



**Economic
Development and
Growing the
Economy**

**UW
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Profiles of Best Practices

Mercer's "Loon Capital" Tourism Campaign

Community, County

Town of Mercer, Iron County

Area of Project Impact

Town of Mercer and all of Iron County

Population Affected

6,861

Situation

Town leaders recognized the need to expand the economic base of the community through tourism in order to develop its local economy and provide opportunities for its residents.

Economic Development Strategies

To put its community "on the map," the Town of Mercer identified a theme to build a tourism campaign around. Taking advantage of its unique natural resources, local assets and rural character, the community decided to become the "Loon Capital" to promote tourism in 1979 and has continued to capitalize on this campaign ever since.

Implementation

Several decades ago, the Town of Mercer began its tourism campaign by establishing its community identity as the "Loon Capital." One of the first actions taken by the Mercer Chamber of Commerce was to erect a 16-foot, 2,000 pound plastic loon in front of its information center. While the loon statue served to draw attention to the information center, it also enhanced the community's newly established identity and reinforced the unique attributes of the area. The Chamber of Commerce also decided to create a mini-park so that the Town could organize festivals based on the Loon Capital theme. With the help of many people, the Chamber raised \$10,000 for the creation of a mini-park featuring attractive landscaping, sufficient lighting and adequate parking facilities; part of the money was also directed toward paying for the costs of erecting the statue.

Once constructed, the park provided the grounds for an annual, Chamber initiated, day-long celebration of the loon—"Loon Day." This celebration is now in its 23rd successful season. Loon Day entails a huge arts and craft fair, flea markets, live music and dancing, sidewalk sales, food and bake sales, face painting for the kids and the ever popular Loon Calling contest. The festival reinforces the Town's community identity while also providing local businesses the opportunity to showcase their goods to community members and visitors. Today, about 250 vendors and four local restaurants participate in this festival that attracts thousands of visitors to this small town. The festival has now become a northern Wisconsin tradition.

To build upon the successful Loon Day festival and the Loon Capital theme, the Chamber of Commerce started a "Go Looney for Mercer" tourism campaign in 2001. The campaign is an effort to develop the Mercer area as a spring travel destination because it is historically a difficult season for tourism businesses in Mercer. As part of this strategy to expand upon its successful tourism industry, the Chamber works with as many local businesses as possible in order to offer promotions throughout the month of May to support spring tourism. To date, 25 to 30 local businesses have participated in the campaign highlighting spring recreational activities in the area, such as walleye fishing. The promotion has utilized a combination of newspaper advertising in major markets, a direct mail campaign and the development of a "Go Looney for Mercer" web site.

Partners and Leadership

The Mercer Chamber of Commerce has lead the tourism campaign and events in collaboration with numerous individuals, organizations and businesses throughout the community. Furthermore, the Mercer Chamber has received marketing grants and support from the State Department of Tourism for the "Go Looney for Mercer" promotion. In the future, the Mercer and Hurley Chambers are planning on partnering to create county-wide spring tourism promotion.

Outcomes

Mercer is now "on the map" as the Loon Capital. The community has created an image that is recognized by thousands of tourists from around the state and Midwest. This brand image is continually reinforced by the loon statue symbol as well as by the annual Loon Day festival and the new "Go Looney for Mercer" campaign. The results of this tourism campaign have been phenomenal. For example, the Loon Day festival attracts as many as 10,000 visitors each year to the small Iron County community, and the "Go Looney for Mercer" campaign is expected to generate a \$24,444 economic impact on the area. Finally, countless impressions have been made upon travelers who are now aware of the "Loon Capital."

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