to more visitors. Educate your partners on tourism marketing trends and best practices and ask what their goals are in order to map out strategy in terms of programs and creative. Part of that approach is sharing the following:

- **Research & Whitepapers** – For example, Miles partners with Destination Analysts to conduct a quarterly research effort around the State of the American Traveler. We also create an array of white papers to educate partners on trends and best practices and have found this to be an important part of our own sales strategy.

- **Campaign Tracking & Optimization** – In this complex planning landscape, partners struggle with attribution. It is imperative that you help partners understand how to measure the quality of traffic versus just quantity, which generally reveals the comparably high conversion rate of DMO audiences versus other digital channels. We also believe in educating partners on creative best practices at point-of-sale and proactively optimizing campaigns during the flight.
Web Program Recommendations at a Glance

Core Web Products

Banner Advertising

Banner ads are currently being sold on a real estate, time-based model. Our recommendation would be to move to an impression-based model, allowing advertisers to open their targeting to multiple channels within the site (or ROS) and optimize based on performance.

Moving to an impression-based model will help eliminate the ROI risk that is currently created by the inequity of impression distribution as it is sold today. CPM tiers should be determined based on expected inventory on site.

Comparison using 2017 annual impressions delivered (DFP) and web audit spreadsheet revenue:

- **Current Model:** $23,900 on 3,460,012 impressions served. That’s a $6.91 CPM on average (range was $3.63-$78.15).

- **Impression Model:** 3,460,012 impressions at a recommended CPM of $8 would net $27,680. In this model, $8 would be the lowest tier so you would recognize some revenue increase just by introducing a tiered structure.

Featured Listings

FREE LISTINGS & ENHANCED LISTINGS

Enhanced listings are currently $375 per year. Our recommendation is to determine how many partners with enhanced listings are taking advantage of all additional offerings within this option. Additionally, you should do an engagement audit on those offerings to ensure there is added value over the free listing.

FEATURED SEARCH RESULTS

Featured search results are currently offered at $100 per month, with a minimum of three months in the initial buy and monthly thereafter.

From a timing perspective, we would recommend moving to quarterly and annual buys for this option so as to streamline the process on the production side.

A best practice for featured search results is to randomize the top-tier sort and maintain either alpha or randomized default sort order for the remaining listings, always below the top-tier.
Pricing here is relatively aligned with the industry and your partner clicks seem to support this structure.

**ENHANCED DEALS**

Enhanced deals are currently $300 per year. Our recommendation is to evaluate performance, both on the website and in the newsletter and potentially adjust rate. Deals is typically a top performer on sites, either from an engagement standpoint and/or as it relates to page/section traffic. It is possible your annual rate is low here.

**Opt-In Leads**

Introduce a lead generation program by which partners receive leads from travelers who have recently opted into your newsletter or requested your guide.

Leads can be sold as a subscription program, or on a cost per lead basis. Selling on a cost per lead basis removes risk for the advertiser, as they are pre-paying for a specific number of leads and will remain live until that obligation is met.

We would recommend aiming for a $3 CPL on this program.

**Extension: Destination-Driver Products**

**Native Content**

Native content leverages the expertise of content writers to produce content that the partner then owns indefinitely for direct distribution on their own site. This content is then also distributed on the Explore Minnesota site for an entire year, with the option to revise and renew in year two.

Our recommendation on custom content pricing would be $3,500-$4,500. Renewal pricing with no changes to the article can be offered at a reduced rate ($2,500).

**Sponsored Video**

Digital video has quickly become — and continues to be — a dominant medium for connecting with visitors. Online videos are key throughout the travel funnel. Highlight destination partner experiences to drive more visitors to your site and to the destination overall. Offer video creation and distribution packages to top partners.

Video pricing varies significantly based on production values and media packaging, but we generally recommend video package pricing starting at around $7,500.
Banner Advertising Rate & Performance Analysis

Explore Minnesota Tourism’s banner advertising is currently being sold on a time-based model, with advertisers paying the same rate for each channel/section. The danger in this approach is that the share of voice per advertiser is not regulated, so we see dramatic differences not only between impressions delivered to advertisers, but also between sections. This creates an inequity around rate, as page traffic is not equal across the site.

For the sake of rate comparison, we eliminated monthly campaigns and concentrated on only annual buys for 2017. The impressions served to annual campaigns ranged from 19,195 to 413,698 per advertiser during that time, creating a cost per thousand (CPM) range of $3.63 all the way up to $78.15.

### 2017 ANNUAL CAMPAIGNS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement</th>
<th>Impressions</th>
<th>CPM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willmar Lakes CVB</td>
<td>Events Landing Page</td>
<td>413,698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perham Area Chamber</td>
<td>Events Landing Page</td>
<td>413,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin Cities Gateway</td>
<td>Events Landing Page</td>
<td>412,698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota Northwoods</td>
<td>PlacesToStay Full Section</td>
<td>280,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin Cities Gateway</td>
<td>PlacesToStay Full Section</td>
<td>280,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owatonna CVB</td>
<td>ThingsToDo Full Section</td>
<td>242,295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilmar CVB</td>
<td>ThingsToDo Full Section</td>
<td>242,024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perham Area Chamber</td>
<td>ThingsToDo Full Section</td>
<td>242,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cragun's</td>
<td>ThingsToDo Full Section</td>
<td>241,211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owatonna CVB</td>
<td>Events Landing Page</td>
<td>204,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roseville Visitors Assoc.</td>
<td>ThingsToDo_Dining</td>
<td>97,615</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to annual channel buys, Explore Minnesota’s advertisers can currently purchase monthly buys. This option makes sense from a seasonality standpoint but is potentially contributing to the loss in share of voice for the annual advertisers above if the additional campaigns aren’t being offset by an equal increase in traffic during those months.

Our recommendation would be to move to an impression-based model for all banner ads, which carries several benefits to partners.

- Impressions have a more equitable distribution, being sold on a CPM basis and eliminating the imbalance demonstrated above.
- Partners have several options when purchasing impressions, including targeted and/or run-of-site (ROS) campaigns.
- Partners gain visibility into performance across sections they may not have otherwise considered, as well as options for optimization within their campaigns.
- Partners are able to control their share of voice across the site through annual spend.
- Impression-based advertising is still very flexible for start/end dates as it is driven by available inventory, protecting the integrity of campaigns already in place on the site.
Note on Impression Audit

In reviewing your 2015-2017 impressions delivered, it looks like the site’s advertising impressions have been trending down each year, with a 16-20% loss in impressions year-over-year.

Some of this may be attributable to year-over-year decreases in pageviews, however it is also possible this is being unintentionally caused through URL structure changes being made on the site. DFP ad tags are going to call specific page URLs in order to deliver impressions. Changes to the site will interrupt this process if the change has resulted in a URL change that is not also made within DFP. This could include:

- Changing URL of existing pages
- Reorganizing existing pages into new sections
- Adding new pages or creating new sections

The way ads are currently being trafficked within DFP doesn’t allow us visibility into whether or not this is in fact a problem. Below is an example where we have seen this happen previously:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement</th>
<th>Impressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Web » plan-your-trip » visitor-services-and-resources » newsletters</td>
<td>April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web » plan-your-trip » visitor-services-and-resources » newsletters</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web » plan-your-trip » visitor-services-and-resources » newsletters</td>
<td>June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web » plan-your-trip » visitor-services-and-resources » subscribe-to-e-newsletters (URL changed from above to this new URL but DFP wasn’t updated)</td>
<td>June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web » plan-your-trip » visitor-services-and-resources » subscribe-to-e-newsletters (What it looks like once DFP is then updated)</td>
<td>July</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Detailed Website Advertising Recommendations

Miles is strongly recommending a native-focused advertising strategy for Explore Minnesota. There are several factors driving that recommendation:

- **Mobile Domination** – The average person checks his or her phone within 5 minutes of waking up and goes on to spend five hours per day using the device. Phones are at the center of our daily lives, and we expect using them to feel seamless. Mobile experiences are more intuitive than ever, with web pages and apps tailored to organic movements like swiping and tapping. In this world of long, scrolling pages and constantly shifting feeds, large buttons and limited text areas, the busy, brand-driven banner ads of yesteryear simply don’t cut it anymore.

- **Make Ads Welcoming** – The mismatch between content experiences and ad experiences is jarring for the user and studies (and ad performance results) show that users have learned to “tune out” traditional display advertising. Native advertising presents a solution. It allows ads to fit the form and function of nearly any publisher’s content, on any screen, providing consumers with consistent, well-presented experiences wherever they are.

Your partners that use advertising agencies may push back on this shift as ad agencies typically create a creative suite of units based on IAB’s universal ad package. To serve these partners, you can offer the option of either a formatted or display version of a 300 x 250px unit. We would recommend limiting placements that would support traditional display advertising to page areas that will have the least impact on user experience and the performance of other on-page elements.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**


Approaches to Incorporating Native Advertising Units

Native ads can express amongst organic site design elements – here are some examples:

**Option 1:** Leverage existing (or impending) design elements for a truly native partner program.

**Examples of This Approach:**

[Visit St. Pete/Clearwater](#)

[Visit Tennessee](#)
Option 2: Create new native ad units (can also be in addition to leveraging existing design elements as described above).

We recommend creating two ad sizes: A 300 x 250px unit and a 465 x 143px (flexible formatted) unit. This approach accomplishes:

- **Increasing Impressions** – This strategy allows for multiple units to be incorporated onto a page in an aesthetically pleasing way.

- **Increases CPM (and thus, Revenue Potential)** – The 465 x 143 unit can be integrated high up on the page, increasing CTR and thus, CPM.

- **Meeting Industry Demand** – Agencies tend to only submit IAB standard units, which this plan supports through the 300 x 250 unit.

**300 x 250** – Tried and true ad display sizes are found in the IAB’s global ad package. We recommend 300 x 250s. If we cannot put a line in the sand and offer only formatted, we can accommodate a display ad in this space, too. *For reference, with all other considerations equal, a formatted ad typically nets 2-3x higher CTRs compared to display.*

**Flexible Formatted Unit** – This flexible ad unit integrates into the page design, netting high CTRs and commanding premium CPMs. Placement: Two units, integrated into the content of the page ‘side-by-side’ on desktop, stacked on mobile. Desktop width: 465px. Mobile width: 300px.

**Examples of This Approach:**
PLACES TO STAY
Find the best places to stay in Washington, D.C.

Rest assured, there are many great places to stay in the city

One day in Washington, D.C. isn’t enough. Luckily, there are plenty of hotels to rest up for a foray into worth of adventures, including family-friendly brands, luxury, modern, boutiques and more. Whenever you stay, you’ll love the unique experience in Washington, D.C.

FEATURED
Planning Your Trip to Sarasota on Florida’s Gulf Coast


Wild Sarasota: A Guide to Enjoying the Great Outdoors in Sarasota County

Gulf Tides of Longboat Key
Contemporary, luxurious and fully furnished studios, one and two bedroom condominiums with complete kitchens, located near the Gulf. Click here...

Sandcastle Resort at Lido Beach
Full-service hotel right on the Gulf of Mexico with 600 feet of private beach. Click here...

Top DC Hotels

DC in Monumental
Explore DC's monuments and memorials.

More...
DFP Installation, Set-Up & Trafficking of Native Ads

Native ad trafficking through DFP is surprisingly simple and flexible.

**Assets** – You’re trafficking one set of assets, i.e.: title, description and image.

**Workflow** – The workflow for a native line item is completely size-less. For instance, a line item targeted to ad unit A will display in all styles marked A. This creates a very simple workflow once you’ve built your native styles.

*Please note:* As a first step in launching a revised partner program, we recommend DFP be reinstalled on the site and reconfigured to support the recommendations in this document, including Native Advertising. Miles is currently working on a client-facing recommendations manual for DFP installation and will provide it to Explore Minnesota at no additional cost in the Fall of 2018.
Creative Approach: Balancing Performance & User Experience

A three-frame layout for native or traditional display will up-to-triple (typically double) your CTR, allowing you to charge a higher CPM, doubling your revenue potential for the program. However, while performance for the advertiser is always better with animated creative formats, some usability tests show consumers can be turned off by what they see as intrusive or “loud” advertising. Ultimately, this is a decision tied to your priorities. We strongly recommend testing consumer reaction to advertising formats as part of any usability test.

If Explore Minnesota does opt to explore three-frame layouts, we recommend training your partners to follow the proven AIDA funnel:

**Attention Frame** – Commands attention by showcasing the partner’s highest value proposition through both photos and text.

**Interest/Desire** – Experiential copy and images create interest and desire by pulling the user into the partner experience.

**Action Frame** – Drives response by clearly communicating the value proposition to the user.
Sales Model, Targeting & Pricing

Sales Model – Sold on a guaranteed impression over time-frame model. This approach removes the ROI risk of a time-frame model and allows businesses to buy smaller or larger shares of traffic, bringing more partners into the fold.

Targeting – Targeting is valuable for any advertiser; however overly specific targeting can quickly reach the point of diminishing returns. Given the quality of your website and email audience as a whole, we recommend a limited approach to targeting, which also maintains maximum flexibility with site inventory. We also recommend instituting a slight upcharge in the CPM for targeted buys. Recommended targeting criteria for Explore Minnesota includes:

- **Categorical** – Accommodations, Attractions & Outdoors
- **Geographical** – In-state versus out-of-state based on IP

Pricing – The overall package CPM is established once the unit mix is defined. We would recommend establishing rates based on the forecasted CTR of each placement against the inventory for that placement, all translating into forecasted impressions and clicks, and thus, CPC.

Defined impression quantity discount tiers trigger a $2 CPM discount at each tier. Impression amounts are available in between tiers, allowing us to exactly match any budget to an impression amount.

From your 2018 Website Audit document:

- **Graphic Ad Revenue (Total)** – $23,900
- **Graphic Ad Impressions Served (Total)** – 3,460,012
- **Graphic Ad Clicks (Total)** – 2,916

Your current average banner CPM was **$6.91 in 2017**, which is on the lower end of what we typically see but possibly aligned with your current performance of a **0.084% click through rate** (CTR). Moving to an impression-based model with the opportunity to optimize campaigns should help increase performance. Placement of ad units will also play a key role in regard to ad performance. The current placement among listing results on the page should be revisited, with consideration given to incorporating ads into editorial features and inspirational landing pages.

We recommend taking this opportunity to raise rates slightly in anticipation of improved performance. Impression tiers should be determined based on anticipated inventory. **Our recommendations for pricing are below.**

- Expected inventory of 5 million impressions:
  - 50,000 Impressions, $12 CPM = $600
  - 100,000 Impressions, $10 CPM = $1,000
  - 150,000 Impressions, $8 CPM = $1,200
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- Expected inventory of 7 million+ impressions:
  - 50,000 Impressions, $14 CPM = $700
  - 100,000 Impressions, $12 CPM = $1,200
  - 150,000 Impressions, $10 CPM = $1,500
  - 200,000 Impressions, $8 CPM = $1,600
- Add $2 to the CPM for any targeting criteria described above.

An advertiser paying $2,000 today would receive an $8 CPM and be guaranteed 250,000 impressions. A monthly advertiser with a budget of $750 would be guaranteed 62,500 impressions at a $12 CPM (top example). In either scenario, the advertiser sets the start/end dates and DFP delivers accordingly.

Other Core Website Advertising Products

The following foundational programs yield high user- adoption, have palatable price points for all partner levels and are structured to deliver relevant and timely messaging to site visitors and opt-in subscribers.

Featured Listings

Explore Minnesota currently offers an Enhanced Listing product at $375 per year, in addition to a Featured Search option offered at $100/mo. While the upgrade from basic to enhanced should be assigned a value, we recommend an engagement audit of the features outlined in the Enhanced Listing option to ensure the current pricing reflects the value of the features being offered. It’s possible that a program that combines these two products will simplify administration on the program management and technology fronts.

Featured Listings allow you to highlight destinations and experiences. Partners who participate in this program are electing to do so because they understand the importance of the audience and thus, tend to submit higher-quality images and copy. This ensures that you are serving site visitors your most compelling content, at the point when they are looking to convert.

Explore Minnesota is currently offering this program but should consider a few changes. In any of the below outlined scenarios, we would recommend a few best practices to ensure the integrity of the program:

- **Featured Listings should be served in random order.**
- Regular/Basic listings should be served in alpha or random order in a tier below Featured Listings.
- Advertisers should pay per featured business listing. If a hotel has a watersports shop on property, then the hotel and the watersports shop should each have their own listings inside their respective categories and each would need to be paid for separately if both were to be treated as featured.
Featured Listings could be sold on an annual basis for a more efficient and streamlined process. Otherwise, we would recommend quarterly at a minimum so that you’re not revisiting partner listings as frequently.

Program Model Options:

- Unlimited, sold annually at low(er) price-point. (Range: $750-$950 per year)
- Limited, sold annually at premium price-point. (Range: $1,000-$1,200 per year)

Opt-In Leads

Serve visitors in the planning process by allowing them to request info from participating partners. The program is simple and intuitive for the user and the partner and works as follows:

- **User Requests Info** – When a site visitor requests information from Explore Minnesota (email opt-in or Visitor Guide order), they are given the option of requesting to receive information directly from any mix of participating partners.

- **Immediate Fulfillment** – Upon request, the user is sent an immediate, auto-generated email (from the system) that the partner has written which can act as a partner website referral opportunity.

- **Advertiser Leads** – Partners receive leads each week from the previous week.

Pricing – Sold on a cost per lead (CPL) basis. We would recommend a $2 CPL.

An Important Note: On the surface, it does not appear that the current email management database or Tourism Manager architecture would support this type of automated opt-in lead program in its current configuration. Miles is happy to assist in adding that functionality to the existing technology stack or provide additional details on how this type of functionality and partner program could be implemented through a new site build.
Extension: Destination-Driver Products

Your tier-one partner experiences are a major reason that people visit. Creating programs that showcase those experiences in a much deeper way both within and outside of owned channels, and especially in the inspiration phase of the lifecycle, should convert more visitors to the area. These programs would only be offered to larger partners such as the Mall of America, major sports teams, major DMOs within the state and select large attractions.

Native Content Program

Offering native content solutions to your destination partners makes sense, not only for your site visitors, but also for the partner. Many of these partners do not have access to the resources needed to develop critical content. The primary value proposition of this program for partners is that you are providing them access to top-of-the-line content creators and that they own these content elements indefinitely for direct distribution. This new content will help to drive organic traffic directly to your site as well.

Value Proposition

Partners can leverage the expertise of your Content Directors to develop owned content. At Miles, we use an enterprise solution called BrightEdge to conduct keyword research to inform the strategy of the content, ensuring optimal organic reach.

In addition to being published on your channels, in the end, the partner will own the content for owned channel distribution.

How It Works

- Kick-off call with partner to understand their goals.
- Keyword research around vacation experiences that align with the partner and their goals.
- Create an outline for the article for client approval.
- Content director writes the content with a defined number of revisions.
- Partner owns content for owned channel distribution.
- DMO distribution (content is distributed across DMO channels).
  - Can include paid search and/or paid social to provide a guaranteed minimum level of reach.
Sponsored Video Program

We know that video converts all throughout the travel funnel. Highlight destination partner experiences to drive more visitors to the Explore Minnesota site and to the destination overall.

Digital video is an impactful way to connect with visitors. On average, more than 80% of web users are engaging with video and they’re doing so throughout the travel cycle, from inspiring where to go, to helping plan what to do.

Video is such a resource that YouTube is the second-largest search engine in the world, with 1 billion visits and 6 billion hours watched monthly. More than 65% of tourism videos watched online are professionally created. In this market, it is crucial for DMOs and tourism businesses to have a solid, high-quality video library to connect with key audiences.

One of the benefits and challenges of video content is its adaptability; video styles, techniques and technologies are always evolving – and quickly. But there is one key video element that stands the test of time: Storytelling.

What Makes a Great Video?

- Be authentic and share memorable experiences.
- Include strong messaging and a single call-to-action.
- Invest in high-quality video production and editing to best resonate with viewers.
- Make sure your video content is current and reflects experiences visitors will see today.
- Know the purpose of your video and set up the right goals to achieve it.
- Create a supporting traffic generation strategy to drive engagement.

Of course, simply making a great video doesn’t mean it will be seen. As part of these special partnerships with top destination drivers, we recommend an owned/paid strategy for distribution, which should include time-based promotion on Explore Minnesota’s homepage and promotion through owned and paid social and pre-roll.
Email Marketing Partner Program Recommendations

A diversified mix of organic content and formatted partner messaging nets high performance.

Monthly Email

Promoting partners promotes travel by offering inspiration and actionable-booking messaging around top destination experiences. A purely native mix of ad placements - meeting all budget levels for partners - resonates incredibly well with readers.

Explore Minnesota currently offers monthly email options to partners, but in the event that you decide to revisit your template design, we would recommend considering a variety of options within the template, as appropriate.

Some suggestions we’ve had great experience with are outlined below.

- **Formatted Banner** – This leadership position is formatted and comes with photo and text.

- **Sponsored Content** – Matches the look and feel of the organic articles. It is also a great option for promoting partner sponsored content articles from the website.

- **Formatted Ads** – These formatted placements round out the email and allow lower price points for all budgets.

- **Display Ads** – While conversion on formatted ads tends to be higher, display is still a very relevant option to offer to clients looking for more of a branding opportunity.

Your current pricing is aligned with what we see in other markets. If you were to consider adding additional units, we would recommend structuring pricing to be weighted according to hierarchy within the template. We have found a good range to be $750 down to $400 based on your current list size of approximately 125,000 consumers.
**Custom Email**

Users respond incredibly well to singularly focused messaging and as such, a custom email can generate excellent open and engagement rates. Partner messages should be sent in a formatted template to ensure design consistency across the program. Aim for a $2 or less CPC. We have found that a $25-$35 CPM based on your list size is typically a good starting point, after which you can adjust based on performance.

**Based on Explore Minnesota's list size of 125,000 subscribers, we recommend pricing a custom email between $3,125 to $4,375.** Below are some examples of custom emails for single partners, as well as co-ops within destinations.
Co-Op Emails: Neighborhood/Region & Events

**Neighborhood Email Example:** Warehouse District – Austin

**Event Email Example:** NYE – Philly
As part of this audit, Miles Partnership reviewed the technology behind exploreminnesota.com. Our review included the Content Management System (CMS) that drives exploreminnesota.com, the speed of the website and, to the extent possible, the underlying hardware. While we did not have direct access to the hardware, we have provided some best practices for hosting systems that could be applied to any hosting environment.

The following findings and recommendations are based on that review.

**REIgnition CMS**

A critical requirement of a modern enterprise website platform is to ensure it is architectured and configured for flexibility. Tourism organizations like Explore Minnesota Tourism frequently face new market and technology developments, and they need to be able to respond to these changes with agility.

A recurring observation when evaluating the CMS is that it’s showing its age. With the last version of REIgnition being released over two years ago (http://www.reignitioncms.com/users-guide/release-notes/version-2620-release-notes/index.aspx) we’re see an outdated approach to content management and have concerns about security.

There are some CMS features missing in REIgnition that are necessary to develop a modern platform for creating and serving content. This section outlines the features we’d recommend a DMO look for in a content management system.

**Component-Based Layouts**

Content development and publishing is a creative process. Given the current competitive environment in the travel industry, the DMO’s lead role in generating awareness and interest in the destination, and the needs expressed by travelers, DMOs need a CMS with a content editing approach that doesn’t limit the creative process. It’s critical to have the flexibility to customize the delivery of your message from page to page as necessary. To facilitate that, we believe that systems offering modular, component-based page layouts are preferable to those offering strict template-driven page layouts.

With a templated approach, the content editor provides “variables” into the CMS admin that are then plugged into a predefined layout. To create a new design means creating a new template and often paying development to create that layout.
With a component-based design, the content editor places the functional and/or layout components that he or she wants on a page, in the preferred order, and then populates each component with content to match the creative vision for the page.

While modern CMSs have varying degrees of flexibility and varying approaches when it comes to achieving this sort of publishing experience, it is something almost all have in common.

**Content Editing**

Knowing where to edit content in a CMS for a specific page should be a trivial exercise. But with the model we see in REIgnition, you need to traverse a directory structure to locate the specific page you want to edit. A common feature of today’s best known and most widely adopted CMSs is to provide links for logged-in users directly on the page they are viewing that take them into the edit screen for that specific content unit.

**Flexibility/Pluggability**

The ability to extend a CMS is critical to adapt to the rapidly changing technology landscape. At Miles we believe that a well-constructed CMS provides a framework that can be extended, in a scalable and supportable way, to meet an organization's multifaceted needs.

That flexibility will lead to wider adoption and, especially in an open-source scenario, that wider adoption will help the CMS to become more mature at a rapid rate.

It also helps keep the codebase lean by allowing the development team to start from a common core and only add the extra plug-ins or modules that apply to the project needs.

**Underlying Web Standards Support**

We’d like to see better caching support in a CMS than we currently do in REIgnition. Specifically, the ability to specify cache lifetime headers for content and the ability to work with a front-end caching layer like Varnish. More information on caching can be seen in the Speed section.

Two frequently used URLs seen on pages are those that serve images and videos. For example:


These generic URLs for images prevent Content Delivery Networks (CDN), which we recommend adding, from identifying content correctly and applying caching rules. Ideally, we’d recommend all images and videos get cached via CDN and served from a CDN rather than the web server. That would improve page speed and would take load off the web servers.
We like that video downloads are served in chunks via 206 Partial Content responses to not hold up a connection for a long video download.

For this part of the audit we added Cloudflare in front of ExploreMinnesota.com. This was only visible to Miles during our audit via some DNS overrides we put in place on our computers. Taking the image URL as an example, when placing Cloudflare in front of the site, we see that the headers for a normal image indicate they are cached:

A normally served image does get cached at Cloudflare.

HTTP/1.1 200 OK
Date: Fri, 18 May 2018 19:43:49 GMT
Content-Type: image/png
Content-Length: 3724
Connection: keep-alive
Set-Cookie: __cfduid=de949d17d5e50033ed38c31978b04f66e1526672629; expires=Sat, 18-May-19 19:43:49 GMT; path=/; domain=.www.exploreminnesota.com; HttpOnly
ETag: "3164f32fb2d21:0"
Last-Modified: Tue, 11 Apr 2017 20:05:48 GMT
X-Powered-By: ASP.NET
CF-Cache-Status: HIT
Expires: Fri, 18 May 2018 23:43:49 GMT
Cache-Control: public, max-age=14400
Accept-Ranges: bytes
Server: cloudflare
CF-RAY: 41d0d09b574a5546 -ORD

Note the CF-Cache-Status header. That implies that Cloudflare successfully cached the image and was serving it from its servers.

But the image.aspx generic image URL breaks that caching detection:

HTTP/1.1 200 OK
Date: Fri, 18 May 2018 19:40:55 GMT
Content-Type: image/jpeg
Connection: keep-alive
Set-Cookie: __cfduid=df40131b8f9cc0d23ca1ec95612d4d7b1526672455; expires=Sat, 18-May-19 19:40:55 GMT; path=/; domain=.www.exploreminnesota.com; HttpOnly
Cache-Control: public
Cache-control: no-cache="set-cookie"
Set-Cookie: ASP.NET_SessionId=gv5ta54njh3s3uevessum11p; path=/; HttpOnly
Set-Cookie: AWSELB=4SEBBB9F0AB5C9355CF1551501F72CC3B9B409CF38732F474C58434F84C2F911BD9CBE31D70E6BD4E74A445AC6E335532E831FD7398351863227BABA3E07EB737DB30CB9D74;PATH=/;MAX-AGE=86400
X-AspNet-Version: 4.0.30319
X-Powered-By: ASP.NET
Server: cloudflare
CF-RAY: 41d0cc5c844b71eb-ORD
In this case, the *CF-Cache-Status* is missing completely, meaning Cloudflare does not recognize this URL as an image and isn’t even making an attempt to cache it, which could be affecting site speed performance and, in turn, the user experience as a whole.

**Open Source vs. Proprietary**

REIgnition is a proprietary software application and is not open source. During the audit we noticed characteristics of an aged proprietary system as mentioned above. In an open-source environment, those updates would continue and would provide additional features as well security updates.

Miles is a proponent of open-source technology where possible to use it. Our opinion of open source applies not only to the CMS but to the full software stack down to the operating system.

There are a range of benefits to using open-source technologies over proprietary software to support digital platforms, including:

- **Cost** – No up-front fee to license.
- **Security** – Established open-source platforms have large user communities and transparent source code, meaning bugs and security holes are typically found and repaired more quickly.
- **Interoperability** – Open standards and APIs are the foundation for the Open Source technologies we advocate for in the web space. This adherence to standards eases technology inter-operation.
- **Innovation** – User communities contributing to product evolution leads to these platforms staying more current with the latest innovations and technologies. User communities are typically larger and more diverse than proprietary companies’ teams.
- **Preventing Vendor Lock-In** – In addition to user communities, well-established open-source platforms have large vendor communities. Access to source code is included with the platform, so as long as the contract with the vendor assisting to develop the site on the open-source platform does not prohibit transfer of the codebase, an organization using open-source technology would not be not locked into a relationship with the initial vendor to maintain or continue evolution of its platform.
- **Stability & Support** – Free support resources are available from the user community, and when using established platforms, a wealth of information is within easy reach. Bugs in core and community-contributed features tend to be caught and fixed more quickly due to the size of the user base. However, partnering with a skilled vendor or maintaining skilled internal support staff is still important for direct, one-on-one support.

The approach an organization should ultimately use comes down to how its business needs align with the specific advantages and disadvantages of each approach, and the platforms available.

Working with DMOs, Miles has concluded that working with solid, proven open-source technologies for the CMS and hosting stack assures the stability and longevity needed by these
organizations while (1) reducing licensing overhead, (2) enabling the flexibility to leverage community-based functionality with regular updates, (3) focus development resources on custom features and functionality, (4) integrate with a variety of complementary marketing and content platforms, and (5) change vendors when/if required.

The full software stack commonly referred to as LAMP is comprised solely of open-source technologies (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP). Because the codebase for these applications is available for anyone to review, security flaws are seen by many and reported to the community. The result is a more secure application. The application is also continually updated, staying with the trends and latest standards that are released.

Because the source is open, it is free, and using open-source – especially well-established, mature applications – can often be more stable than the alternatives.

The argument can be made that open-source software is not in fact free because a vendor or in-house team needs to build, configure and manage the platform. But in Miles’ experience, if support is needed, it can typically be purchased for a fraction of the cost of a whole application license.

**Web Server Usage Statistics**

Statistics for websites using Web Server technologies

Apache, nginx and Varnish, all open source, combine to handle 69% of the internet traffic for the top 10K websites. Source: https://trends.builtwith.com/web-server

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

https://www.coredna.com/blogs/comparing-open-closed-source-software

Website Speed

A slowly loading website is a sure way to lose users and their interest in your content. Website speed is key on all devices to keep users engaged with your content from page to page.

We see good trends on exploremnnesota.com when looking at gzip compression, minified JavaScript and CSS, and generally avoiding 404 responses (Page Not Found) for page assets. The areas below could use attention and would improve site responsiveness.

CDN & WAF

One of the first recommendations we make for any state-level website is to take advantage of a Content Delivery Network (CDN). A CDN will cache static assets (images, videos, JavaScript, CSS files) on servers geographically spread out across major internet hubs, and when they are requested on your page they are served from those hubs, also called Edge Servers.

The benefit of serving content from Edge Servers is twofold. First, users receive the content faster from optimized servers that are close to them, in a networking sense. Second, the traffic served from Edge Servers doesn’t get served from your primary servers, allowing them to focus their processing resources on generating the dynamic content driven by the CMS.

Another feature of many CDN services is to also include Web Application Firewall (WAF) functionality. This is processing on the incoming request from a user before it hits your primary servers that inspects the request for known security problems. This functionality can also block malicious attacks or bad bots filtering useless traffic from hitting your servers. Again, this allows your primary servers to focus on serving dynamic content to meaningful users.

Redirects

301 (permanent) and 302 (temporary) HTTP redirects are useful tools on the web, allowing a content owner to send a user to a newer version of a URL that may no longer be in use.

Redirects can also have drawbacks. A redirected HTTP request requires a user’s browser to take additional network requests to get to the content, slowing down perceived page speed. Also, search engines will take time to recognize a redirected URL and also take time to apply any page ranking the previous URL had to the new URL.

On exploremnnesota.com we noticed three redirects when requesting the homepage, slowing down response time and diluting the website’s SEO authority.

At the moment, when a user types in www.exploreminnesota.com in a browser or hits that link, they are redirected two times to reach the homepage:


Ideally, the main URL for the homepage would be housed directly at http://www.exploreminnesota.com. If the current CMS can’t serve at http://www.exploreminnesota.com, at least one quick fix would be to redirect http://www.exploreminnesota.com directly to http://www.exploreminnesota.com/index.aspx, eliminating one redirect.

**Caching**

Cache is a large part of making a modern website load faster for an end user. Caching can happen at the database level, HTML level, at a CDN and even at the user’s browser. Proper caching headers from the web server are important to leverage all available caches.

All caching is controlled by cache headers from your webserver and CMS. A cache header can specify that no caching happen or that caching is allowed but only for a certain amount of time.

A sample of files not allowed to be cached on exploreminnesota.com. Full caching report available via https://www.giftofspeed.com/cache-checker/

We’ve touched on caching when outlining the functionalities that a CMS should have. When reviewing what files are allowed to be cached, according to the headers your web server/CMS sends, we’re seeing that the dynamic image and video URLs are not sending cache headers to allow browsers to cache at all. Enabling those headers would help a browser to reuse a previously downloaded header and speed up page load.
Optimize Images on Mobile

While more difficult to accomplish, another area of speed to investigate is to provide smaller images for mobile devices or devices that use a smaller viewport in a responsive configuration. This allows mobile devices, which are often connecting via a slower internet connection, to download fewer bytes and load your site faster.

Hosting Architecture Best Practices

Examining the network infrastructure and hardware itself was not an exercise we undertook due to the hosted nature of the CMS and the fact that Explore Minnesota does not directly manage this piece.

This section will discuss the hardware and network environment best practices that Miles follows for websites and applications that we create, with explanations for why we recommend this style of approach to our clients.

Hosting

Cloud-based virtual machines (VMs) are almost a standard now for web hosting. It’s worth noting that VMs provide flexibility and ability to upgrade that is not possible with “bare metal” servers or physical servers. Miles recommends deploying on virtual machines in a load-balanced and/or redundant scenario that includes at least:

- Multiple load balancers deployed in a failover scenario for one to take over if the primary fails.
- Multiple web servers to divide the requested load and provide redundancy to allow continuous uptime during maintenance events.
- Multiple database servers deployed in a failover scenario for one to take over if the primary fails.
- SAN-based disk storage for speed and flexibility when resizing.

Miles realizes that no system is perfect, so the above approach will provide redundancy for your hosting environment and allow for quick recovery when unexpected failures happen.

Backups

Miles recommends a traditional filesystem backup using the standard weekly full and daily incremental approach. In addition to filesystem backups, virtual machine images also allow quick
restoration should a whole server be corrupted in some way. Miles takes daily VM snapshots of all database servers and weekly of all web servers.

Multiple backup scenarios as described above provide more options to restore data when the unexpected happens.

**SSL (Standard Security Protocol)**

HTTPS is now the standard of the web that all sites should migrate to if not already there. HTTPS sites receive preferred status from Google when indexing, and many browsers flag a site as “Not Secure” when browsing over HTTP.

Miles strongly recommends a high priority be placed on moving
http://www.exploreminnesota.com and http://admin.exploreminnesota.com to HTTPS.

**Separation of Systems**

Miles’ school of thought with application architecture is to leverage best-of-breed technologies where possible. There are software applications in the market that would be nearly impossible to build functional replicas of because whole companies are focused on specific layers in the application stack.

For this reason, Miles’ approach is one of integration over implementation. If there is a good tool to perform a task, we’ll use it and possibly tweak our requirements to leverage that tool instead of building our own. We’ll then use existing APIs to integrate that tool into our application stack. With the current speed of network connections and robustness of API command sets, pulling together different toolsets is a common practice and doesn’t result in loss of functionality or speed.
While having the Tourism Manager integrated into the same codebase as the CMS can provide some simplification of data sharing, leverage shared hosting and allow for maximum customization of features for Explore Minnesota's specific use case, we see this architecture as a possible liability in the following areas and recommend rethinking this approach in future website versions:

- Single point of failure – application failure of one system affects the whole product.
- Limited upgrade options because upgrades to one system must take into account the needs of both.
- Increased overhead in maintenance and new features development.

Front-End Systems/Integrations

There is a huge range of available technologies that DMOs and other content and travel-centric businesses are experimenting with in an effort to connect more effectively with their customers. Many of these are nice-to-haves. They can be helpful in sharpening the messaging or effectiveness of campaign efforts, amplifying and curating the voices of content creators, or providing a more personalized and comprehensive level of service to visitors. They require not only financial investment, but also investment in strategy, planning, management and optimization to generate these outcomes.

The choice of when and which of these systems to implement, if any, ultimately comes down to the specific goals of the organization and the content strategy in place to support those goals.

- **Social Content Integration** – A popular trend in DMO websites as well as travel and retail brands is the incorporation of curated social media content as a way to share what locals and other visitors are finding and doing in-destination, and to expand the collection of visual assets available to the destination to market the experiences it has to offer.

  As mentioned in the content section of this report, Explore Minnesota’s Chute social integration on the #OnlyinMN hub page is well-curated and well-presented. We only wish this sort of experience was integrated more deeply into the site on landing pages, event features and more, that calls to click through to related content were more noticeable and that it was more mobile-friendly. We love the way editorial and video content is integrated, the detail of the animated icons and the tagging of calls to action on the photos that link into content. The Minnesota hashtags on Twitter and Pinterest posts are also a plus, reinforcing the social content strategy for the organization.

- **Social Sharing** – Sharing buttons are available on the page types whose content is most likely to be shared, but social metatags are not present. Clicking the Twitter share button leads to a link that creates a circular experience for users, where a link to the Twitter share page is shared instead of a link to the actual content. We recommend that at minimum, each page include OpenGraph and Twitter card metadata as part of the page
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template to optimize these pages for social sharing, with proper links back to the original content on exploreminnesota.com.

- **Personalization & Customer Data Platforms** – A lot of experimentation has been happening in this space for DMOs. It’s important to note that managing these platforms requires strategic and technical expertise and continuous experimentation and adaptation. In our own experience, we have seen several DMOs have success in tailoring parts of the website experience to visitors in specific geographic segments or to visitors who have past behavior on the site.

Because of DMOs’ high incidence of first-time and one-time visitors, and the non-transactional focus of DMO websites, it can be challenging to effectively target a significant segment of visitors in a focused enough way to move the needle on site engagement in an aggregate way, but there is clear evidence to demonstrate that the visitors who do see targeted content are likely to engage longer and more deeply in the site than similar visitors who do not.

There is room for creativity and innovation in this space, so if Explore Minnesota reaches a point where it is satisfied that its baseline platform is delivering effectively on its core objectives, it’s worth considering integrating a content-targeting/personalization platform to more effectively tailor the website experience for visitors in certain segments, e.g. in-state, out-of-state, Canadian, repeat visitors, etc.

For organizations with first-party customer data across disparate platforms, another option to consider would be to use a customer data platform to connect browsing data with social advertising and email behavior. Many of these platforms require personally identifiable data to make connections between platforms, however, so this is an important consideration before diving in.

- **Live Chat** – We applaud Explore Minnesota’s early adoption of the Live Chat feature on its site. In light of the “high-tech, high-touch” trend in digital technologies, offering a live person-to-person customer service on the website appears at first glance to be a promising investment. At the same time, after reviewing usage statistics of this feature on Explore Minnesota’s web reports, it appears that the feature is experiencing very little engagement from site visitors and the level of service offered focuses very closely on delivering low-funnel, partner-specific information to visitors without much other context.

As part of this audit, a member of Miles’ team reached out using the tool to get some advice on places in the state that might be appealing to first-time visitors from Florida who love the outdoors and have a penchant for good food and towns with good arts scenes. The person assisting via live chat was pleasant but appeared to be tightly scripted and focused on creating a travel planner for activities in a given town rather than sharing anecdotes and local knowledge that someone new to the area might need to get a feel for the possibilities within the destination. A town was selected with no rationale or description given to the mystery shopper, and a travel planner with the suggestion to stay at a “unique Viking Lodge” was emailed, but no emotional connection was made with the
destination and the mystery shopper was left feeling misunderstood and unsure how this town and this lodge came to be recommended.

Tools like live chat have been used successfully to deliver one-to-one customer service and issues resolution for years, but the transition to using this technology on DMO websites is very new. If DMOs' prime directive is creating destination awareness, affinity and travel intent, the typical practical, task-oriented live chat script proves to be an awkward fit for the stage of travel these websites are targeting, where visitors are looking for stories and images that spark emotional connections and inspire them to experience a particular destination first-hand. The entire experience needs to be reimagined within the modern DMO context to be successful.

While experimenting with optimizing the content and conversational style of this feature could eventually yield an innovative breakthrough for Explore Minnesota Tourism, it’s likely that the time and money currently being dedicated to this program would yield more immediate return if focused on supporting higher-funnel goals. We recommend Explore Minnesota evaluate the current cost vs. benefit of the Live Chat feature and decide whether to continue to experiment with the format and user experience for the sake of testing ways to increase user uptake and make it more effective, or to cull this feature either temporarily or for the foreseeable future to free up resources that are likely to have higher uptake and ROI.