

Vermont Attractions Association Strategic Plan

Executive Summary

The VAA's deep due diligence during this five-month strategic planning process revealed this clear path:

The VAA should evolve into a powerful trade association that helps individual member businesses grow stronger, and harnesses the collective strength of membership as an influential voice in the VT tourism industry.

Research findings and documentation that led to this conclusion have been shared with VAA staff, board, and the members who attended the 2017 Fall Member Meeting. All are enthusiastically supportive of this path, and the corresponding points as follows:

- VAA is not – nor should it strive to be – a consumer marketing organization.
- As such, the VAA does not market to consumers. Rather, it provides sales and marketing tools – like the map and brochure distribution – to industry partners and VAA members to assist them in marketing to consumers.
- As a trade association, the VAA should consider “members” its primary audience and serve as a networking, communication, education and resource hub for the VT attractions industry.

Overall, this strategic planning process has brought clarity to the VAA's direction. Embracing and owning its role as a powerful trade association will reduce confusion, simplify decisions, maximize resources, and temper inefficiencies.

The strategic plan that resulted from this process will guide VAA comfortably and realistically on its evolution journey. It has breathing room to proceed at a manageable pace, and the staff and board should use it to stay anchored and focused from year to year.

How to Use this Plan

This is not a task list, so it won't be used as a daily reference tool. The plan should be used as a touchstone in the following ways:

- Reviewed quarterly (by staff and Exec Comm), to develop task lists and “mini-goals” for the coming three to six months.
- Reviewed annually (by staff and full board), to determine adjustments needed, measure progress, and give shape to the next wave of longer-term goals for the plan.
- Referenced as a litmus test when new ideas arise and/or big decisions need to be made. Hold these things up against the plan to assess compatibility and determine whether they support or disrupt the plan. If it's a disruptor, the VAA may choose to proceed anyway for other business reasons, but then it's clear that the strategic plan will need to be adapted accordingly.

Most importantly, use this as your 30,000-foot-view guidebook. Don't let it gather dust on a shelf...it's a living, breathing, evolving document, and it should be used regularly to help keep you on course and navigate change when necessary.

Challenges You Will Face in Implementation

Implementing a strategic plan takes:

- Patience
- Ability and conviction to stay on course
- Fortitude to make choices
- Courage to see things you COULD do, but choose not to do because they're off course
- Humility and wisdom to keep returning to this touchstone and let it guide and re-anchor you

All organizations doing strategic planning (effectively) must rely on these things, but membership associations are at the greatest risk of derailment from their absence because

- The board leadership changes and new folks aren't anchored to plans past, present, and future.
- Keeping staff, board, committees, members, and industry stakeholders informed of the plan's progress and changes is arduous because they all need different depth of information at different times.
- It's hard to get all these different groups on the same page (and keep them there) when geography, seasonal patterns, and lack of steady communication prohibit sharing by osmosis.
- Passionate members and/or volunteers can force disruption with loud persistence of a personal agenda, even with the best of intentions.
- Volunteers will get all fired up with big ideas that simply aren't well matched to the association's resources.

To help overcome all these challenges, be aware of these helpful tips:

- **Leadership Education** - all new board and committee members—anyone in a leadership role – should be given this document and supporting documents from the strategic planning development process prior to commencing their duties. The VAA Exec Director and/or Chairman should review these documents with the new people to ensure they start off on the same page as the rest of the board/staff/committees.
- **Slow Down** – everything will FEEL urgent, but it will not BE urgent. Don't cram each quarter's task list with unachievable quantities. Do fewer things, but do them thoroughly well.
- **Simplify** – when something starts to feel unwieldy and complex...question it. There is an inherent tendency for humans to overcomplicate things. This will block your progress. Stop and ask yourself: what's the simplest way to the goal line here?
- **Bite-sized chunks** – facing all that's needed in a five-year plan can be daunting, because our brains automatically try to process the “how” alongside the “what.” Unfreeze your brain by focusing on the short-term “how” and the long-term “what”. Do detailed task lists in quarterly chunks at most.
- **Do not drive this plan by committee** - Have a driver (or two, but no more) who keeps things moving, deploys/taps resources on schedule, and holds people accountable for their parts.
- **Don't reinvent the wheel** – a massive amount of research and thinking went into the process that led to this plan. Use all the documents and presentations provided along the way to form the basis for your task lists and future actions. Refer back to them often for idea-starters and threads to explore.

Be patient and have faith that your efforts will pay off. It may feel slow-moving, but it's a long-term plan. It should be slow-moving.

**VAA Strategic Plan
2018 – 2022
-Subject to Annual Updates-**

Plan Purpose

This plan is designed to support and protect the VAA’s mission and purpose as follows:

As the singular trade association that serves the Vermont tourism attractions industry, the VAA is a networking, communication, education, and resource hub that:

- 1) Helps individual businesses grow stronger*
- 2) Harnesses the collective strength of membership as an influential voice in Vermont tourism and commerce*
- 3) Supports the sales and marketing efforts of members and industry partners with collateral and tools that showcase VAA members*

Plan Oversight

Timeline, assignments, and accountability are managed jointly by VAA Executive Director and Board Chairman, with periodic review by full VAA board.

Effective Plan Maintenance

At all times, this plan should have significant detail in its “year one and two,” and summary category and goal anchors in its “years three, four and five.”

In Q4 of each year, plan overseers should strategize to flesh out necessary details for the upcoming year (the new “year one”) as well the following four years.

In this way, the VAA is ALWAYS working with a rolling, five-year plan, and therefore, any new board and staff members can pick up the reins without needing to upheave progress or go back to the drawing board with a massive strategic planning process.

Strategic Plan – 2018

Theme: Owning Who We Are/Strengthening Foundation

Goals:

- 1) Recast all VAA operations, offerings, and actions to align with “new” focus as a powerful trade association.
- 2) Establish and secure support for VAA’s clarified mission and new strategic journey among members, non-members, and industry stakeholders.
- 3) Inspire stronger connections with members

Core Strategies:

- 1) Recast to support/align with the clarified path:

Revamp VAA bylaws, mission statement, and operational documents.

- Bylaws:

VAA bylaws ok as is. Changes can be made if necessary but SOP and Policies noted below can be changed and altered as necessary and required.

Create and compile, from existing documents and new, a play book of Standard Operating Procedures and Policies.

- Mission statement:

The VAA is a statewide trade association that helps individual member businesses grow stronger, and harnesses the collective strength of membership as an influential voice in the VT tourism industry.

- Operational documents:

- ED & Admin job descriptions completed to include a playbook of monthly assigned tasks, all job details, business expenses-overhead, invoice/contract process
- Board member tool kit to include invite, responsibilities, calendar of expected meeting dates, welcome letter
- Identify VAA business/non-profit required business operation, original documents of incorporation, accounting, reporting requirements and include in SOP and Policies.

- Revamp committees – quantity, type, and composition.

New possible committees:

- Map
- Web solutions
- Membership

- Communication
- Academy (learning opportunities)
- Ad hoc/task based for special or short term projects

Each committee will have a list of tasks to complete and report to ED/President for ongoing member communication.

- Redesign all member communication tools:
Member orientation/sales kit, Annual Report format, and other existing pieces
 - Annual Report to be renamed as Year End Review
 - Member tool kit will be created with existing material and new. Administrator to review all existing, compile and create additional materials.
 - Design templates to be used for these items.
 - Communication committee review/develop
- Website:
 - Determine most sensible way to pare back website maintenance and updating requirements to maximize its life with minimal effort for 2018 and 2019.
 - Close back end management of member listings on site. Administrator and President will update listings at member's request. Create a Help Desk/Update form
 - Events and coupons will remain managed by the member.
 - Add tab Members Only section to house Academy documents, minutes, meeting schedules and other information/documents for members.
 - Discuss these items with Earthlogic to determine pricing for 2018 and preparation for new website in 2019.

2) Establish and secure industry support:

- Communicate VAA strategic plan results to key stakeholders and industry-wide through 12-month multi-faceted campaign: emails, one-one-one discussions, industry presentations (i.e. VTS, VCB, etc.).
- Promote VAA to current and potential members with 12-month communications campaign that unifies thinking, mindset, and expectations.
 - 6 communications per year
 - Design template for these communications
- By 2018 Fall Marketing Meeting, there should be full clarity (and enthusiastic support) for the VAA's clarified mission and focus from all businesses in the VT attractions industry, with clear value proposition for membership in its entirety, not just "the map."

3) Inspire stronger connections with members:

- Use topics from FMM index cards as basis for these communications
- Create and launch an industry newsletter that marries frequency & content for optimal engagement.
 - 6 communications per year

Next page, 2018 continued

- Establish a closed VAA Facebook group to create a seamless, real-time channel for member communication, both with VAA and with each other.
 - Launch with a mini-campaign that shares guidelines and usage, and ensure a VAA content calendar is created to help keep the group dialogue fresh and useful.

- Establish and launch sensible plan to foster ongoing face-to-face networking sessions for members that are useful, geographically/financially sensitive, and achievable.
 - Ideally, each session features a facilitated blend of structured topics and unscripted conversation.
 - Perhaps establish regional champions

- Establish and launch a VAA branded training series, the “VAA Business Academy,”
 - Start small in 2018 and grow over time.
 - Offer education and training resources to members in diverse ways (small group, large group, online, in-person, paid/free, etc).
 - Under the VAA Business Academy umbrella, the VAA can merchandise its efforts to bring knowledge and education to its members.
 - Use topics from FMM index cards as basis for these training options

- Deliberately court and secure “new blood” to VAA leadership group (board and committees) and ensure they are connected to the strategic plan to help champion its implementation.

Since FMM:

- 2 new Board Members – Gregg Banse, Lake Champlain Maritime Museum and Gail Albert, Shelburne Vineyard
- Interested in Board or committee – Trish Palao, Montshire Museum
- Interested in committee involvement – Meghan Mahoney, Simon Pearce, Sarah Granstrom, Lincoln Peak Vineyard

Strategic Plan – 2019

Theme: Charting growth

Goals:

- 1) Build upon the newly-solidified foundation of member engagement with additional tools and programs.
- 2) Identify viable opportunities for increasing VAA resources to fund future ideas.
- 3) Evaluate and improve rack card and brochure distribution program to increase effectiveness and expand opportunities for success.

Core Strategies:

- 1) Build on member foundation:
 - Improve/enhance training series.
 - Merchandise successes of 2018 with written and in-person summary of achievements.
 - Recast leadership positioning within VAA to promote board and committee roles as coveted appointments that are earned and respected.
- 2) Identify funding opportunities:
 - Create and launch a viable sponsorship program to establish sustainable funding for ongoing training and networking programs.
 - Explore additional funding increases that come directly from members, such as: new member categories, varying dues levels, pay-to-play programs, and more.
 - Explore potential grants and funding opportunities from government (and other) sources that match specific VAA programs and needs.
 - Develop funding strategy to revamp VAA website in 2019.
- 3) Improve Rack Card Distribution Program
 - Assess strengths & weaknesses of current system.
 - Identify additional opportunities to increase the value of this program (to both members and consumers).
 - Create and launch new system/program that has fewer weaknesses and greater strengths.
 - Communicate – and celebrate – new program to members and VT tourism industry.

Strategic Plan – 2020

Theme: Investing in growth

Goals:

- 1) Revamp VAA website to more effectively align with VAA positioning and strategic path.
- 2) Create at least one new tool that members and industry partners can leverage to sell/market Vermont.
- 3) Continue to build upon the now-strong foundation of member engagement.

Strategic Plan – 2021

Theme: Pursuing growth

Goals:

- 1) Launch new website to appropriate audiences and ensure it integrates well with industry partner websites that are backed by consumer marketing programs.
- 2) Launch a proactive and fun membership drive, which can be implemented annually and harnesses the VAA groundswell of successes.
- 3) Continue to build upon the now - strong foundation of member - engagement.

Strategic Plan – 2022

Theme: Owning growth

Goals:

- 1) Solidify industry leadership position with external industry relations campaign that showcases VAA strategic position as a key, influential player in the Vermont economy.
- 2) Evaluate VAA resources – staff, sponsors, volunteers – to determine (and implement) structural changes needed to keep pace with growth.
- 3) Orchestrate fun, visible, and exciting celebration to provide full report to members and industry on successful conclusion of its first five-year strategic plan, with overview of achievements and the path to come.