

Jeff Bonaldi, Founder of [The Explorer's Passage](#) (TEP), a young tour company, spent some time reflecting in January 2015 on all of the marketing strategies he employed over the previous 18 months since beginning his organization. Jeff had been actively in conversation with the ATTA before founding his company, and has been an engaged member ever since. The ATTA and AdventureEDU Educators have occasionally asked Jeff to speak with other aspiring and early adventure entrepreneurs regarding his journey, so he decided to compile a reflective account of his personal experiences with various marketing channels.

A brand new adventure company faces many challenges in a competitive market where Word of Mouth from happy clientele is the biggest driver of sales. This document reflects an honest and healthy analysis of those challenges, as well as depicts the creativity and perseverance it can take to get your products visible to the right markets and subsequently build out a strong clientele. Jeff was happy to share it with the goal of helping promote growth and success in the adventure industry.

1) Marketing Brochure

Observations: "TEP produced a high quality and engaging brochure which was carefully constructed with input from experienced adventure travel industry professionals. Feedback on the brochure was excellent and it proved to be a useful tool to familiarize potential clients with our products."

Medium:

- Physical version
- Digital version

Marketing Strategy: Distribution

- Friends
- Family
- Industry partners
- Vendors
- Partner Tourism Boards
- Ground Operator Partners
- Prior Workplace Network
- Selected Media
- Travel Agents
- Trade shows

2) Trade Show

Observations: "TEP spent an enormous amount of time and energy in producing a booth space that was visually appealing to consumers at the 2014 New York Times Travel Show. This effort paid off as it was one of the highest traffic booths at the event. As a result, we won the Best

Small Booth Award out of over 450 other booths. When deciding whether or not to participate in a trade show I think it is important to understand the audience whom will be attending the show to ensure that this matches your company's target market."

Marketing Strategy:

- Trade Show selection consistent with company target market. Determine which market segment you are targeting (TEP targeted: Consumers, Media, Travel Agents, Tourism Boards, & Potential Ground Operator Partners)
- Booth Location
 - Essential to obtain booth space in high traffic area - corner location is preferred
- Visually appealing booth to attract consumers and demonstrate your brand
- Professional looking staff that embody the brand
 - Knowledgeable staff
 - Critical that staff know the company's ethos and trip details
- Marketing materials
 - Brochures
 - Less expensive one page flyers to direct consumers to company website
 - Take advantage of media opportunities and placements with company press release
- Lead capture technology
- Pre-schedule meetings
 - Utilize conference industry attendee list to establish meetings with key decision makers in advance of the show
- Post Trade Show Follow-Ups
 - It is essential to follow up on each lead obtained at the show from all market segments.
- Press
 - Take advantage of all press opportunities at the show to gain media attention.

3) Travel Agents

Observations: "Many of the agents I spoke to have established longstanding relationships with an existing provider. They also have hundreds of suppliers calling on them. Unless you can differentiate yourself it will be very difficult to break into an agency as a preferred provider."

Marketing Strategy:

- Create List of Top Travel Sources
- List Sources:
 - Conde Nast
 - Travel & Leisure
 - Consortium websites

- Industry relationships/contacts
- Travel agent associations
 - ASTA
 - NACTA
- Utilize ATTA introductions to fellow member travel agents
- Important to target 'adventure focused agents'
- Do not only target U.S. specific agents but do market research to target agents in countries with 'high' travel rates to your destinations
- Perform 'On-Site' Presentations to agents
 - Critical to differentiate your product
- Perform internet based Webinars to multi-office agencies

Note: Potential Issues for New Operators

- Difficult to break into an agency without a Track Record
- If you have yet to run a trip you will not have references
 - Emphasize the experience of your underlying operators
 - Focus on your stringent due diligence procedures in selecting operators
- Consortiums require certain minimum requirements
 - Have established working relationships with a particular operator and typically have 'One' go to adventure travel provider

4) FAM Trips

Observations: "This was a fantastic way to get our name out there in the media with next to no cost. We also received an extensive amount of calls and inquiries about our trips from this effort. I feel strongly that this is a very effective way to get your first few trips under your belt so you can build a track record and garner much needed references."

Marketing Strategy:

- Creation of FAM trips by location to increase interest in tours
- Limited to 10 agents per trip (including companion at agent price)
- Priced at cost to make attractive to agents
- If you have a strong relationship with a tourism board they will sometimes help offset cost of trips and transportation for agents.
- Should try to work with your operator on providing a lower NET price to you for FAM trips since you will be taking little or no profit.
- Free advertising placements in press & web media - a number of media publications and websites offer these free placements. This is a great way for adventure travel companies to get their name out there. Many of these entities put the listing on their site as well as in their print magazine. Listed below are a few of the publications that offer this service:
 - Travel Agent Central - Print & Web

- Travel Weekly - Print & Web
- Travel Age West - Print & Web
- Famrates.com
 - Will blast your FAM trip HTML email to 10,000+ agents

5) Email Marketing

Observations: “Consumers, Media, and Travel Agents obtain hundreds of Spam emails per day. We utilized MailChimp for our email marketing campaigns and while our emails were of exceptional quality our statistical hit ratios were very low. For example, we would send out a blast to 400 agents. Thirty would click on the email and only 3 would open it. The travel industry is desensitized to email marketing. When I was working with AdventureEDU Educator Richard Weiss, he suggested that instead of sending out emails we should purchase high quality print books or a video series related to our trips and then mail them out individually to agents with thank you notes. We saw a much better response on this than from the emails and bookings.”

Marketing Strategy:

- Creation of comprehensive mailing list
- Creation of high quality HTML emails
 - Trip Specific
 - Press Worthy News - Example: We did one to announce our Nepal Charity partnership
 - FAM Trip Deals
 - Trip Discounts
 - Webinar Announcements
 - Special events
 - Targeted to media

6) Bloggers

Observations: “Many tour companies utilize bloggers to create buzz. It can be very beneficial to utilize bloggers but it does take a large commitment of time spent in interacting with them. In addition, many of the bloggers will need to be present on one of your trips so that they can write about it. You will need to be in a financial position to do this. Also, some of the more popular bloggers will work with you for a fee.”

Market Strategy:

- Target top 25 or 50 travel bloggers
- Interact with them via social media
 - Retweeting their posts
 - Mentioning them in your posts
- Send private emails explaining your company & brand

7) Twitter Chat

Observations: “Holding a twitter chat is a great way to bring awareness to your company and gain new followers. We had great feedback from attendees on our chat. Activity during the chat by participants was very strong. Over 50 twitter personalities participated in the chat and we received an additional 35 likes on Twitter from the session. Lastly, it can be very helpful to attend other travel Twitter chats as well to engage with other users on social media and build a strong following. There is a website that has a schedule of travel chats around the globe.” See this link: <http://www.travelogx.com/home>

Marketing Strategy:

- Hold a Historic Travel Twitter Chat
- Sought co-hosts with strong social media followings whom were relevant for the subject
- Create webpage for Chat
- Pre-post questions
- Create a Twitter hashtag for the event
- Limit to 30 minutes in duration
- Engage prior with top travel social media encouraging them to join the chat
- Important to hold on a periodic basis (monthly/quarterly) to keep momentum moving forward

8) Special Events

Observations: “We held a special event on our Nepal tour at a restaurant in New York City. The event went very well. All of those whom signed up showed. We had many questions from the audience about the logistics of our trip as well as on our company. It was a great forum for the industry trade to get to know us on a more personal level. After the event we followed up with each and every individual who attended and were able to develop relationships which will hopefully result in sign-ups down the road.”

Marketing Strategy:

- During the initial phase of my sales process I felt that it was very difficult to convey the message of our company over email and the phone. The NY Times Travel show gave us the forum to speak directly to consumers and the travel trade. This spawned the idea of having a special event in NYC to target key players in the travel industry.
- Limited the event to 33 people (filled event)
- Held in private room at select NYC restaurant – served multi-course meal
- Slide show illustrating our company and Nepal trip displayed on flat screen TV in the room
- Handed out brochures and business cards to attendees
- Invited key travel agents, media, and industry participants

- Lead Guide for our Himalayan trip spoke at the event which added credibility for our organization

9) Hiking Clubs

Observations: “While the speeches were well attended and the audience was engaged and enjoyed the talks. We came to realize that the attendees, while interested in adventure and hiking, were not in our target market. We offer high-end adventure trips. Most of the attendees fit more with the mid-end range in terms of consumer pricing.”

Marketing Strategy:

- Similar to our goal to try to get in front of the end consumer. We began scheduling speaking sessions to hiking and adventure clubs in the Northeast U.S. The sessions had to be educational in nature as the clubs were not interested in hearing an all out sales pitch on our tours. For some presentations we focused on the adventure and history and for others we focused on how to properly prepare for a hiking/adventure trip.

10) Alumni College Associations

Observation: “There is a very long timeline to become part of a major alumni association’s features suite of trips. They usually plan 18 to 24 months out. Just like with trying to break into travel agencies many of the associations asked for a track record specifically on our experience in working with other alumni associations. We got the sense that they also receive countless calls from other top tour operators whom are looking to be part of their suite of offerings. That said, if you have the time and patience I felt that you have a pretty good shot of breaking in as long as you can differentiate your product.”

Marketing Strategy:

- As our trips are geared towards those with an interest in history and education we thought that attempting to have our trips offered as part of the suite of trips that college alumni associations offer to their alumni was a perfect fit. The educational travel market is a very robust industry in the U.S. and an annual conference takes places where tour operators are able to connect with alumni associations and other outfits (<http://travelearning.com>). We made some good inroads with a number of colleges. They were willing to speak to us about our trips and many found them fascinating as they appreciated the educational and history component.

10) Targeted Media Advertisements

Observations: “We tracked our website numbers upon the launch of each advertisement. There was a marked increase in hits to our site. I feel that advertising is an effective way to get your

company's name out there. But any new company should be very conservative in terms of the budget they commit to this and test the water with various small publications and websites to see what sort of reaction you get."

Marketing Strategy:

- Start-up adventure travel companies do not have the resources to advertise their tour offerings in major media publications. Such an advertisement would completely exhaust their entire operating budget. We searched for a cheaper low cost advertising solution to test the market. Hiking and adventure clubs have a number of means of reaching their members for a low cost. For under \$1,000 we did a multi-faceted marketing campaign with an Eastern U.S. based 10,000 member hiking organization utilizing the following methods of distribution. This consisted of the following:
 - One month home page website banner ad
 - Email Marketing Blast
 - Side page ad in member newsletter

11) ATTA (Adventure Travel Trade Association)

Observations: "The ATTA has been an invaluable resource to us on so many fronts. By utilizing their vast infrastructure we have been able to increase our presence and standing in the adventure travel industry."

Marketing Strategy

- As a member of the ATTA, we utilized every one of their resources available to increase the awareness of our company to the travel industry. Below is a list of areas where we took advantage of ATTA's benefits:
 - Posted company profile on adventure travel website
 - Fortunate to have the ATTA do a number of articles & case studies on our organization
 - Distributed multiple press releases via ATTA weekly adventure travel news
 - Company Launch
 - Best Small Booth – NY Times Travel Show
 - Nepal Charity Partnership
 - Posted FAM tour deals on the Hub
 - Took advantage of all Journalist alerts
 - Networked via Membership consultant with Media
 - Networked via Membership consultant with over 30+ ATTA member travel consultants through direct introductions

12) Media Outreach

Observation: "I think that getting a major editor or writer to talk about one of your company's trips is absolutely critical. A strong write-up in a major publication gives credibility to your company as well as reaches a broad based audience of your target market."

Marketing Strategy:

- We compiled a comprehensive list of contact information for media publications such as newspapers, websites, magazines, etc. and reached out to each one individually in regards to our various press events related to our company. Similar to what we experienced with travel agents these editors and writers get bombarded with requests all day long. Our hit ratio was very low (say less than 5%). When I was working with AdventureEDU Educator Russell Walters, he suggested that we do personalized mailings of our brochures to these same outlets. I thought this was a great idea and something that we will be executing on in the near future.

13) Social Media

Marketing Strategy: Social Media is an effective and inexpensive way to build a presence online and to get people familiar with your business. I am no expert at social media but I do feel strongly about a few key points:

- Limit the number of platforms you are posting to so you don't get overwhelmed. We focused on three:
 - Twitter
 - Instagram
 - Facebook
- Create a weekly social media guide which gives you a framework to follow when creating your posts
- Utilize a pre-posting platform such as Hootsuite so that you can schedule tweets ahead of time. This helps because if you get busy during the week you might not have time to post.
- If you want to be successful in social media you will need to put the time in to interact with other members.
 - Retweeting of other's posts
 - Usage of Hashtags
 - Thanking new followers
- Contests – A number of adventure travel companies utilize contests to attract followers on social media.

14) Founder to Be Front and Center

Marketing Strategy:

- I believe strongly that the founder of an adventure travel company needs to be the FACE and BRAND of the company. People like a good product but they buy from the person selling it to them. In this effort, the website should have a detailed bio of the founder on it which embodies the brand. In addition, I began to write articles for various regional publications on my adventures around the world. Also, as mentioned previously, I began doing talks to hiking and adventure clubs as well.

15) Tourism Boards

Marketing Strategy:

- Tourism Boards can be extremely valuable in helping to offset marketing and advertising costs. Many tourism boards have programs in place where they will share in these expenses. From Google AdWords, to print advertising, to offsetting your expenses when scouting locations in their territory, it is important to leverage all programs available at these government agencies.
- Tourism Boards will also partner with you when you do webinars which lends credibility and expertise to your organization.

16) SEO (Search Engine Optimization)

Marketing Strategy:

- SEO is an extremely important tool to bring traffic to your website. You can either utilize a SEO tool for your website or hire a marketing firm who specializes in SEO.

Other Ideas

Media Only Trips - Conduct a media-only trip for top adventure writers who write for publications with a wide readership base. One example of such a writer is Jason Heaton who writes for Gear Patrol and Men's Journal.

- Downside: Expensive! You will be required to pay airfare, expenses, and the cost of the trip for each writer.

Trip Trailers - Contract with a video production company to do a trailer of one of your trips. Make it as close to a movie trailer as possible.

- Downside: Expensive! Expect to pay at least \$7k for production costs not including the expenses of the photographer to join the trip.

Partnerships – The more people I speak to it seems that many start-up travel companies experience the most success when they partners with either individuals (guides, yoga instructors, etc.) or brands that have an existing customer base. To be able to leverage these existing client networks by combining your expertise of travel planning and their relationship network could make for a win-win for both organizations.

Grass Roots (Starting from the Ground Up) - I have read many articles on the history of some of the successful American adventure travel tour operators such as Backroads, MT Sobek, etc. One of the common themes that I have noticed is that many have started their companies organically. Backroads was started by running local bike trips in Death Valley out of the founder's garage. It got me thinking, start out locally with day trips combining all of the key elements that you would want in your foreign trips (luxury, history, and adventure). This method would allow you to build references, offer media and travel agent trips at a fraction of the price and grow your company. In time, as you build the loyal clientele you can begin to slowly expand with trips in new destinations. I think it helps too if the founder is the lead guide at first. The founder has the skills, personality, and certifications to lead the trips and build the business. The founder will also convey the most amount of passion to his/her clients.