



STRATEGY & CREATIVITY MATTER

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"Beyond Marketing: Designing Competitive Advantage Through Experience"

The next era of tourism leadership belongs to destinations that create connection, not just promotion.

Introduction

In today's competitive travel landscape, destinations can no longer rely solely on traditional strategies rooted in infrastructure, advertising, or attractions. The future of tourism advantage lies in creating *experiences* that forge emotional connections experiences that are co-created with residents, grounded in authenticity, and designed to transform. This emerging experience-centric approach marks a new phase in tourism strategy, one where a place's competitive edge is shaped not by what it has but by how it *feels* to be there.

Central to this shift is the powerful interplay between creativity and research. These two forces are not at odds, but partners; creativity fuels storytelling and immersive design, while research ensures relevance, alignment, and measurable impact. When strategically integrated, they allow destinations to craft emotionally resonant offerings and deeply rooted in community values. This article explores how creativity and research serve as dual engines of experience-based strategy and identifies key ways destinations can gain a lasting advantage by embracing this evolved approach.

Creativity vs. Research in Experience-Based Strategy

Creativity

Experience design is driven by imagination and storytelling

Differentiation comes from original and unique expression

Aligns with residents' artistic and cultural forms

Research

Insight into visitor expectations and drivers

Alignment with resident sentiment and boundaries

Measurement of emotional impact and transformation

Value of
Creativity



Research-Based
Insight

Creative
Input

Creativity and research are not competing forces in an experience-centric tourism strategy they are complementary tools that, when combined effectively, create a sustainable competitive advantage. However, there is a balance between the two shifts compared to previous strategy phases. Here's how their roles evolve and interrelate in this new paradigm:

The Value of Creativity in Experience-Based Strategy

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1. Experience Design is a Creative Act

- Crafting immersive, emotionally resonant experiences requires imaginative thinking, storytelling, and aesthetic sensibility.
- Creativity drives the “how” of the visitor’s journey not just what they do, but *how it feels*.

2. Differentiation Comes from Creative Expression

- In a global marketplace flooded with similar attractions, destinations win by offering original, story-rich, and co-created experiences.
- Creativity allows destinations to escape the trap of benchmarking and instead focus on expressing local identity in unique ways.

3. Creativity Aligns with Resident Voices

- Residents often express their values through artistic and cultural forms—local cuisine, music, storytelling, crafts, and outdoor rituals.
- Tapping into these forms creates a bridge between visitor curiosity and community expression.

The Value of Research in Experience-Based Strategy

1. Insight Grounds Strategy in Reality

- Visitor expectations, psychographics, and emotional drivers must be understood through research, not assumed.
- Tools like journey mapping, emotional response surveys, and visitor behavior analytics are critical for informed experience design.

2. Resident Alignment Requires Listening

- Resident sentiment analysis helps shape the boundaries of acceptable and celebrated visitor engagement.
- Research ensures co-creation is inclusive, not extractive or performative.

3. Measurement of Emotional Impact Requires New Tools

- The success of experience-based strategy depends on capturing *feelings* and *transformations*, which requires developing or adapting qualitative and emotional KPIs.

The Creative–Analytical Synthesis

Creative Input	Research-Based Insight
Storytelling and narrative development	Visitor psychographics and emotional motivators
Designing sense-of-place experiences	Journey mapping and visitor feedback loops
Resident-inspired experience curation	Community sentiment and cultural asset inventories
Visual identity and emotional branding	Brand perception and experience recall studies
Artistic collaboration and place activation	Behavioral data and trend analysis
Together, they form a loop:	

Research reveals the truth → Creativity expresses the truth → Research evaluates the impact → Creativity refines the experience.

Strategic Takeaway

In this new experience-centric era:

- Research is the compass. It guides where to go and ensures relevance.
- Creativity is the vehicle. It transports people emotionally and makes the journey unforgettable.

Destinations that harness both creative imagination and research rigor will design experiences that are not only different but deeply meaningful, memorable, and marketable.

The Experience-Centric Road Map

A destination can gain a competitive advantage using an experience-centric strategy by focusing on elements that foster emotional connection, uniqueness, and co-created value. Unlike traditional strategies that compete on infrastructure or volume, experience-centric strategies differentiate destinations based on how deeply they resonate with visitors and align with resident values.



Here are eight ways a destination can achieve that competitive edge:

1. Leverage Sense of Place to Create Distinctive Experiences

- **How:** Root experiences in the authentic culture, history, landscape, and stories of the destination.
- **Why it matters:** A strong sense of place is not easily replicable giving the destination a durable competitive advantage.
- **Example:** Santa Fe, NM, uses its adobe architecture, Native American heritage, and artisan culture to craft immersive visitor experiences.

2. Involve Residents as Experience Co-Creators

- **How:** Integrate residents into tourism product development (e.g., resident-hosted experiences, farm-to-table dinners, walking tours).
- **Why it matters:** Locals become ambassadors, enriching the experience with authenticity while increasing resident buy-in.
- **Example:** In Mendocino County, local artists, chefs, and growers are actively part of curated visitor experiences.

3. Deliver Emotional and Transformational Outcomes

- **How:** Design experiences that help visitors reflect, reconnect, learn something new, or feel inspired.
- **Why it matters:** Destinations that facilitate transformation enjoy greater emotional loyalty, social sharing, and return visits.
- **Example:** Retreats in Sedona, AZ, don't just offer nature—they offer spiritual and emotional renewal.

4. Focus on Niche Passion-Driven Markets

- **How:** Build experiences around shared interests like food, art, wellness, or outdoor adventure that align with local values.
- **Why it matters:** Passion-based travel creates deeper engagement and often attracts higher-spending, values-aligned visitors.
- **Example:** Sonoma County's emphasis on sustainable wine tourism and eco-adventures resonates with values-driven travelers.

5. Encourage Visitor-Resident Interaction and Stewardship

- **How:** Create opportunities for visitors to engage in community projects, local volunteer efforts, or cultural exchanges.

- **Why it matters:** Visitors feel a sense of contribution, not just consumption, enhancing reputation and differentiation.
- **Example:** Hawaii's Mālama program invites visitors to participate in beach cleanups and cultural preservation in exchange for discounts.

6. Use Storytelling as a Strategic Tool

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- **How:** Build a narrative arc across touchpoints—website, guides, signage, and interactions—that brings the destination's soul to life.
- **Why it matters:** Stories create emotional memory and meaning, distinguishing a place from competitors.
- **Example:** Scotland's "Spirit of Scotland" campaign ties myth, land, and tradition into a unified story experience.

7. Design for Immersion, Not Just Itineraries

- **How:** Offer slower, deeper, participatory experiences (e.g., forage-to-table, art residencies, learn-a-skill workshops).
- **Why it matters:** These immersive formats create differentiation from mass tourism destinations and build longer stays.
- **Example:** Asheville, NC offers immersive craft and maker experiences tied to its regional identity.

8. Measure and Market the Emotional Impact

- **How:** Shift from promoting "what to do" to "how it will make you feel." Collect stories and testimonials that reflect emotional value.
- **Why it matters:** Competing on emotional outcomes changes the visitor selection criteria in your favor.
- **Example:** New Zealand's "Good Morning World" campaign featured daily greetings from locals, making the emotional invitation the centerpiece.

Experience-centric strategy creates advantage not by what you build, but by what people feel. It allows destinations to rise above commodity-level tourism and establish enduring emotional differentiation.

About the Author



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