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Creating a Directory to Build Maryland's Outdoor Recreational Businesses

COURSE

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PALS

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Partnership for
Action Learning
in Sustainability



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ABOUT PALS

The Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability (PALS) is administered by the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD). It is a campus-wide initiative that harnesses the expertise of UMD faculty and the energy and ingenuity of UMD students to help Maryland communities become more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. PALS is designed to provide innovative, low-cost assistance to local governments while creating real-world problem-solving experiences for University of Maryland graduate and undergraduate students.

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Company Background

The Maryland Office of Outdoor Recreation (OOR), which is part of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), has taken on the mission to “make outdoor recreation spaces more welcoming and inclusive, expand access to outdoor recreation opportunities, and amplify the good work being done in the field.”

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources plays an essential role in shaping Maryland’s identity, economy, and quality of life. From Western Maryland to the Chesapeake Bay, the state offers a variety of natural landscapes supporting outdoor recreation opportunities. These businesses, such as outfitters, tour guides, rental services, and tourism sites, promote active lifestyles and environmental awareness.

The DNR supports this growing sector through initiatives like the Office of Outdoor Recreation, the Outdoor Equity Grant Fund, and the Outdoor Recreation and Clean Water Fund. These programs aim to expand access, uplift underrepresented communities, and foster sustainable practices. As Maryland continues to invest in its outdoor economy, recognizing and supporting local outdoor businesses is important to ensure equitable access to nature and long-term environmental sustainability.

Opportunity

There are several opportunities that the Office of Outdoor Recreation can capitalize on to create a directory. First, and most prominently, is the increased economic development that would come from the advertising aspect of the directory.

Now that the OOR has access to a finalized set of data, they can implement a directory of all Maryland outdoor recreation businesses on their website. This free advertising could encourage other related businesses to put their own information in the directory, making a chain of incoming businesses.

This directory will help people across the state to quickly and easily locate and use these businesses, boosting local revenue and the state’s GDP.

In addition, several internal operations will improve once the directory is implemented. For example, the directory could help reveal gaps in recreational activities. If some parts of the state are underrepresented in outdoor recreation, OOR can quickly recognize it and take action to correct it.

OOR can also recognize growth and trends more easily through the categorization of businesses. They can see the types of activities that are growing or losing popularity and respond to the changes.

Finally, with accurate data, OOR can help ensure that grants and funding are properly allocated. OOR can recognize high-need areas and pinpoint specific businesses that would benefit from targeted funding, as well as track what sectors have benefited from previous funding.

Ultimately, this directory will be a valuable tool for OOR, and we believe that Maryland as a whole will benefit from it.

Literature Review

An extensive literature search and review was undertaken for sources relevant to building directories and how DNR/OOR could use such directories.

There aren't many sources specifically discussing this niche topic. However, there is a lot of information on similar and tangential problems. We specifically sought literature and sources that discussed creating directories and business directories, as well as sources on using these directories for business and economic development.

Best practices for building a directory include sources such as the University of California's systematic literature review on User Interface and User Experience (UI/UX). It gives granular details on how to build an online website or resource that is easily accessible and navigable by everyone using the internet. Specifically, guidelines for organization and graphical content can make the directory easy to use for the intended audience.

Furthermore, the literature review revealed that many sources argue for the benefits of directories for small businesses. The news website ConsumerSearch includes an article about why small businesses should list themselves in online directories, primarily because of potential increased name recognition and community social value.

This evidence can assure the DNR/OOR of the usefulness of this project and convince small business owners to be active participants in the process of building a directory.

In research focused on the use of these directories, the first notable piece of literature was the Economic Development Journal (volume 18), in which Rebecca Engum argues in an economic case study of Great Falls, Montana, that in communities benefiting from outdoor recreation tourism, 87% of spending comes from dining, retail, and lodging. This corroborates DNR/OOR's intention to include outdoor businesses and businesses that support outdoor recreation, such as bike shops.

Beyond economic value, the research also focused on maintaining and populating directories. Several sources indicated the necessity of using a maintenance mechanism for determining what businesses are inactive and should be removed, as well as the need for an easy way to enter new businesses in the directory. These aspects are crucial parts of our strategy.

Analysis

The Maryland Office of Outdoor Recreation seeks to manage, preserve, and market outdoor recreation centers and businesses throughout the state. Maryland doesn't have a centralized, verified source of recognized recreation centers and businesses, which makes it difficult to track data on its outdoor recreation industry. To address this problem, the team suggested creating an official online directory of outdoor and recreation businesses in Maryland.

To implement this idea, the team conducted extensive research on similar concepts in other states. The states of Vermont and Wisconsin have the closest thing to the proposed directory, and they became a blueprint. The team outlined the directories' information categories: business name, address, city, county, categorization details, contact information, ownership status, and more.

In addition to that data, the team also aimed to replicate the directories' intuitive and user-friendly layouts. After a meeting with a representative of Wisconsin about their business directory, the team identified some shortcomings to be avoided in Maryland's implementation. Chief among these was a lack of "cleaning;" there was no mechanism to remove old and outdated information. Maryland's directory can be kept "clean" via a form users can submit, alerting the OOR of outdated information so that it can be quickly removed from the directory.

Another insight from the Wisconsin representative was data gathering methods. Before this meeting, the primary source of information was the Maryland Department of Commerce. Their data was a good start, but its format wasn't ideal for an outdoor business directory and required extensive reformatting and modification. The Wisconsin representative suggested reaching out to local recreation groups and using their help to populate information in the Maryland directory, as these groups are one of the best sources of such information.

Recommendations

We recommend the Office of Outdoor Recreation team create an online directory for small businesses that mimics those of Wisconsin and Vermont. An online directory allows outdoor businesses to advertise their services, potential customers to support their local communities, and the state of Maryland to collect key recreation information. Through this mutually beneficial relationship, businesses will want to be included in the directory, and outdoor enthusiasts in and out of state will have a resource that specializes in their specific outdoor needs.

Currently, Maryland has no comprehensive online resources for finding outdoor businesses, and alternatives like Apple Maps aren't very useful. This online business directory will connect the community of outdoor recreation lovers and allow them to support Maryland businesses.

We also recommend that OOR use the directory to collect business information like size and ownership. Collecting this information is essential to OOR's mission to support outdoor recreational businesses; by understanding the businesses, they can better understand their needs. A lot of this collection can be done internally to the directory by monitoring how many times people click on a specific business, what recreation type is most popular, or what areas are most filtered to. Additionally, Wisconsin posts a monthly newsletter featuring outdoor businesses based on the time of year, like Black-owned businesses in February, and Maryland should have that same option.

Finally, we want Maryland's directory to exceed Wisconsin's business directory. A big issue for the Wisconsin directory was that information quickly becomes stale without a way for

businesses to update or remove themselves. This leads to inaccurate information on the website, which dilutes the quality of business data. We recommend creating a Microsoft form that is convenient, comprehensive, and integrable with Excel. It is essential to integrate with Excel because the directory will be pulled from an Excel database. Power Automate can seamlessly transfer responses to the Excel table, keeping it up to date and relevant.

Action Plan

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources seeks to promote underrepresented outdoor recreation centers and believes that creating a directory to assess and market these centers will allow the state to become more prosperous.

While a directory seems like a simple task, many states have yet to create one. With a directory, Maryland would become a trailblazer and the first to try to promote underrepresented organizations.

The first step to implementing this directory was to create an outline of the client's goal for the site. The categories and headers on Excel map the data to collect and the information needed to promote recreation centers.

After receiving data from the Department of Commerce, we added about 300 outdoor centers, with a most categories complete. However, we were unable to identify minority-owned, women-owned, or underrepresented owners. After researching the companies further, we found that some no longer exist or don't meet the requirements to be listed as an outdoor recreation center. Because this data will serve as a centralized location for the OOR to track outdoor recreation centers, the team suggests that businesses need a way to request to be added or removed from the directory.

With the need to add/remove companies in mind, the team drafted a Google Form for businesses to fill out with the data the OOR hopes to collect. This information will be a good backbone for the directory and will allow OOR to track some indicators that both the team and OOR believe are important. Some of these indicators are click-through-rate, filter rate of counties, and the number of businesses added to the directory each month.

Tracking this information will give OOR a better idea of which counties need to be marketed, and which are performing above average. Additionally, OOR can track the success of the directory. With the directory and Google Form completed, we believe that the OOR can continue to market the form and show outdoor recreation centers the importance of adding their business.