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175 S. FRANKLIN ST.  
SUITE 304  
JUNEAU, AK 99801  
907-957-8462

## GUSTAVUS VISITORS ASSOCIATION BLUEPRINT

**GOAL:** To provide a strategic path forward in communications and marketing that articulates how to increase the growth of the independent travel audience and/or lengthen the perception of the operating season.

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### Facing Challenges and Identifying Gaps

*Note: Although it was not in our project scope, we wanted to note that through multiple interviews and conversations it was brought forward that the town and businesses of Gustavus need a forward-facing COVID-19 response and preparedness message. This frequently updated message should let travelers know what they can expect upon arrival, including whether business as usual exists.*

### Strategic Summary of Findings:

Cedar's findings summarize the many challenges that the Gustavus Visitors Association (GVA) faces when marketing their community to the broad public. Currently, the independent traveler is an aging demographic and the attempt to bring in new travelers and diversify those demographics has been too broad. There is also storytelling conflict — multiple brand stories and key messaging are expressed by competition and collaborating businesses, which can create distortion or struggle in how travelers choose where to visit as well as their overall perception of the community. These challenges are common, but there are numerous ways to resolve many of these issues and create meaningful change in the way the GVA conducts its communications and marketing that will be identified through future phases.

These changes are prioritized and focused on the audience identified with the highest rate of return for GVA — return travelers, independent families, independent artists, and independent adventure seekers. These four audiences were identified in conversations as the most important demographic pertaining to the success of increasing travelers in 2021. It is also important to note that

if there are budget restraints in developing marketing tactics, the target audiences should be reduced in order to get the best return and until GVA secures additional funds to broaden their market reach.

In addition to the audience, making sure a concise, engaging and unique story about the town is told in verbal and visual format is paramount. Currently the most consistent leading message emphasizes Glacier Bay. While Glacier Bay is an important value add, the priority messaging and emphasis should be on Gustavus to shift the balance of visitor time spent versus up the bay. We must reimagine how we entice people to stay at the gateway and describe the many benefits.

One other area of focus will be on how the shoulders of the travel season could be lengthened and henceforth advertised by the GVA to increase tourism in the early spring and late summer.

The key to success will be in the rebranding of Gustavus to showcase the people and place – the community – that make it uniquely spectacular. Through our research, we believe that although Gustavus is the “Gateway to Glacier Bay,” the town’s personality and offering is much more than that.

The current problem identified is that the visitor is primarily making their travel through Gustavus solely for Glacier Bay National Park as a result of the emphasis on Glacier Bay versus the community of Gustavus. A number of lodges indicate that as their relationship with the park ebbs and flows, there is less reason for people who are traveling through to stay in town and stimulate the local economy.

We will offer strategy on how to entice independent travelers as well as provide efficient methods that will help extend the overall length of their visit and time in the Gustavus community. The new strategy will solve the number one issue identified: expanding the independent traveler visitation and demographic to diversify the current aging visitor demographic trend.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### The Shadow of Glacier Bay

**Problem:** Although Glacier Bay is a world-famous destination, the increase in cruise travel has limited the benefit of independent travel and the Gustavus community as large cruise ship travel has increased capacity. Due to a divided relationship with Aramark concessions, the city receives little to no support. In fact, in recent years there have been stories of employees explicitly instructed to not recommend visits to town. So although people are flying into town to visit the Glacier Bay Lodge, they are often bussed directly to their location and never set foot in the town.

**Solution:** The GVA needs to rebrand and reimagine what Gustavus is beyond Glacier Bay. This rebrand should visually attract travelers and entice them to stay solely in Gustavus or to add a day or two on to their vacation to explore the town. The imagery should translate and be appealing across various mediums (web, social, print). The narrative and visual messaging should be targeted to the four defined audiences of interest.

In addition, it would be beneficial to create a new relationship with Aramark public relations. Cedar has experience in vendor relations that could be valuable to serve as a negotiator in creating cross-marketing efforts and redefining the relationship of the town and park.

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### Define and Focus on Independent Travelers

**Problem:** Because of the diverse geography upon which travelers are coming from, there needs to be a visual representation of cohesive unity in the community regarding why Gustavus should be a haven for independent travelers as a unique, special destination that must be experienced. The current focus is on the Alaska tourism traveler. Through Cedar's interviews, there is a more specific traveler in mind that the entire community can rally behind and embrace when it comes to growth: the independent family, independent artists, and independent adventure travelers.

**Solution:** Tradeshow and general advertising should be rebooted to place an emphasis on digital media advertising. The imagery for each advertisement should match the targeted traveler. In addition to advertising, create a seasonal event in town that could be a showcase as to why the town is special. This would build awareness and inspire new travelers seeking a place to vacation, while moving Gustavus to top of mind in their planning.

## Aging Demographic

**Problem:** The entirety of business interviews relayed concerns of an aging demographic of travelers. These ranged from first-time travelers to repeat travelers who have been coming to Gustavus for more than 20 years. This is a problem because the town is not medically built to handle an older population in case of emergency (e.g., COVID-19), but besides health concerns, a larger problem is that the current traveler demographic curve continues to trend toward aging out completely.

**Solution:** GVA needs to build off of a visual rebrand to define its desired growth and diversification of the visitor demographic. Multimedia assets need to be created to show prospective first-time travelers why a young family or young independent traveler would be interested in making the investment to visit Gustavus. This messaging can be accomplished through video and still imagery/photographs. It would be beneficial for the GVA to create “how-to” materials for GVA members to implement within their own marketing programs to enhance and diversify their demographics through similar tactics.

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## Communication on Hours of Operation (lengthening season)

**Problem:** The challenge stated by many when the topic of lengthening the tour season arose was the lack of cohesion and business buy-in. When travelers invest time and money for a vacation, they expect to have the necessities of food, housing and entertainment. If one of these is left out, it can negatively impact the quality of travel experience. If independent traveler “X” books a vacation in May because of impactful advertising, their experience and services should be comparable to June or July. If the traveler doesn’t have access to tours, food or satisfactory accommodation, it could greatly impact word-of-mouth marketing as well as online reviews.

**Solution:** There needs to be an investment into visuals and activities available in May and September and a solid advertising plan put forth. Targeting specific travel scheduling periods and sites would also be ideal. Another thing to consider is making sure that GVA members utilize their resources to focus on expressing their expanded services and hours of operation and to build awareness of the opportunities, or rather the missed opportunity of not investing in a community-wide extension of the community service season to visitors. We would recommend starting with the spring and focus on that time as to why it is a great time of year to visit.

## PHASE TWO: PART ONE

### Identified Needs:

#### 3-5 Year Marketing Plan

- Creative Asset Re-brand
- Message and Story Update
- Photo & Video Asset Update
- Advertisement Strategy
- Web Strategy
- Events

**GVA needs to clearly state what they offer to independent travelers beyond scenic beauty. The balance of showcasing people and place — and most important, experience — is vital.**

#### Brand Hero and Tagline

Cedar would recommend re-branding the look and tagline to the city and eliminate the use of the term, “Gateway to Glacier Bay.” We believe through tagline and messaging we could make the city the hero of the story and treat Glacier Bay as a character in the plotline and as a value-add, secondary to the amazing offerings of Gustavus — similarly to how Juneau features the Mendenhall Glacier but focuses more on what makes up the offerings of the city.

#### Brand Campaign Creative Development

We need a call to action and a reason to outline why it is essential for independent travelers across the United States and the world to embrace and seek out the safe, clean, solace of Gustavus.

We believe the brand and campaign created must exude the *benefits* of traveling independently and spending time in the city of Gustavus.

The best opportunity to showcase and message the benefit and experience of Gustavus is to focus on post-COVID-19 lifestyle marketing, i.e., “**Safe travel and pristine location.**” This type of experience will be desired into the future. We need to make sure that travel and experience seem obtainable and available to everyone, including the affluent traveler who is among the desired demographic.

Exploring Gustavus will allow travelers to live better, take a mental health break, and be inspired. A creative spirit exists in the community that has the potential to be tapped into and showcase.

Safety will be the traveler's number one focus and priority when basing decisions. Being able to visit the remote COVID-19-free nature of Gustavus is an advantage. People will be able to relax and responsibly social distance. Additionally, the town of Gustavus is small enough to create a unified message and appearance of precaution, cleanliness and responsibility.

*We must build value with family travelers and independent travelers.*

We are living in a new age of transparency. Travelers want to see what their money will get them. In this post-COVID-19 world, people are going to want to know that they can get the same Alaskan experience and not be at risk of exposure.

Through Cedar's review of Gustavus' online resources, it has become apparent that the town needs imagery revolving around identifying the unique and creative nature of Gustavus. We believe that the GVA would not only benefit aesthetically in the materials stated above, but also would help explain and attract new visitors while building value in the city. Although the beauty of Glacier Bay is important, we have to also make sure that Gustavus beaches, art, coffee, farmer's markets, and other specialty landmarks are highlighted professionally.

We aim to capture an appealing original take on the creative, free-spirited nature of the city, and through photos, video and illustration bring Gustavus to the forefront of Glacier Bay. Illustration is a great tool to speak universally and visually. There are notable icons from the city that can be illustrated and used in portraying local uniqueness and genuine personality.

