

Tourism Stakeholders in Ontario's Highlands "Wander" Toward More Authentic Visitor Experiences

PEMBROKE, ON (November 3, 2014) – When Marc Whitehead, Senior Strategist for Karo Group, hit the 'Stop' button on a video he just finished playing for a group of nearly 100 tourism businesses from Ontario's Highlands at the OHTO's 4th Annual Tourism Conference on October 27, there was a brief pause in the room.

The video was part of a powerful presentation that encouraged tourism operators in Ontario's Highlands to embrace experience-based, visitor-centric marketing and product development, unveiling the Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization's (OHTO) new brand promise to its members and tourism stakeholders by capturing the spirit of an exciting new visitor profile with potential to drive tourism to the region.

Coupling experiential images of "slowing down" and "disconnecting in Ontario's Highlands with a relaxed voiceover that encouraged seeing every inch of the region as a potential travel destination, the video spoke of our rural communities' unique capacity for making authentic, personal connections with guests and appealing to their desire to escape, unwind and spontaneously discover their next big (physical and emotional) adventure.

For the rest of the two-day conference, there was a new word buzzing around Haliburton's Pinestone Resort: wandering. At the heart of the brand promise? That, sometimes, the best way to recharge is to slow down, look around and just wander, letting every new discovery along the way become its own opportunity to stimulate the senses and nourish the soul.

"We are excited to see that our partners support our new brand direction and can begin to see themselves playing a key role in working with us to create captivating, memorable tourism experiences to help bring new visitors to Ontario's Highlands," says Nicole Whiting, OHTO's Executive Director. "By working together to share our stories, visitors are going to walk away remembering more than our landscape, accommodations and activities. We can truly enrich their travels and compete with Big City destinations by connecting with our visitors on an emotional level. Now that the brand platform is released, we look forward to bringing the vision to life in collaboration with our stakeholders."

In addition to the presentation of OHTO's visitor-centric strategy, the agenda for the Tourism Conference also included a review of the organization's hot-off-the-press 2013-14 Annual Report (available for download on ohto.ca later this week), the election of a new Board of Directors, the recognition of hard-working tourism businesses who were awarded an OHvation designation for their commitment to customer service, and several keynote speakers and workshops.

Dorothy Payne, President and Chair of Synergy Louisbourg, kicked the day off with a keynote presentation showcasing how a nearby Canadian region, located at the eastern edge of Nova Scotia, was

able to change its perception with visitors from “dead end” to “destination” by focusing in on the needs of a targeted guest –“We couldn’t be all things to all people,” she says –and honouring the stories found within the community.

Next, Fred Sheppard, an Interpreter with Gros Morne National Park, began his presentation by bursting into song, demonstrating that everyone has a story to tell and highlighting “Rule number six” of storytelling: don’t take yourself too seriously. Sheppard walked OHTO members through some of the key elements of telling their stories in an authentic way, such as focusing on the positive, being themselves and creating experiences that are real, unique and sensory. A key takeaway from his presentation? Grab hold of what sets you apart from your neighbours. “Visitors want a different story when they come to your different communities,” he said.

The second day of the conference enabled tourism operators to identify and share their stories through a series of tourism workshops on topics such as travel media, digital strategies (including TripAdvisor) and an introduction to travel trade. “In the coming year, we look forward to sharing more of our region’s local stories and inviting visitors to wander and create their own stories among our hidden gems and undiscovered places,” says Whiting. “As J. R. R. Tolkien famously said, all those who wander are not lost.”

About the OHTO

The Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization (OHTO) is a not-for-profit organization mandated by the Province of Ontario to increase tourism within the counties of Haliburton, Lanark, and Renfrew and portions of Frontenac, Hastings, and Lennox and Addington. Find out more at www.ohto.ca.

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