



# **Great Falls Montana Tourism Marketing Strategy**

*April 2017*

## Executive Summary

Great Falls Montana Tourism has begun an ambitious initiative to attract more visitors to the City of Great Falls, supporting its growth and bolstering its economy. Successful tourism attraction will depend on the highly-targeted engagement of Great Falls' audience groups – people looking for a vacation or meeting experience centered around the assets Great Falls has to offer.

Great Falls Montana Tourism has engaged Atlas to develop a comprehensive tourism marketing strategy for the city to guide tourism attraction tactics and campaigns for maximum impact. To develop an effective strategy, Atlas has:

- Assessed Great Falls' tourism strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats, to growing the tourism economy, along with an analysis of in-state and regional competing communities
- Performed a national survey of professional meeting planners to gauge the perception of Great Falls as a meeting destination, including respondents that have actively planned meetings in Great Falls and those who have not
- Researched Great Falls' online reputation on popular travel websites, including TripAdvisor, Yelp, Google Maps, and Facebook
- Interviewed Great Falls Montana Tourism leadership and reviewed the previous, internally-developed marketing plan and tourism brand package and its supporting research developed by North Star Destination Strategies

From this foundation of analysis and research, Atlas developed the positioning statement for Great Falls as a tourism destination. This strategy defines marketing objectives and targets with specific tactical recommendations and an execution calendar.

### Desired Outcomes of the Engagement

Based on research and analysis, it has been determined that the outcomes of the marketing initiatives will:

- Establish a cohesive tourism brand that positions Great Falls as a premier destination for targeted groups
- Get buy-in and promote the use of Great Falls' tourism identity by Great Falls Montana Tourism members, its strategic partners, and the entire Great Falls community
- Increase overnight tourism visitation
- Increase group meeting stays
- Increase attendance at key events like the Montana State Fair, Western Art Week, and the PRCA Circuit Championship
- Increase foot traffic at Great Falls International Airport

- Raise the profile of the city within targeted audience groups and regions both on and offline (e.g. in-state visitors from Central and Eastern Montana, Canadian regional travelers from communities near the border, and out-of-state visitors from cities with direct flights to Great Falls)

## The Challenge

The City of Great Falls has a growing downtown with new dining options and continued development, an established and vibrant arts scene, and the state's highest concentration of museums, natural attractions, and outdoor activities. It provides access to many of central and western Montana's outdoor attractions and true wilderness areas. However, visitors to Great Falls must drive for several hours to access Glacier National Park, and its popular western entrance is even farther away. By car, visitors from the west, south, and southeast must pass through several cities that most directly compete with Great Falls, including Missoula, Butte, Bozeman, and Billings.

Great Falls Montana Tourism must position the city as the premier destination for the experiences the city offers and target audiences seek. Finally, Great Falls Montana Tourism must engage these groups using effective tools and measurable campaigns that build awareness and drive visitation.

## Background

### Description of the City of Great Falls

Founded in 1883, the City of Great Falls has a population of nearly 60,000 residents and is the county seat of Cascade County. Great Falls is named for a series of five waterfalls on the Missouri River that was made famous by Lewis and Clark's 31-day portage of the falls – the longest the duo spent in any one location. The promise of hydroelectric power and rail access was instrumental in the founding of Great Falls. The first hydroelectric dam was built in 1890, attracting industry and visitors to the “electric city.”

Downtown Great Falls and the new West Bank Landing development offer residents and visitors an array of shopping and dining options. There are many new restaurants, breweries, and coffee shops – some offering live music – along with established eateries, bars, and shops. The city has over a dozen art galleries and three art museums, including the renowned C.M. Russell museum complex. This robust arts scene boasts the annual Western Art Week, an event that includes over 30 independent shows, live art events, and auctions at venues across downtown Great Falls. The city also has a history museum and the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center.

Great Falls visitors can enjoy nearly every outdoor activity available in Montana: hiking, road and mountain biking, hunting, fishing, swimming, kayaking, canoeing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and many opportunities for viewing local wildlife. The city offers an extensive hiking and biking trail system along the river, three golf courses, a disc golf course, a skate park, a water park, a 15-field soccer park, a minor-league baseball stadium, and a system of city parks. Nearby is Giant Springs State Park, the First Peoples Buffalo Jump, two ski resorts, and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The most well-known natural attraction in the region is Glacier National Park. Great Falls also offers one of the more convenient starting points for travel to Canada's Waterton Lakes National Park.

Great Falls is home to Malmstrom Air Force Base and the 341st Missile Wing. It has a significant history and geographic presence in the city. The base attracts contractors traveling for business, but most of its service members stay siloed from the community.

## **Current Regional Initiatives**

### **West Bank Landing Development**

West Bank Landing offers hospitality, dining, shopping, fitness, and lifestyle space targeting affluent residents and visitors, along with commercial office space and apartments. This real estate development is located across the river from downtown and is in the middle of buildout. The current development is expected to be completed in the next five to seven years, with additional land available nearby.

### **New Tourism Organization and Leadership**

In 2015, the Great Falls Tourism Alliance, now known as Great Falls Montana Tourism, was formed as a cooperative effort by three organizations – The Great Falls Convention & Visitors Bureau, The Great Falls Tourism Business Improvement District, and the Visitor Information Center – with a strategic partnership with The Great Falls Area Chamber of Commerce and its membership. In 2015, the city's first full time tourism director was hired to lead Great Falls Montana Tourism. These developments represent an unprecedented level of collaboration, leadership, and focus on growing tourism visitation for the city.

## Research and Discovery

### Previous Brand Research and Development

In 2012, the Great Falls Branding Alliance engaged North Star Destination Strategies to develop a new brand platform for the city. The resulting Great Falls Montana brand focused on quintessential Montana and targeted “adventurers with conviction” using the tagline “Untame Your Spirit.” While the brand platform did not capitalize on the opportunity to unite residents and the business community around the new Great Falls brand, the research and many of the recommendations are strong and remain valuable today. Atlas referenced the community research and competitive analysis while developing this marketing strategy.

### Online Reputation Research

Atlas performed research of Great Falls’ online reputation on trusted, crowd-sourced review websites. Research included independent traveler and meeting planner reviews of Great Falls’ tourism attractions, hotels, and conference venues on TripAdvisor, Yelp, Google Maps, and Facebook.

Great Falls does not have a large number of reviews, but the city does enjoy a positive online reputation with current visitors, meetings, and groups, as well as local residents. While Great Falls doesn’t have a national tourism brand, those that do visit enjoy their experience and have recommended the city and the region to others online. By and large, reviewers that left negative responses do not fit the profile of Great Falls’ target audience.

Unsurprisingly, national and state parks, wilderness areas, trails, and museums remain the biggest draw and highest rated attractions in Great Falls. Great Falls hotels with meeting and event amenities got high reviews, though some individual guests found customer service lacking as compared to group service. Two convention centers received strong reviews and accommodate conventions, trade shows, meetings, concerts, fundraisers, banquets, and wedding receptions, but space is limited to smaller gatherings of around 150 to 250 people depending on the venue. On top of purpose-built venues, Great Falls’ many museums offer guests a unique meeting setting, which is appreciated by online reviewers. See *Appendix for quotes from the online reputation research.*

## Meeting Planner Research

A survey of professional meeting planners was conducted with professionals identified by Great Falls Montana Tourism and with national meeting planners identified by Atlas. Respondent data was collected through an online survey in January 2017. The survey evaluated meeting planner perceptions of Great Falls, their knowledge of the community's assets, and where it ranks amongst competitors within the region. Respondents were also asked about their meeting planning needs, tools they use, and promising industry trends. *See Appendix for full results from the meeting planner survey.*

### **Perspective of the Industry**

Meeting planners surveyed identified rising food and beverage costs as their biggest struggle. Good lodging accommodations, entertainment, attractions, shopping, and dining options ranked as the most appealing aspects of a community. A positive local perception of meetings and a destination marketing organization advocacy program were ranked the most appealing aspects of community support. Event subvention/incentive programs were the clear leader in emerging destination marketing organization practices and services. The survey identified that planners use a variety of sources for researching a potential destination, from search engines and travel websites to trusted colleagues and their own previous experience. Digital advertising ranked just above site inspection tours as effective destination marketing engagement tactics.

### **Perception of Great Falls and Montana**

Most respondents had not considered Great Falls for a meeting, but perceive it as a city surrounded by natural beauty. Planners identified the need to convey Great Falls' hospitality amenities, shopping, unique activities, restaurants, and meeting facilities, as well as airport access, central location within Montana, and affordability to people unfamiliar with the city. Top northern mountain state competitors identified include Sun Valley, Idaho; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Kalispell, Montana; and Missoula, Montana. Meeting planners have little perception of any Montana cities as meeting destinations, but half said they would recommend Great Falls to a colleague. When asked what attributes fit Great Falls, they identified outdoor recreation, fly fishing, hiking, and Glacier National Park.

## Great Falls Stakeholder and Visitor Surveys

Atlas surveyed Great Falls visitors and potential visitors, as well as stakeholders from within the community. The visitor survey was sent to over 400 visitors that have registered at the Great Falls Visitor Center, and potential visitors that met with Great Falls Montana Tourism staff at conventions and events around the country. The stakeholder survey was distributed to 86 community stakeholders including Convention and Visitors Bureau and Tourism Business Improvement District board members, CVB members, lodging property owner/management, and other prominent members of the community.

Great Falls stakeholders hold a range of perspectives on the city as a tourism destination. The key themes in their feedback include the opportunity to promote Great Falls as a basecamp for outdoor activities nearby and around the state; as a surprising center for art, culture, and museums; and a unique destination for riverfront attractions. Helena and Billings were identified as similar communities, though some see Great Falls as completely unique. Stakeholders identified the C.M. Russell Museum; the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center; shopping; the proximity to parks, airport, and the highway; and family as the top reasons for tourist visitation. They identified the friendly atmosphere and outdoor activities as the top reasons visitors return. The tourism-oriented description of Great Falls used most includes a mention of fly fishing and outdoor activities, with museums, art, and the river and its falls and dams as the most unique tourism assets.

The biggest challenges identified are a lack of a tourism identity, unified voice and message, and active marketing and promotion. Stakeholders recommend better messaging and promotion with a fresh perspective – especially of large events – to overcome these challenges. Increased visitation, hotel stays, tourism jobs, and revenue are the best ways to measure success, but success was defined in a variety of ways, including the development of a cohesive messaging / marketing plan, filling up hotels 90% of the time, protecting lodging tax dollars, and more tours or pre-organized activities. Airport renovations, land improvements, and the development of downtown and the riverfront are the biggest recent changes. Most cite continued investment in downtown and the riverfront to strengthen Great Falls as a tourism destination. Finally, some stakeholders suggest creating a large attraction or activity center.

Out of the visitors and potential visitors to Great Falls, 61% of respondents had never been to Great Falls but were interested in visiting. Out of the people who had visited, most were there for vacation. The biggest draw is the classic Montana experience, followed closely by accessibility to the outdoors. Some of the visitors' favorite experiences include

the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center, C.M. Russell Museum, the falls, Glacier National Park, the Missouri River, and shopping. For most, the biggest drawback for visiting Great Falls is the location and the cost of flying.

Bozeman and Billings were cited as the most similar communities to Great Falls which people have visited or considered visiting; however, Glacier National Park stood out as being a unique offering of Great Falls. Many visitors did not know what makes Great Falls different from its competing communities.

Visitors confirmed their favorite types of vacations include exploring new places, enjoying outdoor adventures, and outdoor escapes for solitude. The top vacation destinations of this group included Glacier National Park, Yellowstone, and other mountain states.

*See the appendix for the full results from the stakeholder and visitor surveys.*

## Competitor Analysis

Atlas performed a competitor analysis to understand what communities the City of Great Falls competes with, to see how it ranks amongst its peers, and to identify opportunities for differentiation. The analysis was based on Atlas' research, previous consultant research, interviews with Great Falls Montana Tourism leadership, and online reputation survey results.

Cities in Montana	The Larger Region
<p><b>Bozeman</b> Presents an upscale vacation destination with hotels, shopping, museums, and symphony to match its ski resort, cross-country trails, natural hot springs, and breweries.</p> <p><b>Billings</b> Positions itself as Montana's Trailhead, the starting point for a drivable vacation through Montana's outdoors.</p> <p><b>Missoula</b> A university town that promotes a variety of amenities and experiences without focusing on any one option. Montanans know the city as a laid-back city for fly fisherman, paddle boarders, and mountain bikers. Features many microbreweries and a distillery.</p> <p><b>Kalispell / Whitefish</b> The popular western gateway to Glacier National Park, offering closer accesses to its popular attractions. Positions itself as a vacation destination and its airport (though smaller than Great Falls') makes it accessible to out-of-state travelers.</p> <p><b>Butte</b></p>	<p><b>Sioux Falls, South Dakota</b> Sioux Falls is nearly three times the size of Great Falls. The city has a strong tourism website that promotes attractions and tourism-related businesses. Downtown Sioux Falls has access to the Big Sioux River and the scenic Falls Park, with an outdoor sculpture garden and nearby Native American and Early European historic attractions. The city has a range of shopping, dining, and hospitality options, but limited outdoor recreation attractions.</p> <p><b>Fargo, North Dakota</b> With a population nearly double that of Great Falls, the city highlights an eclectic mix of art, culture, dining, and other attractions online. The website leverages social content from visitors and residents to demonstrate the broad range of venues and activities available for people to enjoy. Art museums and festivals are promoted heavily. The city has access to open space and wilderness for activities like hunting, fishing, golfing, biking, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling, but there are no major outdoor attractions nearby.</p> <p><b>Bismarck, North Dakota</b></p>

Does not hide from its rough and tumble image though and it is in the beginning of developing a cohesive brand. Great Falls locals feel a level of inferiority compared to Butte.

### **Helena**

The smallest city in the competitive set that has traditionally had little tourism draw. However, the state's capital city is growing as a tourist destination, and benefits from its location near the head of the Missouri River as well as proximity to Lake Helena, Hauser Lake, and Canyon Ferry. Helena also has an IMBA Silver Trail System that is very impressive. Because of a higher household income average than Great Falls, businesses often choose Helena before Great Falls for retail opportunities.

The capital city of North Dakota has done a good job with meetings and conventions, drawing over 100,000 people every year. They promote their downtown and have been ranked as one of the top 100 places to live. Their website leverages videos to tell visitors about featured activities from their new heritage museum to riverboat cruises to golf.

### **Cheyenne, Wyoming**

Cheyenne, Wyoming has many similarities to Great Falls. At just over 60,000 residents, Cheyenne is similar in size. Cheyenne has a large military presence supporting nuclear and logistical forces, and strong Old West roots, culture, and events. Their most well-known event is Cheyenne Frontier Days - the world's largest outdoor rodeo. There are similar local options for outdoor recreation and wilderness access. National parks, like Yellowstone, are in-state, but the drive is more than three times as far as Great Falls is to Glacier National Park. Its "Live the Legend" tagline promotes a familiar, authentic west identity.

### **Canadian communities with direct access to wilderness north of Glacier**

Great Falls is well-positioned to compete with this set, being located just as close to wilderness north of Glacier as communities like Cranbrook, and logistically more convenient, with access to the Great Falls International Airport. Even with a three-hour drive to the lake, flying through Great Falls International Airport is preferred by many U.S. fliers and Canadian tourists.

### **Cities to the west of Montana**

Competition with cities west of Montana is limited. Visitors traveling by car from cities like Spokane, Washington must be willing to drive south past several other competing Montana cities to get to Great Falls. These cities also have more direct access to other parks and outdoor attractions outside of

	Montana.
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## SWOT Analysis

Atlas performed a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to explore how the City of Great Falls can best align its resources within the regional competitive environment. The goal of the SWOT exercise is to determine where the City of Great Falls can capitalize on its assets and advantages to attract meetings and position itself as an attractive tourism destination. The analysis was based on Atlas' research, previous consultant research, interviews with Great Falls Montana Tourism leadership, and the survey of national meeting planners.

### Strengths

- History and museums – Great Falls' deep connection to Lewis and Clark's historic expedition and its hydroelectric heritage have spawned several museums and historic sites. This may draw a select group, but enriches the visitation experience for other tourists and meeting attendees.
- Art and galleries – The C.M. Russell museum has anchored the arts in Great Falls since the artist's death in 1930. Russell became the world renowned "Cowboy Artist" working and living in the city. Great Falls also has two more art museums and over a dozen art galleries.
- Western Art Week – This annual event is spread across more than a dozen Great Falls' art galleries, museums, and other venues. It's regarded as the premier auction of original western art of the 19th and 20th centuries. The event was built around the C.M. Russell Art Auction, and includes half a dozen major art shows, gallery shows, and live "quick draw" painting and drawing events.
- Growing dining and nightlife – Downtown and riverfront neighborhoods have new restaurants, coffee shops, and breweries, and many offer live music and events. These new options have changed the experience that had been dominated by older bars and casinos, energizing the dining and nightlife experience for visitors and locals alike.
- West Bank Landing development – The prominent new development is revitalizing the riverfront across from downtown with new space for businesses, nightlife, dining, and shopping. The project is roughly halfway to completion and the buildout is expected to continue over the next five years with the potential to spur development of nearby properties.
- Outdoor activities, parks, and trails – Great Falls has a large network of hiking and biking trails, a significant collection of city parks, a water park, skate park, ball fields, and Giant Springs State Park. The River's Edge Trail offers 48 miles of multipurpose trails including great views of the city's largest waterfall, Rainbow Falls.
- Basecamp for outdoor excursions – Bob Marshall Wilderness Area and the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest are

nearby, as is the First Peoples Buffalo Jump. The Eastern entrance to Glacier National Park is a two-and-a-half-hour drive. Great Falls offers the most convenient airport access for Canada's Waterton Lakes National Park. The Missouri River offers visitors fly fishing day trips and overnight stays in fishing cabins.

- Friendly residents that are open to tourists – While a friendly population is not a differentiator from Great Falls' competitors, it is an important aspect of the Great Falls tourism experience.
- Central location within the region for long-distance travelers – Situated on Interstate 15, Great Falls is roughly halfway between Salt Lake City, Utah, and Edmonton, Alberta (via Highway 2 in Alberta, Canada). Travelers by car travel up and down the I-15 corridor.
- Canadian visitation – Great Falls attracts visitors from Canadian border communities that take advantage of lower U.S. taxes on products ranging from clothing and household goods to ATVs and cars. The cost savings motivates significant Canadian visitation despite a weak Canadian dollar. When the Canadian dollar is stronger, the impact is even greater.
- Business community and long-term business travelers – Local businesses and Malmstrom Air Force Base bring a significant group of long-term contractors and business travelers to the city.
- Great Falls International Airport – This international airport is small and accessible. In 2016, the airport offered direct flights from Chicago, Denver, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, and Seattle.
- The Montana PRCA Pro Rodeo Circuit – The circuit finals are held at Montana ExpoPark in Great Falls, hosting over 96 of Montana's best PRCA pro rodeo contestants, as well as the Miss Rodeo Montana Pageant, professional bull riding, an auction, and a dance. The area also hosts the PRCA rodeo in Belt and the oldest one-day rodeo in Augusta.
- Meeting space options that are growing – The Best Western Plus Heritage Inn can host up to 320 people for events, and the Mansfield Event Convention Center can host up to 688. The Four Seasons Arena seats 2,100 people. Great Falls just hosted the State FFA Convention, which hosted over 1,400 students who were accommodated with ease.

## Weaknesses

- Negative perception from Great Falls' past – Great Falls has had a reputation as a rusty industrial town made up of dive bars and casinos. While it is not surprising that other Montana communities have held on to this negative view, it is Great Falls natives that perpetuate this perception despite real change and growth in the community.
- The reality of the location – While the out-of-state perception of Montana is that the whole state is full of mountains, Great Falls is nearby, but not next to, some of Montana's mountain attractions and is a 2+ hour drive from the East entrance of Glacier National Park. This is a weakness when visitors' expectations and Great Falls' location are not aligned.
- Remote location – Many of Great Falls' strengths are like those of competing Montana cities. Potential visitors from population centers to the south must drive through these cities to get to Great Falls.
- Tourism marketing product in its infancy – Great Falls Montana Tourism is only a few years old and has not been able to establish a unified identity, marketing strategy, and other foundational elements to position the city as a tourism destination or to increase visitation.
- Casinos and industrial infrastructure – These elements of the community are not attractive to many tourists and meeting planners.

## Opportunities

- Positive reputation from current tourist population – Online reviews of Great Falls are positive. People that already visit Great Falls enjoy it and are likely to return. This group should be studied and targeted. The positive experience current visitors have should be shared on a larger scale.
- Military presence – While military personnel have traditionally been siloed from life and culture in Great Falls, Malmstrom Air Force Base’s nearly 3,500 residents hail from all over the United States and, if properly engaged with the community’s assets, can become tourism ambassadors for Great Falls when returning home.
- Meeting planners – The impact of meeting planners should not be overlooked. The impact of effectively positioning the city for meeting planners that work with small groups should be considered.
- Classic Montana experience – Even as Great Falls grows and changes, the city continues to offer a classic Montana experience that many residents feel has been lost by other cities in the state. This authentic experience is a significant draw for former Great Falls residents, for other Montanans, and anyone with nostalgic connections to the state.
- Montana road trips – Prominent publishers already write about capturing the Montana experience by car in articles like National Geographic’s “Montana Road Trip: Main Street Adventures” that feature Great Falls. Cooperative promotion opportunities should be evaluated, including collaborations with Helena, other Montana communities, the Central Montana region, and the Montana Office of Tourism.
- Long-distance drivers – Montana and other western mountain state/province residents are accustomed to driving long distances. Many potential visitors travel up and down the I-15 corridor, which runs right through Great Falls. Promotion of the city and events to these travelers could increase visitation and overnight stays.
- Riverfront development – The continued development of the riverfront and downtown can be promoted while it also expands the city’s offerings to tourists.
- Bigger meeting facilities – To attract more group travel, the city should evaluate supporting and investing in the development of larger meeting facilities.
- Community engagement – Government, the business community, and residents alike need to internalize and reflect a new optimistic spirit about the city. A cohesive and authentic identity based on Great Falls’ real and growing assets can inspire community pride that is shared with visitors and even competing cities.
- Business travelers – There is an opportunity to convert long-term contractors and business travelers into brand advocates and patrons of the city’s tourism-oriented businesses.
- Airport marketing – While direct flights to Great Falls are not a differentiator from other Montana cities, the presence of an international airport is a strong asset. The airport and its attractions should be promoted both in the airport itself and in the airports that have direct connections.



## Threats

- Community skepticism about new direction and investments – Residents can undermine new positioning and investments for new visitors if they are not properly engaged. To a large extent, this is already true today.
- Weak Canadian dollar – Poor exchange rates for Canadian tourists suppress visitation and spending in Great Falls.
- Misaligned expectations for new visitors to the area – Great Falls Montana Tourism should avoid the temptation to position the city as the “gateway to Glacier” or anything that sets up a misaligned expectation about a mountain city. Great Falls’ distant mountain views are only difficult to appreciate for people that expect close-up mountain access.
- Untargeted marketing benefits competitors – Montana as a whole should be avoided. Marketing that does not take into account the mode of transportation and geographic location risk attracting visitors to competing Montana cities. For the greatest impact, marketing should be targeted and emphasize Great Falls’ differentiators.

## Market Potential

Visitors spending a night in Great Falls predominately drive in, with 66% coming by Automobile and 18% coming by air. With direct flights into Great Falls from Seattle, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, Denver, Phoenix, Chicago (seasonally), and Las Vegas.

The historic profile of the Great Falls visitor is between the ages of 35-74, with income of \$50,000-\$150,000, traveling as a couple. Additionally, we know where our visitors are coming from and what they are doing while they are here.

### Top 5 Visitor Residency Locations

Year	Location	%	Location	%	Location	%	Location	%	Location	%
2016	Alberta	16	Washington	9	Colorado	6	Idaho	5	Utah	4
2015	Alberta	19	Washington	11	California	8	Idaho	6	Texas	5
2014	Alberta	17	Washington	14	Wyoming	6	Colorado	5	California	5
2013	Alberta	19	Washington	10	California	6	Wyoming	6	Texas	5
2012	Alberta	25	Washington	12	Idaho	6	Minnesota	5	Colorado	5

### Top 5 Activities

Year	Activity	%	Activity	%	Activity	%	Activity	%	Activity	%
2016	Scenic Driving	59	Day Hiking	33	Nature Photography	33	Camping	29	Shopping	28
2015	Scenic Driving	60	Nature Photography	32	Shopping	31	Lewis & Clark Sites	31	Day Hiking	30
2014	Scenic Driving	61	Shopping	38	Nature Photography	29	Day Hiking	27	Camping	27
2013	Scenic Driving	69	Shopping	42	Historical Sites	32	Day Hiking	30	Wildlife Watching	29
2012	Scenic Driving	66	Nature Photography	35	Shopping	33	Lewis & Clark Sites	28	Historical Sites	27

Along with this, and the Destination Analysts research completed in October 2016 for the State of Montana, we see Great Falls' ability to capitalize on State strategies, and messaging, with our current market as well as our emerging market. Family and History Buffs fit in perfectly with Great Falls, Montana.

The Great Falls emerging market is younger, and could be lured to Great Falls for authentic experiences that contain a perfect mix of outdoor and cultural experiences, focusing on our strengths.

While the State of Montana will work to inspire and orient with their new marketing messaging, Great Falls Montana can focus on refinement of the orientation within Great Falls and facilitation of experiences through our strategies.

## Brand Positioning

An authentic Montana experience is highly valued by many residents inside the state and beyond. Over the past two decades as all Montana cities have experienced significant growth, Great Falls has retained the true Montana character. Tourists can access this experience along with the modern amenities found in Great Falls today, and use the city as a jumping-off point for excursions into Central and Western Montana, and even the Southern Canadian Rockies. To frame marketing efforts moving forward, Atlas crafted a brand positioning statement that expresses how a community fills the needs of its targets in ways that its competitors do not.

While not a marketing message itself, a positioning statement is leveraged to formulate marketing creative and messaging. Positioning statements are specifically structured to clearly articulate the brand proposition. Elements include:

- Point of differentiation – a description of the brand’s benefits to visitors
- Frame of reference – the tourism categories within which the brand competes
- The reason to believe – the justification for the brand’s differentiating claim

### Positioning Statement

For independent, outdoor adventurers and planners of meetings (**target market**) looking for a true, authentic Montana experience (**frame of reference**), the City of Great Falls (**brand**), located on the Missouri River in the heart of Montana (**point of differentiation**) provides a basecamp for a wide range of outdoor adventures and offers a haven of rich arts, culture, and history in a vibrant, modern community where an expansive, unspoiled, diverse landscape renews one’s spirit. (**reason to believe**).



## Objectives and Targets

Our core objectives are designed to meet the City of Great Falls' goal to strengthen its community through greater tourism visitation and meeting reservations. To best achieve this objective, the focus will be on three audiences: visitors traveling by car, visitors traveling by air, and meeting planners.

### Objective 1

Increase awareness of Great Falls as a tourism destination to visit by car and as a basecamp for visiting Montana's great attractions.

- Target: Potential visitors from the region touring Montana by car.

### Objective 2

Promote signature and growing events throughout the state, neighboring states, and drivable regions of Canada.

- Target: Potential visitors that travel within or through Montana by car to attend specific events, for business travel, for shopping, or as a part of a larger trip.

### Objective 3

Increase awareness of Great Falls as a destination for vacationers traveling by air.

- Target: Potential visitors from out of state looking for an authentic Montana experience with interest in history and outdoor attractions.

#### Objective 4

Increase awareness of Great Falls as a destination for small to mid-sized meetings for groups looking for the breadth of what Montana has to offer: hiking, biking, fly fishing, outdoor excursions at parks, and natural attractions, dining, breweries, historic attractions and museums.

- Target: Meeting planners that work with groups of 300-900 people within the NW region that have agriculture, history, outdoor or adventure tendencies.

#### Objective 5

Support the creation of more tourist-centric activities and attractions that strengthen Great Falls' marketability as a destination.

- Target: Local entrepreneurs with tourism-centric ideas, and existing tourism-centric businesses in Great Falls.

#### Objective 6

Increase October-May travel.

- Target: Meeting planners that work with groups of 300-900 people within the NW region that have agriculture, history, outdoor or adventure tendencies. Potential visitors from out of state looking for an authentic Montana experience with interest in history and outdoor attractions.

## Tactics

The recommended tactics are specific action steps to achieve Great Falls' objectives. Suggested tactics focus on attracting both visitors and group meetings to Great Falls.

Fiscal Year 17

### Digital Engagement

Create broader City of Great Falls tourism content for top-performing planning and booking sites, including TripAdvisor and other travel websites about area attractions, shopping, restaurants, outdoor recreational destinations, and events.

Provide ongoing education to restaurants, hotels, and retail businesses to solicit Yelp and Google reviews of their businesses. Encourage the same groups to maintain their digital reputation by respectfully replying to critiques, and leverage the feedback to improve services and overall facilities.

### Social Media Plan

Develop a comprehensive social media plan to strengthen existing channels and capitalize on new opportunities to promote Great Falls tourism digitally. The plan should include a social content strategy that defines the voice, publishing frequency, and the type of content appropriate for each channel. For example, Visit Great Falls Montana should consider adding Twitter as a channel for short, frequent updates on tourism news and event announcements. They should leverage Instagram to promote content generated by tourists alongside community content from residents and businesses, on top of original content from Visit Great Falls Montana. The plan should promote a consistent social experience across channels and the website by reinforcing brand standards and guiding cross-channel promotion.

### Develop New Great Falls Montana Tourism Online Experience

With the design and creation of the new website, deliver potential visitors a modern online experience that communicates the new brand message. Identify and develop content that Great Falls Montana Tourism can easily integrate into the new website and social channels to drive online traffic to the new website, and visitation to the City. Schedule content per channel.

### **Online Digital Ads**

Target audiences to show the unique Montana experience found in Great Falls alongside images of the city's assets: art, outdoor recreation, downtown and the riverfront, and access to nature.

### **Email & Content Marketing**

Target visitors and potential visitors from the current Visit Great Falls Montana database with email campaigns that promote events, showcase nearby attractions, and highlight example itineraries for Western Art Week or a road trip through Central Montana. Email is by far the most effective way of directly affecting our audience and growing visitation. There are more than 3.2 billion email accounts today. 95% of online consumers use email, and 91% check their email at least once a day (Source: Exact Target).

### **Meeting Attraction Ad Words Campaign**

Purchase keywords to capture the attention of event planners looking for meeting space in Montana to promote hotels and meeting venues.

Fiscal Year 18

### **Social Media Engagement Campaign**

Use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to connect with visitors planning trips to Montana. Create evergreen content about the City of Great Falls that utilizes photography of the city, the river, and the surrounding landscape. Develop additional posts that feature local businesses, recreational amenities, and events like Western Art Week and the PRCA Circuit Finals. Strive to create content that will work for both residents and visitors.

Follow and share (Facebook), re-tweet (Twitter), and re-gram (Instagram) content that showcases the community's assets.

Create a hashtag campaign and potential photography contest that visitors can use on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to encourage engagement with the community. Consider integrating the hashtag with the Visit Great Falls Montana logo for use on community signage and business decals.

### **Print Ads & Billboards**

Develop print advertising for publications that target road trippers in and out of the state. Run billboards in markets along the US I-15 / Alberta Provincial Highway 2 corridor.

### **Event Marketing and Tracking**

Establish deeper engagement with events that help promote Great Falls, and inspire the target audiences to visit. Identify more metrics and tracking at distributed events, namely Western Art Week, to develop deeper connections to visitors already engaged with Great Falls.

### **Merchandise Creation**

Support efforts by local businesses to create merchandise that promotes the City of Great Falls. Utilize the logo or brand elements whenever possible. Examples include t-shirts and hats featuring custom artwork, t-shirts, and posters for events.

### **Great Friends League – Hospitality Roundtable**

Create a roundtable group of hospitality business leaders in the restaurant, retail, lodging, museum, and gallery verticals. Use this group as a sounding board for tourist attraction efforts as well as a catalyst to generate business and community-led initiatives. Encourage the roundtable to develop programs that cross-promote within the tourism sector such as a tourist coupon book or collaborative social media effort.

### **Great Falls Champions Training**

Develop a module to be included in training programs for hotel and hospitality workers. The module should provide an overview of the City of Great Falls and things to do in the area. Consider providing front desk and waitstaff with coupons to local establishments so they can experience what the area has to offer in order to provide accurate recommendations to visitors.

### **Retail Outreach**

Develop special offers with local hotels, restaurants, and museums to encourage out-of-town shoppers – especially shoppers from Canada – to extend their trip and experience other area attractions. Provide shopping bag inserts with these offers and higher-level offers for people purchasing vehicles and other high-value items.

## Key Performance Indicators

While implementing the strategy and plan, Atlas and Great Falls will use key performance indicators to determine if marketing efforts are on track to meet strategic objectives.

- Increased RevPAR
- Increased number of meeting planner inquiries and bookings
- Increased overnight visitation from visitors
- Increased attendance at key events like the Montana State Fair, Western Art Week, and the PRCA Circuit Championships
- Increased traffic through Great Falls International Airport
- Identity barometer (adopters and target audience)
- Increased social media engagement across channels

In Fiscal Year 2017, Great Falls Montana Tourism set some aggressive goals in pursuit of its mission: Passionately promote Great Falls Montana as preferred destination for travelers, tourists and conventions to visit stay experience and return. Those goals were:

- Increase occupancy at Great Falls Montana lodging properties by 1%
  - Occupancy has increased 4.73% over the past 12 months, as of 5-31-2017.
- Increase Facebook page likes by 5%
  - Facebook likes have increased 12%, as of 5-31-2017.
- Increase total unique visitors to website by 5%
  - Unique visitors have increased 78%, as of 5-31-2017.
- Establish 1,000 Instagram followers
  - We have 346 followers, as of 5-31-2017.
- Increase Visitor Center use by 1%

- Users of the Visitor Center have decreased 17%, as of 5-31-2017.
- Secure commitments for 3 new conventions, groups or meetings.
  - We have 6 strong leads, however, 0 commitments, as of 5-31-2017.
- Generate 500 views of videos on Great Falls Montana YouTube Channel
  - Our YouTube channel has had 2,974 views of videos since the launch in January 2017, as of 5-31-2017.

## Appendix

1. Online Reputation Research
2. Meeting Planner Survey
3. Stakeholder Survey
4. Visitor and Potential Visitor Survey

### Online Reputation Research

#### **Attractions: Parks, Trails, and Museums**

National and state parks, wilderness areas, trails, and museums are the biggest attractions in Great Falls for tourists and locals alike. It is not surprising that these attractions receive strong reviews online.

"I grew up in Montana and have driven by this museum more than a hundred times. I've always wanted to go in and this past trip, I made a point to take my family for a visit. It was AWESOME!"

– Trip Advisor review of the C.M. Russell Museum

First Peoples Buffalo Jump: "Incredible, historical, profound experience. A beautiful teaching for me, feeling somewhat of an interloper, to get a sense of the Native way. Walk the trail made my imagination fly. I am confident, you won't be disappointed should you visit this state park."

– Google Maps review

"If you just traveled into Great Falls and you need to stretch your legs, you can do part of this trail along the river. The bird viewing was great - but I'm told you need to travel further out of town to get to the best parts of this walk.... Do so, because sticking to the Great Falls area made this 'just ok.'"

– Trip Advisor review of Rivers Edge Trail

#### **Hotels**

Great Falls hotels with meeting and event amenities got high reviews. Hotels and meeting venues seem to be well-positioned to serve Great Falls' current visitors.

"This hotel is exactly what you could wish for. Excellent and friendly hotel staff, super clean and modern style rooms."  
– Yelp review of La Quinta Inn and Suites

"The Hilton Garden Inn exceeds all expectations of even the most picky customer. Their attention to detail, cleanliness, and service are second to none in Great Falls."  
– Trip Advisor review of Hilton Garden Inn

"Great location, clean and spacious rooms, friendly and courteous staff. I always stay here when I visit Great Falls!"  
– Google Maps review of Econo Lodge® Ponderosa Hotel

"Horrible customer service. After a long day of travel, I arrived to my hotel to discover they had an opportunity to book a large group for a meeting and rebooked me at another hotel to accommodate them."  
– Yelp review of Hilton Garden Inn

### **Conference Venues**

Great Falls has several venues for group meetings. There are two large convention centers that accommodate conventions, trade shows, meetings, concerts, fundraisers, banquets, and wedding receptions, but space limits large groups to around 150 to 250 people depending on the venue.

"We were there for the fair and found this little gem."  
– Trip Advisor review of Montana ExpoPark

"Classy venue! Very clean! Fun times had at each event attended! World class local crew! Made the venue look amazing!"  
– Facebook review of the Mansfield Center for the Performing Arts

"Wonderful place for a conference or group meeting."  
– Google Maps review of Ursuline Center

"Stayed in the RV section of the park, poor quality, needs to be cleaned up, needs to be more selective of who stays there, some scary people, would not stay there again. Sorry!"  
– Trip Advisor review of Montana Expo Park

### **Other Unique Locations**

Museums offer guests a unique meeting setting. Visitors and groups generally appreciate the unique venues and programming.

"I went to the 'Swing' night with the New Harold Nichols Big Band. Director Bud Nichols does a concert here every year, and it relives the swing era with old music and new. It was great fun dancing even though my skills are less than remarkable."

– Trip Advisor review of The History Museum, Great Falls

"We absolutely love the Children's Museum! We purchased a family pass, and it's so worth it. There are tons of fun exhibits, great coffee for parents, and is a perfect activity for cold winter days when my kiddos need to get out of the house."

– Facebook review of Children's Museum of Montana

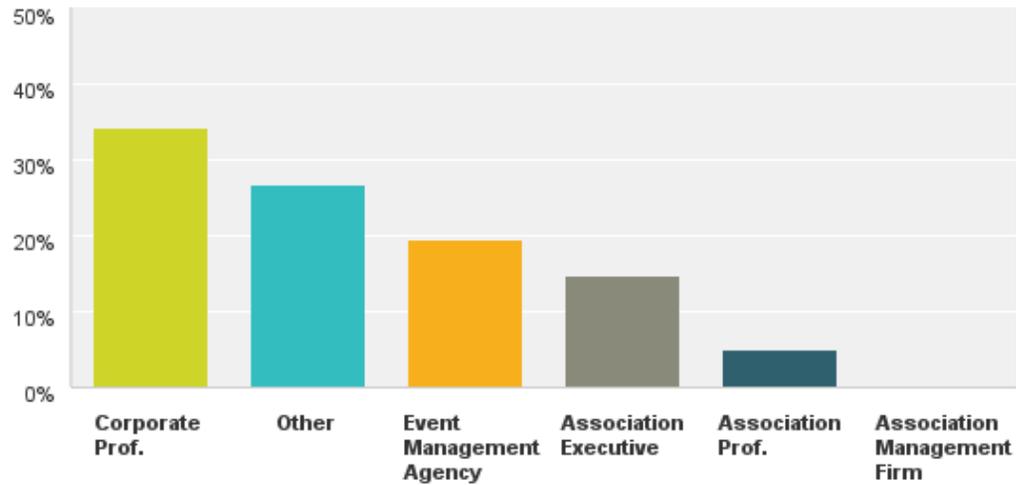
"I understand this is run by donations and fundraisers, but instead of a new exhibit next year, maybe they need to shut the place down and clean... and paint."

– Trip Advisor review of Children's Museum of Montana

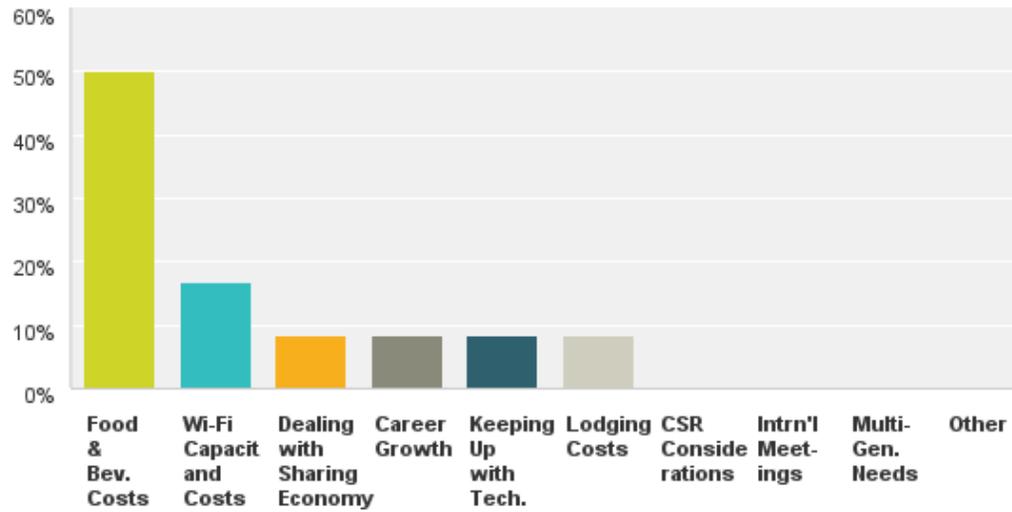
## National Meeting Planner Survey

To gauge the perception of Great Falls as a meeting destination, Atlas surveyed 41 national meeting planners, including some planners that already arranged meetings in Great Falls. Their responses are as follows:

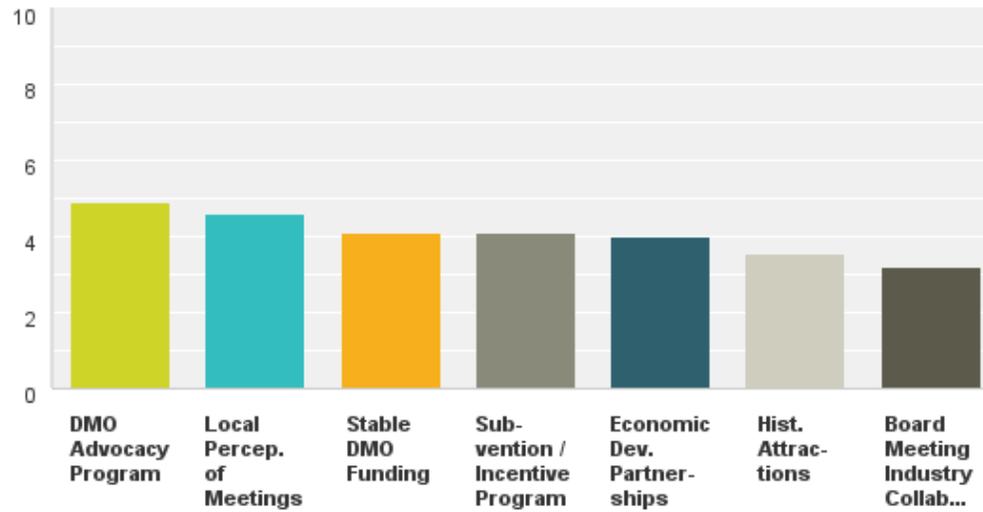
### Q1: What best describes your meeting industry professional role?



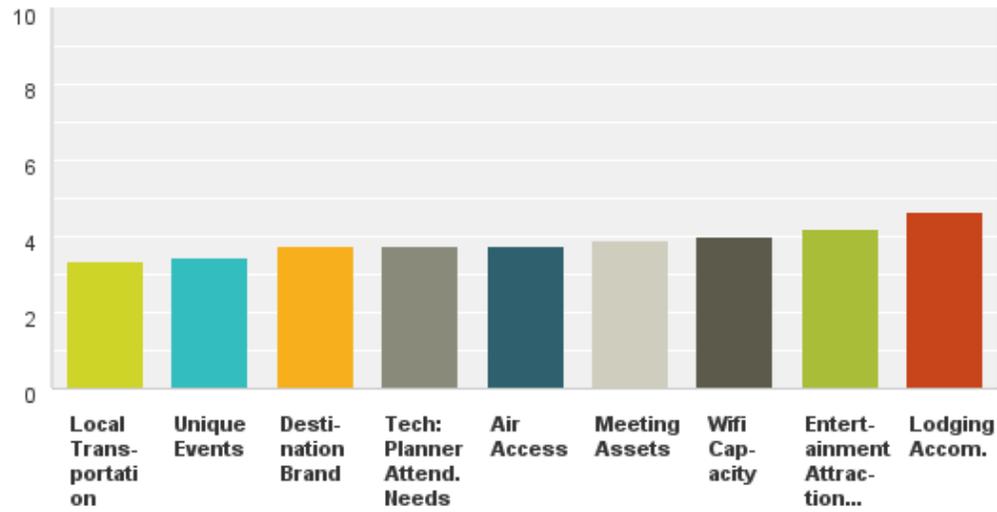
**Q2: As a Meeting Planner, what is the biggest challenge that you face daily?**



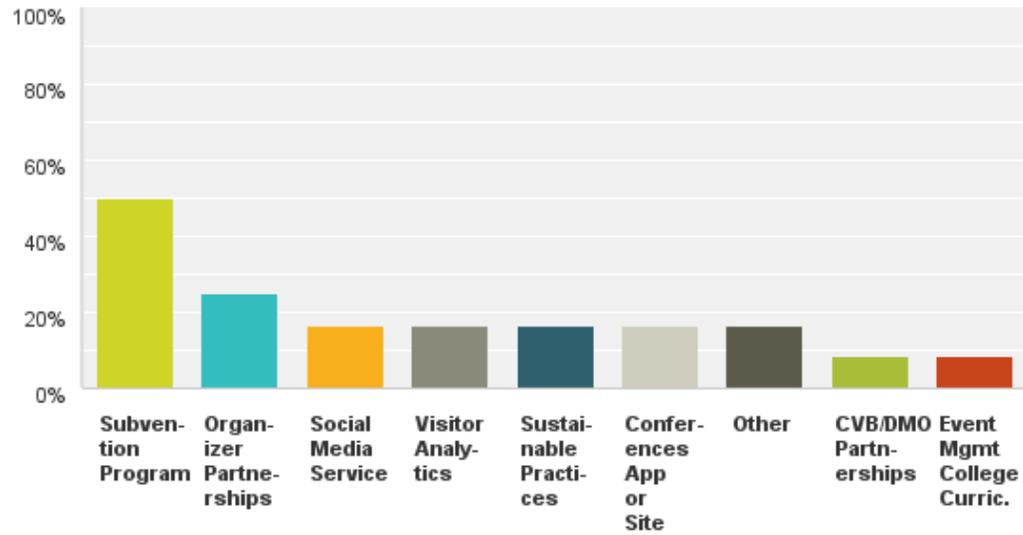
**Q3: Please rank the community support elements that contribute to a destination's appeal in order of importance:**



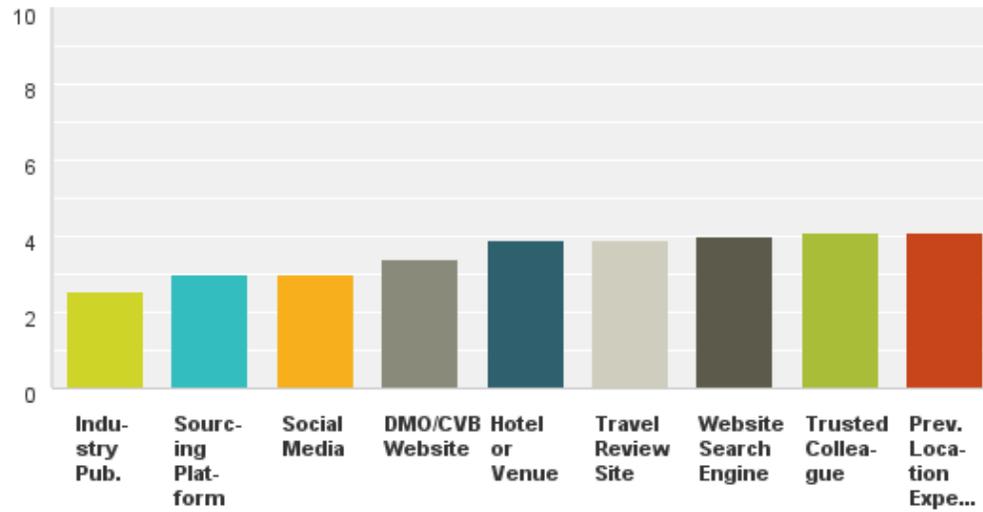
**Q4: Please rate the elements from lowest to highest that contribute to destination appeal:**



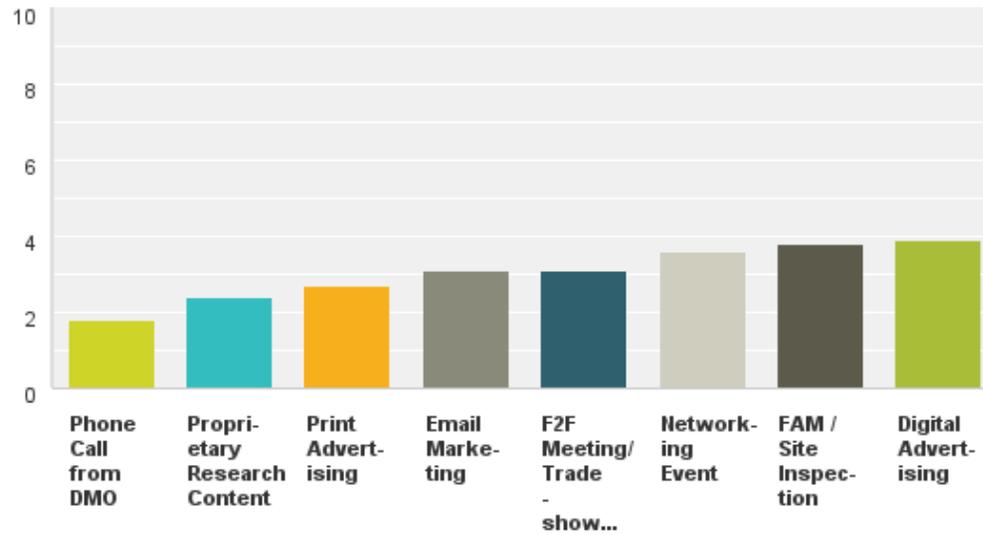
**Q5: What current/emerging Destination Marketing Organization practices and services would enhance the appeal of a potential meeting destination for your business?**



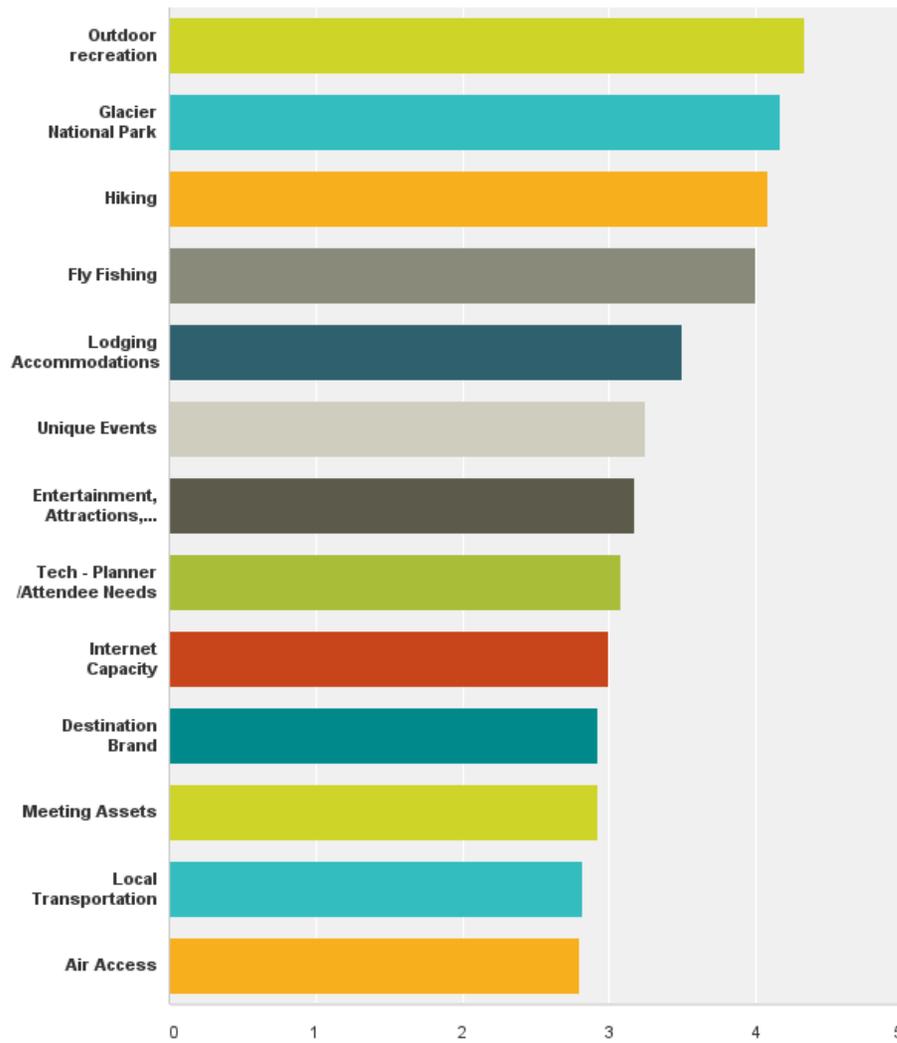
**Q6: Please rate the frequency of use from lowest to highest of the following information sources when researching information or opinions about a destination:**



**Q7: Please rate from lowest to highest how effective the following destination marketing engagement tactics are to get your interest/attention:**



**Q13: Based on what you know, have heard, or would think, please rate how well the following attributes fit Great Falls, Montana:**



## Great Falls Stakeholder Survey

This survey was distributed to 86 community stakeholders including Convention and Visitors Bureau and Tourism Business Improvement District board members, CVB members, lodging property owner/management, and other prominent members of the community. The following is a summary of the survey responses.

1. What are your perceptions of Great Falls as a tourism destination?

- Not on the radar as a tourism destination
- With better marketing, promotions, and community support, could become more of a tourism destination
- Great basecamp for Montana vacation to explore national parks and museums

2. What is the most important thing someone unfamiliar with the city needs to know about visiting?

- The Missouri river
- The abundance of museums and art
- Access to outdoor and state activities and attractions

3. What are the best reasons to visit Great Falls? For example, location, direct flights, and attractions.

- Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center
- Location. In particular, proximity to Glacier and Yellowstone Parks
- Natural attractions and art museums

4. Beyond the leading attractions in the city and the surrounding area, what are some of the city's hidden gems or surprising stories?

- Rivers Edge Trail
- Giant Springs
- Parks
- History

5. What other communities do you consider similar to Great Falls?

- Helena
- Billings
- Great Falls is unique

6. Have you considered visiting any of these similar communities?

- Yes
- Have already

7. What are some of the things that Great Falls offers that other cities in Montana and the larger region do not?

- The River, the riverfront
- C.M. Russell Museum
- Friendly, small town charm
- Location

8. What is the main reason tourists visit the city?

- C.M. Russell Museum
- Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center
- Family
- Proximity to parks and airport
- Most people are passing through
- Shopping

9. What is the main reason they return?

- Hospitality / friendliness
- Outdoor activities

10. How do you describe your community to visitors unfamiliar with your area?

- Central location for fly fishing and outdoor activities
- Laid back / unassuming / friendly
- Small Montana town

11. How do you describe your community to visitors familiar with Montana, but not Great Falls?

- Missouri river runs through town
- Surrounding mountain ranges
- Great people
- Town activities (museums, nightlife, dining)

12. What are the unique tourism assets in your community?

- C.M. Russell Museum
- Museums and art
- Missouri river
- The falls and five dams

13. What are the most significant challenges facing tourism in Great Falls?

- Not marketing and promoting Great Falls
- Not having a unified, focused voice / message
- Overcoming perceptions / image
- Not being a destination

14. What do you think could be done to overcome those challenges?

- Better messaging / marketing / promotion
- Get fresh perspective
- Add to activities (something big needed)

15. What major changes, for better or worse, have you recognized in the city in the recent past?

- Land improvements / developments
- More business growth
- Downtown revitalization / increase in entertainment and dining
- Not much to increase tourism

16. How do you define tourism success for Great Falls?

- Increased visitation
- Increased hotel stays
- Increase in jobs and business revenue

17. What underutilized opportunities or assets currently exist in Great Falls?

- Rivers Edge Trail
- The falls
- The Missouri river
- Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center, C.M. Russell Museum

18. Is there anything missing that Great Falls needs to increase tourism visitation?

- An activity center
- Some type of big event or draw
- Develop downtown
- Better promotion / message

19. In your opinion, what would we have to accomplish to make marketing successful for Great Falls?

- Develop cohesive messaging / marketing plan
- Varied answers including: filling up hotels 90% of the time, getting rid of the CVB, protecting lodging tax dollars, more tours or pre-organized activities.

20. What are the city's greatest successes in the last 5-10 years?

- Waterfront development
- Downtown revitalization
- Airport renovation

21. Is there anything else we need to know to create an effective tourism marketing strategy?

- Create / build large attraction or activity center
- Better leadership, cooperation, and successful attitude in the CVB

## Visitor and Potential Visitor Survey

1. Have you visited Great Falls, or are you interested in visiting Great Falls in the future?

Yes, I have visited Great Falls – 15.74%

Yes, I am interested in visiting Great Falls – 61.11%

No – 23.15%

2. If you have visited Great Falls, what was the trip's purpose?

Vacation – 76.71%

Group Meeting – 0%

Business – 2.74%

Family – 6.85%

Friends – 5.48%

Other – 19.18% (Responses include: photography, wedding, high-school reunion, fishing, passing by, interest in future relocation)

3. What draws you to visit Great Falls?

Shopping – 2.44%

Access to the outdoors – 52.85%

Natural and historic sites – 60.16%

Art and cultural experiences – 8.94%

A road trip stop for dining and lodging – 23.2%

Classic Montana experience – 54.47%

Visit relatives - 4.07%

Business - .81%

Other – 8.94% (Responses include: photography, Glacier National Park, Yellowstone trip, RVing)

4. What are the best reasons to visit Great Falls?

Location – 29.2%

Direct flights – 3.54%

City attractions – 8.85%

Nearby attractions – 52.21%

Authentic Montana experience – 57.52%

Other – 5.31% (Responses include shopping, family, good food, water and friendly people, access to outdoors and scenery)

5. If you have visited what was your favorite experience in Great Falls?

- Lewis & Clark, C.M. Russell Museum, museums
- The falls
- Glacier National Park
- The Missouri River
- Shopping

6. What is the biggest drawback for visiting Great Falls?

- Distance
- None
- Airport path, cost of flying

7. What other communities do you consider similar to Great Falls?

- Bozeman
- Billings
- Helena
- Kallispell

8. Which of these communities have you visited or considered visiting?

- Billings
- Bozeman
- Butte
- Helena

9. What are some of the things that Great Falls offers that other cities in Montana and the larger region do not?

- Glacier National Park
- Do not know

10. What is your favorite vacation destination?

- Glacier

- Yellowstone
- The mountains, mountain states
- National Parks
- Hawaii
- Caribbean
- Florida
- Mexico
- The beach

11. What kind of vacations do you typically take?

- Exploration of new places – 72.46%
- Outdoor adventure – 63.77%
- Outdoor escape for solitude – 43.48%
- Family-friendly activities and amenities – 42.75%
- Cultural experiences – 31.16%
- Shopping and dining – 14.49%

12. When you plan vacations, do you typically fly or drive?

- Drive – 77.21%
- Fly – 22.79%