

Oakridge Ukulele Festival: Business Venture Builds Community

THEME: A private lodging facility organizes a quirky event, discovers an authentic community connection, and grows through creative partnerships. The event, now entering its third year, is profitable.

PROJECT IMPACT: New visitor product: event featuring art/cultural draw: Business development: new revenue source for hospitality business contributing to main business district revitalization.

PLACE: Oakridge is located in eastern Lane County, in the western foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Together with neighboring Westfir, the area population is 4,100 people. The community is surrounded by the Willamette National Forest and its world-class natural assets and recreational areas, including Waldo Lake, Salt Creek Falls, and the Willamette Pass ski area. It is also located on a primary highway route from the Willamette Valley to Crater Lake National Park.

The area was hard hit by the decline of the timber industry in the 1980's and 1990's, and still is more economically distressed than the state or county. Over the past ten years, Oakridge has gained recognition as a premier mountain biking destination: the City has branded itself "Mountain Biking Capital of the Northwest".

STORY: Soon after opening the Oakridge Hostel (now Lodge) and Guest House in April 2010, owners Lynda Kamerrer and Gary Carl invited a friend and her Eugene-based band, the Refreshments, to visit and play for fun. Coincidentally, NPR reporter Zak Rosen was a guest that same weekend, conducting interviews for the "State of the Re:Union" series <http://www.prx.org/pieces/48195-oakridge-a-work-in-progress>. The morning after the band played, Kamerrer and Carl solicited ideas over breakfast about how to draw visitors to their new business. Two band members suggested a Ukulele Festival as a different kind of draw that would create buzz about Oakridge as an arts/culture destination—and yield guests for the Guest House. The first Oakridge Ukulele Festival was launched in the summer of 2011, roughly a year after the serendipitous open house idea.

The first Oakridge Ukulele Festival drew thirty people, and featured guest artists recommended by their friend (including Brook Adams of Eugene) to teach classes and jam. In year one, the event was solely organized and funded by Kamerrer and Carl as part of their business promotion efforts. After the first year, the event developed deeper roots in what had been a hidden and authentically local ukulele community. According to Kamerrer, this was an unexpected discovery, a "lightbulb that just needed to have the switch flipped on" to shine! Starting in the fall of 2011, in an effort to promote local music and the arts, the Hostel/Lodge hosted an informal community ukulele jam every few weeks on a Monday night and rotated among several host businesses. Lynda began participating in these regular gatherings of 8-10 people, all local ukulele enthusiasts. Through that group, she met one luthier (ukulele maker) living in Oakridge, and another pair from Cottage Grove.

The second year, the event drew sixty participants despite the 100+ degree weather. In organizing the 2012 festival, Lynda worked to connect with many other Oakridge businesses, including local lodging facilities, caterers, and vendors. She also connected with the Oakridge Junior/Senior High School to find volunteers to

help with what was expected to be a larger event. Through a partnership with and Mele Ohana, a Eugene-based nonprofit that places free ukuleles in schools, she recruited five high school students to work at the festival. They received a stipend, lessons and free ukuleles for their school. Travel Lane County provided matching marketing funds to promote the festival in its second year, and it was a profitable business undertaking as a result.

In 2013, the event is moving from Uptown (Oakridge's downtown core) to the West Ridge school grounds, a new larger site that can accommodate more workshops as well as camping and RVs. Lynda has engaged the local luthiers as vendors at the festival. Lynda hopes to expand the partnership with Travel Lane County because several community events are scheduled for the same weekend (August 2-4, 2013), which may make it confusing for visitors to find the venue they are seeking. She has the idea of having a highly visible but temporary "pop up" information booth on Highway 58 just for the weekend's events.

TIMELINE:



LESSONS:

- After trying her hand at several different tourism draw/event ideas as business marketing efforts (including a mushroom festival, locavore dinner and hosted road cycling tour), she has concluded that she needs to have either the personal expertise in the topical focus or a "well-cultivated following" who will come to whatever she promotes. Otherwise, the promotional effort and strive for legitimacy with the target audience is too expensive and difficult for a private business to carry. In the Ukulele Festival, she found a connection (her friend) who could connect her with experts. The surprise discovery was that some of those experts were already local residents!
- Events depend on strong connections between businesses and the community vs. a single champion "going it alone". By intentionally strengthening her community connections in year two, Lynda was able to grow the festival's quality and grow its base of committed local stakeholders.
- Weather dependent events are very risky for individual entrepreneurs- need strategies for sharing the risk and reward to make it feasible for a private business to take on. One of Lynda's other event ventures was a "For the Love of Mushrooms" multi-day event in the fall. She partnered with a sous chef from a local winery to create mushroom-themed meals paired with wine along with harvesting forays and entertainment. After a promising first year, the event was canceled last fall as a result of fires and poor weather leading to a poor crop, coupled with low registration. A similar long established mushroom event at Breitenbush Springs in

Oregon experienced similarly low registrations last year, so she was not alone. Nevertheless, unless she can get a new, well financed partnership in place, she will not undertake this venture again.

BUDGET: Proprietary business information; no outside funding year one. For year two, a \$5,000 from the Lane County Tourism Special Projects Grants program paid for event marketing. The project required a \$500 match: the business however spent \$2,575 over and above the grant in promotion and other expenses. Lane County has suspended this grants program for 2013.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

Promotional material samples

Admission to the 2012 Festival was \$85 per person for the whole weekend. Registration included all instruction, facilitated jam sessions, lunch, evening performances, sheet music and handouts in classes.

Additional information on marketing channels used

TRAVEL OREGON CONNECTION: Lynda Kamerrer actively participated in the Oakridge Rural Tourism Studio workshops, held October 2009-January 2010.

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Photo courtesy of Ted Shorack