

How to Set Up a Sustainable Tourism Business in a Developing Country

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Abstract

When I first arrived in Colombia, I did not think I would be running a sustainable tourism business. I did not even know what sustainable tourism meant. And when I started to brainstorm the idea, I did not know I would be focusing on a narrow niche of LGBT travelers. But today I am running a travel and tourism agency that is recognized as an emerging leader in the field of LGBT and sustainable travel in Colombia. As a potential entrepreneur considering launching a sustainable tourism business in a developing country, you might have a lot of doubts and questions. Certainly, many of those questions are the same ones I had when I started out. Just like I did, on your journey, you will need to establish your business, build credibility in your host country, and learn and develop key competencies. Then, you will define your objective and develop a vision and mission to serve as guideposts. After that you will need to get to know your target audience, and then take steps to create that initial product that you will sell to your customers. By building that product with a network of suppliers, you will have a greater impact and inspire a wave of innovation that will transform the tourism industry in your host country. The transformation will lead to improvements in the quality of life for local community members. And you will elevate to expert status, building your brand and inspiring generations to come to realize change they might not have otherwise imagined to be possible.

How to Set Up a Sustainable Tourism Business in a Developing Country

So, you are interested in starting a sustainable tourism business in a developing country, but you just do not know where to start. That is okay. That is how I started, just a little more than two years ago. In fact, I did not have any real knowledge of the tourism industry nor sustainable development, let alone sustainable tourism. I, similar to you, simply wanted to do something positive that would improve conditions for the people in the foreign country I chose to live and start my business, while also helping foreigners see the beauty I saw when I first came here.

My own story about how I created a sustainable tourism business in a developing country – in my case, I chose Colombia – could serve as a guide to help you develop your own plan of action to get your business off the ground. I will start by sharing a little background about how I got here, the new challenges and obstacles I faced both living in a new country and then deciding to start a business there, and why I ultimately chose to go down the path of focusing on sustainable tourism. Then, I will outline the steps I took turn my ideas into action, to transform this vision I had into a reality. Just about two years ago, I remember sitting in my living room spitballing with my then-roommate. And today, my business that didn't exist then is now positioned as a leader in the industry, even earning government contracts to promote sustainable tourism in my host country.

Whatever country you choose, as an outsider coming in or as a newcomer to the industry, you are going to face a bunch of new challenges and obstacles. But perhaps from the lessons I share with you about what I learned along the way, you will be able to better plan your own journey towards launching a successful sustainable tourism business.

Why Colombia? And Why Sustainable Tourism?

I never thought I would visit Colombia, let alone end up moving here. In fact, I barely had been issued my first passport right before my first visit to this South American country. My only experience outside of the United States before that was a short trip to visit relatives in Mexico, where a passport was not required. So, you might be wondering what drew me here.

My first visit to Colombia in December 2013 was motivated by my desire to learn Spanish. I had always wanted to pick up this second language. Being unemployed at the time, I figured why not complete an immersion program while I continued my job search? I would not only be developing an important, marketable skill, but I would also be able to communicate directly and have meaningful conversations with my relatives who only spoke Spanish.

Thus, after completing some online research, I discovered an affordable immersion program in the city of Medellin. I did not know what to expect. In fact, all my knowledge about Latin America, in general, had been shaped by movies and information on the news – largely negative information. But I also read that Medellin was one of the most innovative cities in the world, had Springtime weather all year round, the people were warm and friendly, and their accents were relatively neutral, making it a good place to learn Spanish. And that is exactly what I found.

I quickly discovered that all the negative images I had been fed by American media just did not represent the reality on the ground. What I found when I arrived was paradise. And I immediately fell in love with the city, the people, and the culture. After returning home to the states, it did not take too long for me to find my way back to Colombia. And when I did, I made a personal commitment to do something that would change the way people back home perceived Latin America, and Colombia, in particular.

With that commitment always in the back of my mind, I eventually established my current business – Out in Colombia Travel. The business is an in-bound travel agency/tour operator that offers sustainable tours primarily to English-speaking LGBT travelers. Now, I chose to focus on this particular niche for a variety of reasons. But you will want to figure out the niche that works best for you. A bit later we will discuss how to choose and narrow down your target audience.

It took me a while to decide how I was going to carry out my commitment. In fact, before I launched my business, I had picked up a job working as a project manager for a technology company. It was a good gig. I worked with good people. And it paid the bills. But I always longed to do something that stoked my passion. With my background in social work, community work, and advocacy, I knew I could be doing more to help improve the lives of those around me. I also had always been engaged in the LGBT community where I lived before, but in Medellin, I hadn't yet developed that social circle, and was eager to connect.

So, I started a blog as a way to document my experience as a gay man living in Colombia. The idea for the blog was to slowly build an online resource for travelers like me who were looking for more information on the community. I, also, slowly started to explore the idea of tourism as an avenue for creating authentic, inter-cultural exchanges where dialog and learning about the strengths of different cultures could take place. But, not having any background in tourism, I had no clue where to start. Then, I saw an announcement from the Colombia LGBT Chamber of Commerce about a forum they were organizing in Bogota on the topic of creating a space for gay travelers in Colombia.

That was my call to adventure. After attending the forum and recognizing that there was an industry-wide interest in LGBT tourism but that there was not a lot going on to cultivate it, I knew I had an opportunity to create something new. And that something new also spoke to me.

Even before launching the business, I was already seeing signs of interest from gay travelers wanting to come to Colombia. I had only posted a few stories on my blog, and I was already receiving emails from people wanting to know more. In fact, my very first clients reached out to me via the blog. They were a couple who had already booked their flights and wanted to find a gay tour guide. I did not know of any reliable LGBT travel or tourism agencies in the area, so I offered to organize to put something together for them, and they accepted. Even though I still had no idea how it would turn out, after completing that pilot project with certain success, I decided to pull the trigger and form the business.

Now that's my story. That's what got me here. Whatever your motivations are, something is drawing you to do something positive in the country that you now or will call home. And something has led you to want to launch your own sustainable tourism initiative. But you're probably wondering how to go about doing it. Well, just like a baby learns to walk, there are few initial steps you'll need to take. So, let's talk about that.

Setting Up Your Sustainable Tourism Business

Depending on the context of the host country you choose, before even getting started, you may want to take some time to learn the local language and become familiar with local customs and norms. In fact, if you're starting a business in a foreign country where the dominant language is not your native tongue, I would say it is critical to speak the local language on at least a conversational level. If you do not have a solid grasp of the local language, make sure

you make a concerted effort to learn. Among other benefits, it will help you build credibility with the people who run the entities that you will have to work with.

I also recommend you identify a member of the local community to join you in your effort. They will know the local customs, culture, laws, and communication styles, which do not always match where you are from.

Once you have immersed yourself a bit and have a better understanding of and connection to the local culture, you can get started.

Step 1: Define Your Objective

Having clarity on your overall objective is critical. What is it deep down that you want to accomplish? This is what I call the higher calling. Why do you want to do this? And why should others join you? For me, it was to improve quality of life and open hearts and minds. For you it may be different. But once you have an understanding of what that objective is, that will frame everything else you do. That will frame your strategy. Your objective, your reason for being and doing what you do will be reflected in your grand vision that you hope becomes reality in 10 or 20 years. “A vision concentrates on the future and outlines” the change you want to see; be bold about it (Jones-Crabtree, Patterson, Zanowick, Baker, & McWilliams, 2010). It will also be reflected in your mission statement. And while there are differing ideas of what should go into a mission statement (Khalifa, A. S., 2012), think of it as defining your reason for existing, why you do what you do and why others should care. Your bold vision about where you see yourself and your industry in the future coupled with a clear mission that explains why and what you do will provide the guideposts you need to develop concrete goals and tactics that will lead you towards achieving your vision.

Step 2: Define Your Niche and Target Audience

After you have defined your overall purpose, you'll need to narrow down your niche and carefully choose your target audience. It is important to remember that you cannot be everything to everyone. This is especially true in the tourism industry. With so much competition, the travel and tourism agencies that are surviving are the ones that stand out. That is, they focus and become the experts on specific products and services that fulfill the wants and needs of a specific target audience. Look at this as an opportunity. Rather than be "forced into a tight corner by internet operators and changing consumer tastes," you have an opportunity to be innovative and create something new and unique (Truman, 2006).

When I first started out, I really was not that interested in focusing on LGBT tourists. I thought I would be just marketing tourism services to a general audience. But, as I mentioned previously, external factors pushed me in the direction of focusing on the LGBT population. One such factor was that industry leaders were having a public conversation with government leaders about how to turn Colombia into an LGBT tourism destination. The need for such a conversation shed light on the fact that there was a need that was not yet being filled. Thus, I saw an opportunity to create something new because, and here's the lesson, I paid attention to what was happening around me.

And that is what you need to do so that you do not just get lost in the mix. Find out where you can do more than just fit in; rather, take time to discover where you can stand out. You might attend workshops, read the local newspapers, or find opportunities to network. Whatever you do, it is important to ask questions and pay attention to your surroundings so you can start to identify the area where you will become an expert.

Step 3: Develop Your Customer Persona

Park Howell, a communications expert, taught me the importance of knowing your customers in a God-like way (personal communication). And he is right. If you really want to motivate others to buy what you are selling, you have to know what makes them tick. And you have to go beyond basic demographics. You have to know what their values are, what motivates and inspires them, what fears they have, and what their needs are. Then, and only then, you can craft your message to them and start developing a product that fulfills their needs.

Andres J. Hoffman (2012) wrote six Americas, referring to six different dominant world views on topics like climate change. Since you are focusing on sustainability, that will involve a certain amount of education on the topic. You should keep Hoffman's (2012) advice in mind so you fine-tune your message and have the greatest impact, no matter who you are talking to.

Step 4: Develop Your Product

This leads me to the fourth step: product development. When you started out, you probably had an idea of what you wanted to offer. But now that you are armed with some market research about opportunities and what your customers want, it is time to fully develop that product.

Initial product and tradeoffs. As a business focused on sustainable tourism, it is okay, and I would say it is probably necessary, to make some initial tradeoffs (Bansal, Chapardar, & Gehman, 2016). Sustainable tourism, after all, is as much about eco-friendly and community-oriented products as it is about boosting the local economy (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2017). When you start out, chances are you will not be able to guarantee all of your services are promoting the triple bottom line. It is important, however, to be transparent about that fact and maintain a focus on moving towards offering fully and truly sustainable tourism products. In the meantime, you will need to explore and experiment to find the right balance of products and

services that are both sustainable and that will keep your business afloat so you can have a lasting impact down the line.

Incorporating feedback. As you experiment, it is important to constantly ask for feedback from all of your stakeholders, including your customers, suppliers, and other parties. In fact, when I started out, I did not know that much about the quality level of the services our initial suppliers were offering. I did not know if they were engaging in sustainable practices. I was honest about that with my customers, and relied on their feedback to learn what they really wanted and to determine what we really wanted to offer. You will want to use the feedback you receive to learn the industry, continually recalibrate, get better, and develop the real product you want to offer.

Develop partnerships with your suppliers. And because you want to be sustainable, that means, in part, investing in the local economy. Well what better way to do that than to partner with local suppliers. After all, that is where you will have the most impact. You are selling tour packages, but they are running the hotels, driving the cars, and operating the tours. So, it is critical to build a network of reliable suppliers who are committed to your cause. With them, as Peter Senge mentioned in the Fifth Discipline (2006), you will develop a shared vision, and because of that, you will have an ever greater impact. Your suppliers are among your most important stakeholders.

When considering which suppliers to work with, it is important to always make sure there is some alignment with your vision and mission. These guideposts will serve as a critical filter, as the tourism industry is made up of diverse players catering the diverse needs of a clientele as diverse as the world. And if there is alignment at the onset, it will make it easier to have conversations later on about collaborations to achieve your long-term vision.

I outlined a formal process, including the creation of a supplier survey to identify those suppliers that might be aligned to our goals. This should be built with other stakeholders. Their feedback will be crucial in helping you see things in a different light. Once you send the survey out, you can start filtering through the data to identify high-scoring suppliers – those who are most aligned with your core principles and objectives. From there, you should make site visits and conduct inspections. And don't be nervous about asking to test out their product. They want you to sell it, but if you sell it to a client without trying it, you're taking a huge risk. A dissatisfied client might demand their money back from you, even if you cannot recuperate it from the supplier. You'll quickly learn who, in the industry, is best suited to serve your clients' needs. Once you do, build a relationship with them, share feedback with each other, and then you can start building a strategy. Before you know it, you will have a network of suppliers you can trust.

Improve your sustainable product. Once you have your supplier network, you should work with them to identify what sustainable tourism products they already have, and collectively work to expand your knowledge. By now, you will have learned a lot, and by sharing that with your suppliers, you will help shape their products and services in way that is consistent with your standards and those of your customers. They will recognize the benefit of working with you because you are bringing them paying customers and the know-how to attract them. And, by building your product with your network of suppliers, you will have a greater impact and inspire a wave of innovation that will transform the tourism industry in your host country.

Once you have your list of products, it's time to put it all together. You can now create the first truly sustainable tour package using your suppliers' sustainable products.

Now that you have developed a comprehensive tourism package that is sustainable and marketable to your target audience, you are ready to sell it. It has been a long journey to get here. It has taken longer than you probably expected. But the time you spent perfecting your product will yield incredible results. Once your target audience starts buying your product, you will see how the journey has been worth it.

Adapt to Change

I've outlined a step-by-step process for you to start building your sustainable tourism business. But, don't be surprised if things do not go according to plan. In my case, I deviated from my original plan and still achieved my goal of creating marketable sustainable tourism packages that LGBT travelers would buy. You will find that as your business grows, there will be increasing demands. You must prioritize and be okay with setting some things aside in order to keep the ship afloat. That's okay, as long as you have the big picture in mind. Let your vision and mission guide your decisions.

Becoming the Expert & Growing Your Business

On your journey, you will face some interesting challenges along the way, but you will also find some amazing allies who will help you celebrate your wins. And it is always important to celebrate your wins, no matter how big or small they are.

How will you know what wins to celebrate? How will you measure success? Well, there are a few mile markers that will help make sure you are on the right track. Set a goal for how many initial suppliers you want. In our case it is 10. Hitting that mark will be a short-term win. But to keep the momentum going, you have to quickly work to create a product with your suppliers. That first, polished marketable tour package will be inspirational. Yet, the thing that will really demonstrate that you are nearing success is when you sell your first tour package.

That will be the proof point that says what you are doing will work. Your suppliers will be happy and realize the reward of working with you. With your new leverage and knowledge, you will help to re-shape their products and services, so they meet the high standards that you and your customers expect. In the long-term, you'll recognize success when your customer base grows, the profits are rolling in, and those travel dollars are being spent on tourism products that re-shape the tourism industry and improve environmental, social, and economic conditions in your host country.

You will have been responsible for injecting new foreign revenues into the local economy and making sure they are invested in things that are going to uplift local communities. Money will be spent on tourism services that protect and improve nature. Money will be spent on tourism products that celebrate local cultures and customs, and that foster a genuine understanding. You will have helped to open hearts and minds, helping tourists to take home with them a positive image that reshapes how they view your host country.

In the process, you will have inspired local community members to realize change that they might not have otherwise thought possible. They will be the business owners who not only benefit from sustainable tourism but contribute to the development of a tourism sector that is truly sustainable. They will take ownership and help define what sustainable tourism means. They will enroll in your vision and it will turn into a shared vision that will continue to adapt as it drives their efforts (Senge, 2006).

This will all have a ripple effect, reaching other industries and resulting in long-term community-based projects that help communities meet the new demands that tourism has put on their infrastructure, while doing so in a way that is good for the environment and improves the quality of life of the people who live in those communities.

You will have developed your brand in a way that not just your target audience, but secondary and tertiary audiences want to buy your product. Your customer base will grow exponentially, as will your revenues, allowing you to invest in the local community. You will provide better-paying employment opportunities that will help to spread the wealth. People inside and outside of the tourism industry will look to you as an expert in your field. And you will have started a wave that continues to expand and get passed down to new generations. In the end, sustainable tourism will no longer be unknown. Rather it will become the norm.

As your personal and business brands grow, you will become an expert that people turn to for advice, guidance, and leadership. And you will inspire a younger generation to dream and expect more.

Okay, let's get started. I want you to think about step 1. Ask yourself: What's your higher calling? What's my Why? And why should others join me?

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