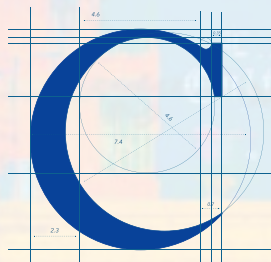


**STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH REPORT
FOR THE
SOUTHERN VERMONT DEERFIELD
VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

NOVEMBER 12, 2020

PREPARED BY

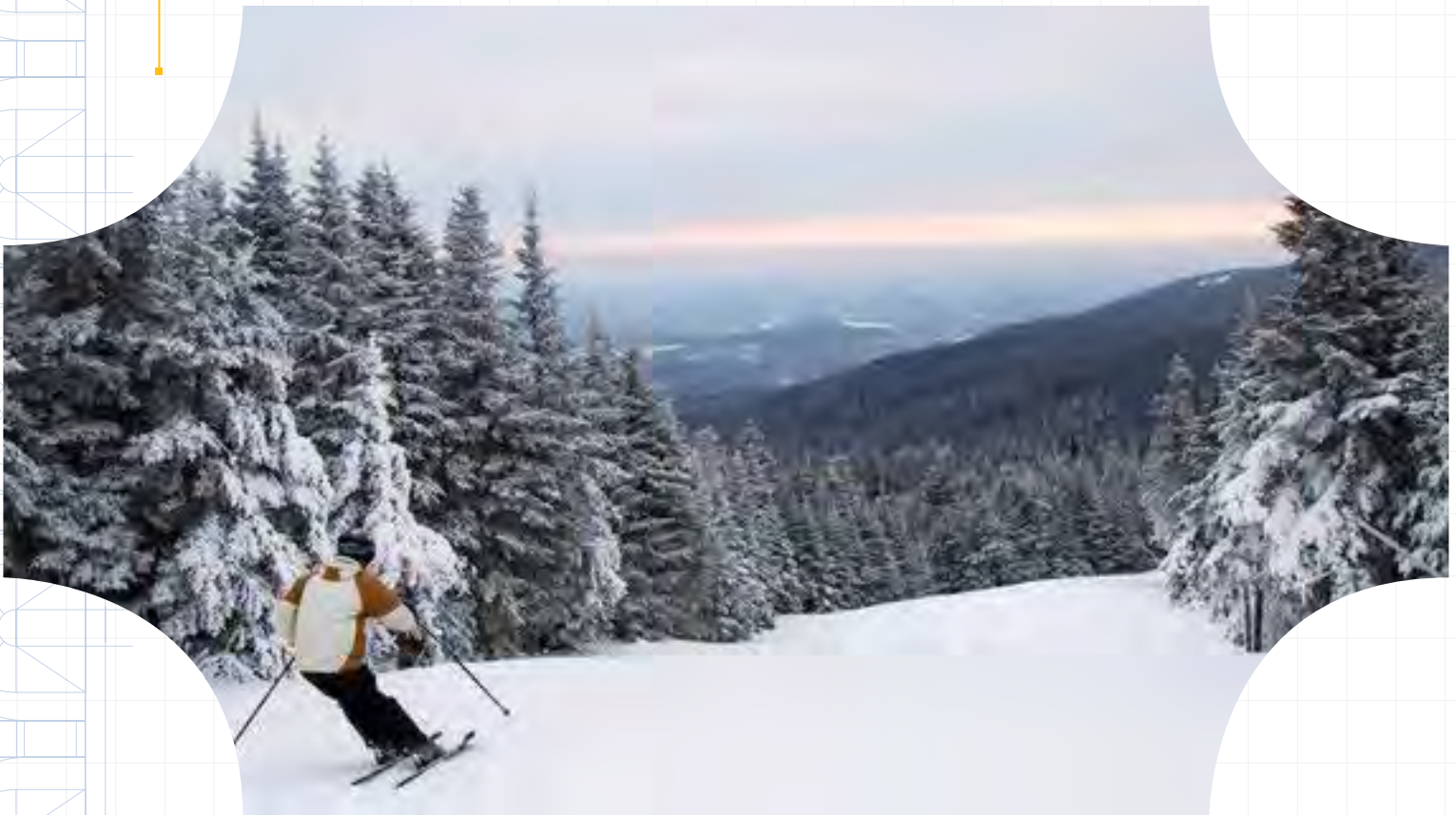


CHARRETTE
A MARKETING FORUM

525 GILLS PLACE VIRGINIA BEACH, VA 23464

foreword.

Life in the Deerfield Valley is distinctive. Natural beauty, commitment to the land and community, and a relaxed lifestyle are among the discoveries awaiting visitors. Our research into the Region delivers a granular view of what should be treasured by a wider swath of travelers. We've enjoyed the research process immensely, and we look forward to translating our learning into a targeted, highly-effective communications program





purpose.

The Bi-Town Marketing Committee, as a driver of economic development for the Deerfield Valley, seeks to build summer and shoulder season visitation to the region. Charrette Agency was retained to develop a five-year Strategic Marketing Communications Plan for the Deerfield Valley and a template for performance metrics.

A key research step in the development of that Plan was to conduct stakeholder research with local hospitality industry personnel in Dover, Wilmington and nearby tourism venues. Learning from that research will inform recommendations regarding brand articulation, target audience personas, market selection, product development and communications strategies.

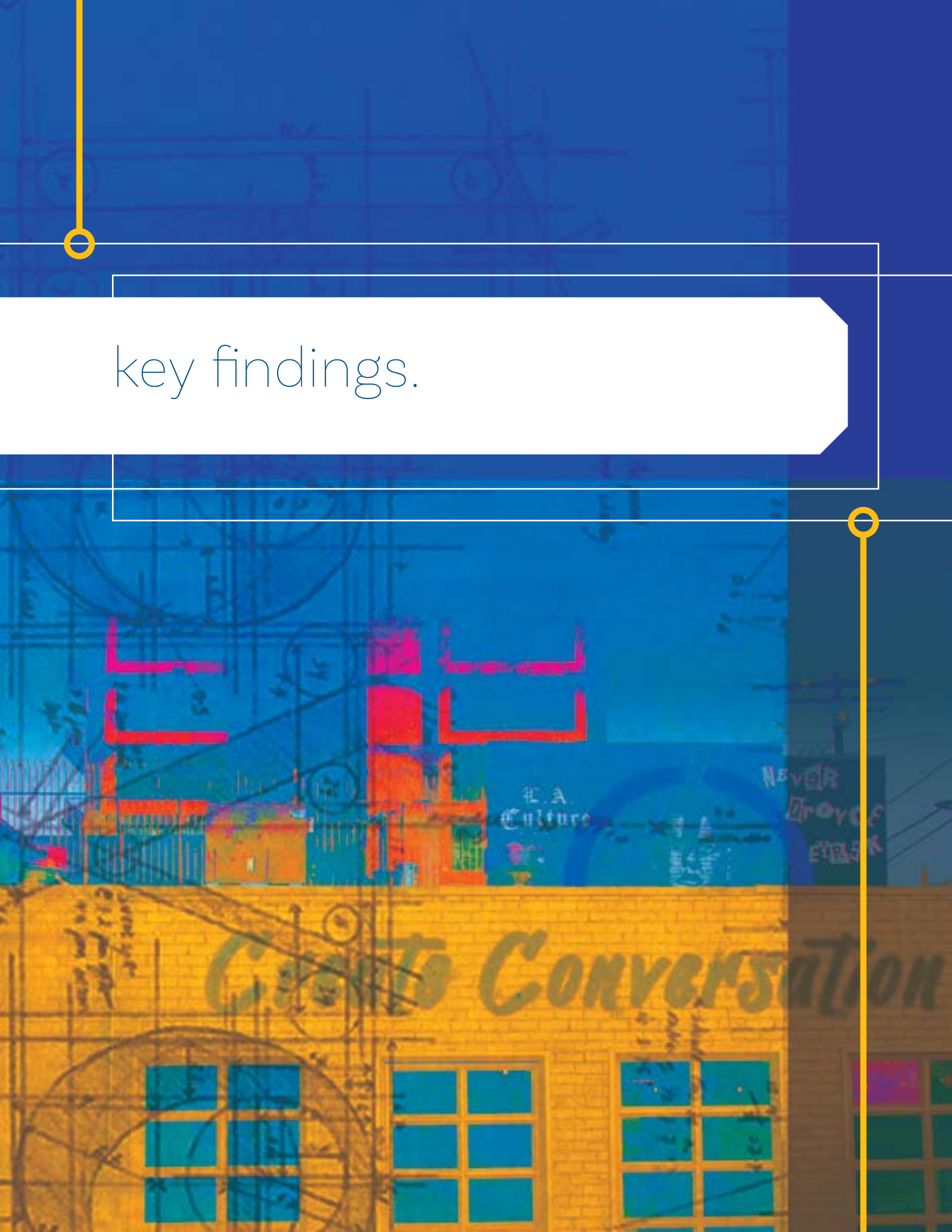
methodology.

Charrette Agency conducted both in-depth interviews and extended email dialogue with 18 local stakeholders. Research took place over a period of two weeks between October 27 and November 10, 2020.

Stakeholders represented a broad range of roles in the Deerfield Valley tourism ecosystem with expertise in areas including, but not limited to: hiking, dining, skiing, accommodations, water sports, real estate and history. Interviews were tailored to the specific area of expertise represented by each stakeholder. Findings were analyzed for common themes that could inform future planning.

A list of participating stakeholders can be found in **Appendix A.**

key findings.



positioning.

- The area is closely connected to its Vermont Green Mountain setting. The beauty of Deerfield Valley's mountains, forests, and waterways are evident in virtually every view. This delivers much needed relaxation and reassurance to visitors.

"Other States are overdeveloped with lots of commercial, high-end features. We're easy going, laid back. We care about our brothers and sisters. Our water and air are clean."

"Just driving over the border and seeing the green Vermont sign destresses the body."

"People want to experience classic Vermont. I think that consists of lots of little unique, hidden spots."



- In addition to nature, the Deerfield Valley experience also includes quaint, rustic, and historic built environments. In fact, Dover, Wilmington and the region deliver those experiences in a manner that seems more authentic and less commercialized than many competitive New England tourism destinations, including Vermont tourism towns.

"Everyone is real here. We enjoy what nature gave us. We respect it. That brings a togetherness."

"There is a caché associated with going to Vermont."

"Other states are overdeveloped, but Vermont is easy going and laid back. We care about our brothers and sisters. We keep our water and air clean."

"We get it. We know how to relax and enjoy the moment. In Vermont, things are a bit lower. There is a simplicity and outdoorsy-ness. I think that's why people come here."

- Vistas and breathtaking views are among the natural rewards of visiting the Deerfield Valley.

“Taking a Bluebird Express bubble chair lift ride to the top of Mount Snow is a distinctive experience for Summer visitors.”

“Beer Naked, the Southern Vermont Natural History Museum, and other nearby tourism stops deliver breathtaking, signature views of the Green Mountains.”

- The area’s ability to leverage the equity of Vermont extends to the culture and character of the Deerfield Valley.

“The people don’t take themselves too seriously. We’re about relaxation and exploration. People can do what they want on their own schedule. There’s plenty to explore in the outdoors.”

“The appeal to me is being able to grow my own flowers, grow my own vegetables for the winter, being able to go for a walk in the woods or on a dirt backroad.”



targeting.

- The region is known by winter travelers familiar with Mount Snow. Skiing at that venue delivers a range of visitors to Deerfield Valley lodging, restaurants, and trail-based activities (snowshoeing, snowmobiling). Shoulder and Summer experiences in Deerfield Valley suggest these same target groups should be invited back.

Mount Snow offers something for everyone. Families are about 50+% of the business. There is a big terrain park, parties and festivals for a younger demographic. And a ton of retirees."

- The Deerfield Valley's southern position within the State of Vermont is a driver of visitation. This geography fulfills visitors' desire for authentic Vermont experiences without adding additional hours of driving to more Northern vacation destinations (Stowe, Killington, Burlington).

"Our biggest piece is the southern location, it's easiest to get to."

"Most come from New England. Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey are our bigger markets. Massachusetts and Rhode Island people seem to be driving to Maine. We get some from Pennsylvania. DC and Northern Virginia folks come in winter."

"Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York are our main source of both second-home buyers and visitors."

Our Inn guests are coming from Albany, Boston, Springfield, Hartford and New York City."



- Summer travelers could be invited to the region on the basis of both a general Vermont-centric brand message as well as more specific targeted experiences. A summary of the targets and experiences raised by this research included:

1 Three Generations and a Dog

Women between the ages of 25-54. Members of active, multi-generational families in search of experiences that allow them to relax, reconnect and share their togetherness with friends and extended family via social media platforms.

2 The -shippies

Adults between the ages of 25-54. Those people looking to strengthen relationships and friendships, traveling without children, to a regional, drivable destination that allows for a change of pace from their hyper-connected norms, providing the opportunity to disconnect, and reconnect with each other.

3 The Adventurers

Men between the ages of 18-34, often traveling alone, who enjoy outdoor activities including hiking (beginner & intermediate), mountain biking (downhill, endurance & cross country), and water sports (boat & paddle rentals). This group enjoys the journey, trading travel to major global cities for short and long-term journeys to natural wonders.

4 Retirees with Time

Secondary demo. Active adults ages 60+, retired, who find pleasure in the pursuit of their unique lifestyle interests, particularly those in nature.

- Dover and Wilmington have become the landing place for residents of New York and New Jersey when urban life feels risky. Recent transplants, as a result of Covid, could be employed as brand ambassadors in their home region.

“Sept 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center caused a major increase in real estate sales in our area as people looked for a safe place to be.”

“Covid 2020 has caused another major real estate boom. With improvements to the internet infrastructure many people were able to work from home here in Vermont. Some customers have told me they plan on staying.”

“A bunch of Connecticut people sold their homes and moved here. We have 52 new students in the elementary school and the amount of broadband being utilized for Zoom was over the bar.”

- Route 9 is a thoroughfare through the destination. This route represents a distinct opportunity to invite travelers to experience the region and stay overnight.

“The real opportunity for the Valley is the thousands of people that drive through the area on Route 9, typically on their way to someplace else. Most are either on their way to visit family or are heading to vacations in New Hampshire or Maine.”

“We (Beer Naked) are a halfway point for many people making the trip to and from New Hampshire to New York. Fifty percent of people happen upon us I would say, while the other 50% are at our place or in the Valley as their destination for a night or two.”

- **The Hermitage Club** member is a source of referrals, but we must recognize that many invited guests stay on Club property. This group is likely a higher-end demographic, although “they purport to want just simple Vermont” experiences. Hermitage Club clientele hail from Boston, Connecticut shore, Northern New Jersey and Manhattan. Members are largely families with kids between 4 and 16 years of age. Finance, banking, law are the occupations that allow second homes in Wilmington to be purchased. Importantly, the Club sends members and their guests to restaurants and activity-providers in the community. This suggests an opportunity to build connections and social media influence from members.



Competitive websites is another way to target potential visitors. A list of the destinations uncovered in this research includes:

- Rockport, MA & other Maine small towns, often coastal (Kennebunkport, Bar Harbor)
- The Berkshires, MA
- Burlington, VT
- Stowe, VT & other Vermont small towns (Woodstock, Barnard)
- Newport, RI & RI beaches (Narragansett)
- North Conway, NH & the White Mountains
- Portsmouth, NH
- The Lakes Region, NH (Lake Winnepesaukee)
- The Litchfield Hills, CT
- Mystic, CT
- Cape Cod, MA & other Massachusetts towns (Martha’s Vineyard, Rockport, Edgartown)





communications
opportunities.

Conversation

- A number of stakeholders referenced the ability of events and festivals to grow shoulder season and Summer visitation. Events that celebrate the local food, beverages, natural environment and culture tend to be most successful. Fourth of July, the Blueberry Festival, and the Fall Harvest Festival were mentioned multiple times by stakeholders. These could serve as the subject of future ads, website features, and social content for the destination.
- Hiking offers a wide range of visitor segments authentic Vermont experiences. Although most of the trails are appropriate for beginner and intermediate hikers, a few offer some aspirational bragging rights that could be leveraged in communications. For example, both the Long Trail and the Catamount Trail traverse the State. Others offer spectacular views. There is a trail that connects Dover and Wilmington, a perfect way to further conjoin the disparate parts of the region. Currently, a rich, interactive description of the trail system does not exist on the Chamber's site although some digital information is available. There is an opportunity to bring the trails to life online for potential and current visitors. Details about local wildlife, historic remnants along certain trails, and geologic details could be included. Tourists are asking for this type of information.

"Visitors to the Chamber of Commerce often ask 'Where can I hike?'"

"The quintessential hikes in the area are Haystack and the Valley Trail. They deliver 360-degree views."

"There are committed people who ensure new trails and trail improvements. Many of the trails are set up for mountain biking and hiking. Backwoods skiing in the winter."

- Both Dover and Wilmington also have trails appropriate for mountain biking. These routes are appropriate for endurance bikers as well cross-country riders. Mount Snow also offers summer downhill mountain biking service via its lift.
- Water-based activities at area lakes offer a distinctive point of difference from other Vermont small-town destinations. Lake Whitingham is the largest inland body of water in the State. It boasts 11 miles of length and 26 miles of uninterrupted shoreline. There are several access points for boats and multiple areas for picnicking. Rentals of pontoon boats, power boats and a range of other options (jet skis, stand up paddleboards, kayaks, canoes) offer area visitors and residents a range of activities.

"The Lakes (Raconda, Whitingham, Sommerset and the Reservoir) are always packed with summer swimmers, fishing, boating, tubing, water skiing, jet skiing, kayaking, canoeing or just floating! Dogs can enjoy themselves too, which makes it a perfect place for the entire family."

"Also for water fun, there are a ton of beautiful waterfalls within some wonderful hikes as you venture closer to Townshend Stratton and Jamaica, VT."

- The region's dining and drinking options were referenced as part of the story to promote visitation. Restaurants and breweries throughout the region are a key pillar of the future Deerfield Valley brand. Their ingredients and atmosphere reflect Vermont.

"The dining can consist of a fine night out at The White House with delicious cocktails, chef inspired cuisine and a beautiful outside patio set atop a hillside overlooking Wilmington and the mountains."

"I think there's a 'gastrotourism' opportunity here. There's elegant high-end dining and local breweries."

"Food and drink don't need to be dressed up here. People love the breweries. One of our chefs just opened a food truck on the top of Hogback Mountain."

- Tourists tend to seek out locally manufactured products and artisanal goods when traveling. Vermont is associated with maple products, craft breweries, dairy products, smoked meats, chocolates and other hand-crafted goods. This aspect of the destination presents a distinct opportunity in the website as well as throughout the destination to reinforce the authentic, made from the land brand values of the State.

"People like the experience of trying a locally made products and will come from out of the area to experience what we (the Distillery) have to offer."

"There are so many artisans in the area. Painters, potters, glass blowers, textile artists, and wood workers. Sometimes they have their installations in shops. All of these folks are in touch with nature, which is reflected in their work."

"There's Spoonwood Cabin Creamery in Jacksonville, VT. You can watch as the owners make cheese or visit their wine bar."



marketing challenges.

- An overarching challenge to growing the region as a top-of-mind Spring-Summer-Fall tourism destination is the ability of the Deerfield Valley to fund and manage the necessary components of an effective marketing communications program. Such a program requires ongoing oversight of creative assets, media placement, local programming, stakeholder relationship engagement, digital presence and other supporting actions.

"We really need one person to implement. We can't do it by committee."

"A major challenge is to identify a way to track ad effectiveness. We don't know if our ads are working. We want to make sure we're spending in the right place so we can relay our success to members. We need to make a business case to the Board."

"I wonder if there's a company Bi-Town can contract to offer services to local small businesses that aren't using tools to maximize their potential?"

- The region's total lodging count (hotels, inns, Air BnB) and an assessment of lodging quality needs to be established and tracked. This would help demonstrate the efficacy of advertising as well as influence communications investment-levels by week.

"We have a deficit of hotels and vacation homes. Our Air BnB listings are occupied 80% of the time. Those were week-long visitors."

"Our number of rooms may be fine, but quality is another issue. Some Inns and Air BnBs are nice, but other properties aren't even up to the standards of a Hampton Inn."

"We need to support local hoteliers and inn keepers with cooperative resources and lessons."

- We consistently heard that visitors required assistance planning itineraries while in the Deerfield Valley. This suggests that one component of a future website would be a series of day or weekend trips, perhaps organized around specific themes.

"A lot of our guests joke about how they've driven through a hundred times, but never stopped. Yet, there's a lot to do."

"I have heard from some of our customers that they are interested in things to do in Vermont. The problem is they are very busy people who don't have the time to do the research."

"I'm constantly being asked 'What is there to do around here?' by tourists."

"It wouldn't hurt to organize the experiences for tourists based on their interests."

- Way-finding in the area can be a bit of a challenge since Vermont does not encourage lots of signage. This presents an opportunity for the Chamber to assist visitors looking for trails, picnic spots, water access, and routes between popular stops.
- A comprehensive, centralized, high-quality presentation of Deerfield Valley accommodations does not exist online. Although we appreciate the challenges associated with creating a centralized booking engine, the ability to offer potential visitors an easy way to dream and shop for lodging is essential. Importantly, this resource must reinforce the Deerfield Valley brand – authentic, high quality, and welcoming.

- Travelers favoring historic sights and museum-based interpretive experiences are currently visiting other parts of New England. The Montshire Museum of Science in Norwich, VT and the Springfield Museums in Springfield, MA were mentioned specifically. Deerfield Valley could include the Southern Vermont Natural History Museum and the historic Wilmington walking tour in its web-based communications

“Older people who enjoy history, who are on vacation with time to spare, want to learn more about Wilmington. They’ve been quite interested in our walking tour map.”

- The area’s golf courses offer yet another way to enjoy the Vermont setting.
- Some stakeholders referenced a need to further cultivate customer service levels among the range of local service industry personnel.

“Greeting people when they arrive. Thanking them. Asking how to be of assistance. These are all things that need to happen but don’t always occur. It will bring people back.”



- Promoting the Valley as a picture-perfect wedding destination may also provide an economic engine in the Spring and Summer seasons. Quite a few weddings from tourism feeder markets were canceled due to Covid, and, subsequently, relocated to smaller, often outdoor settings in Deerfield Valley. Yet, although the region has many of the core ingredients necessary to achieve legitimacy as a wedding destination, organizing the program remains a real barrier for both the Chamber and some of its smaller members who often lack time, experience and a digital presence.

“The Grand Summit is main hotel at the base of Mount Snow. Weddings fill the hotel in the Summer.”

“We definitely have an opportunity to cultivate the region as a wedding destination. Particularly since micro-weddings are coming back out of necessity. But, we don’t have all the components to make this successful. We need someone to make it easy for brides or wedding planners to get things done. We don’t have centralized information. And a lot of our business owners don’t understand what goes into event planning.”

“We catered a backyard lobster-clam bake for some Manhattan folks that relocated their event because of Covid. We cater at homes or rented properties. We had 100 people at the Lake. There’s a nature feel to the entire thing. We offer a complete weekend getaway for guests.”

“Weddings fill The Grand Summit in the summer and conference space is often booked by science groups. The Mountain built Corinthia, a multi-season venue that could become the wedding venue of the future.”

- Another growth engine could be targeting meeting and event planners that deal primarily with small-medium sized businesses and other groups. Stakeholders reported working with technology and science-based industries at both Mount Snow properties and rented Air BnB homes. Groups of 20-30 typically combine business with outdoor activities.

"We do a lot of catering for groups of young digital folks and science people. They rent houses for 15-30 people. Work on their laptops and then go hiking."

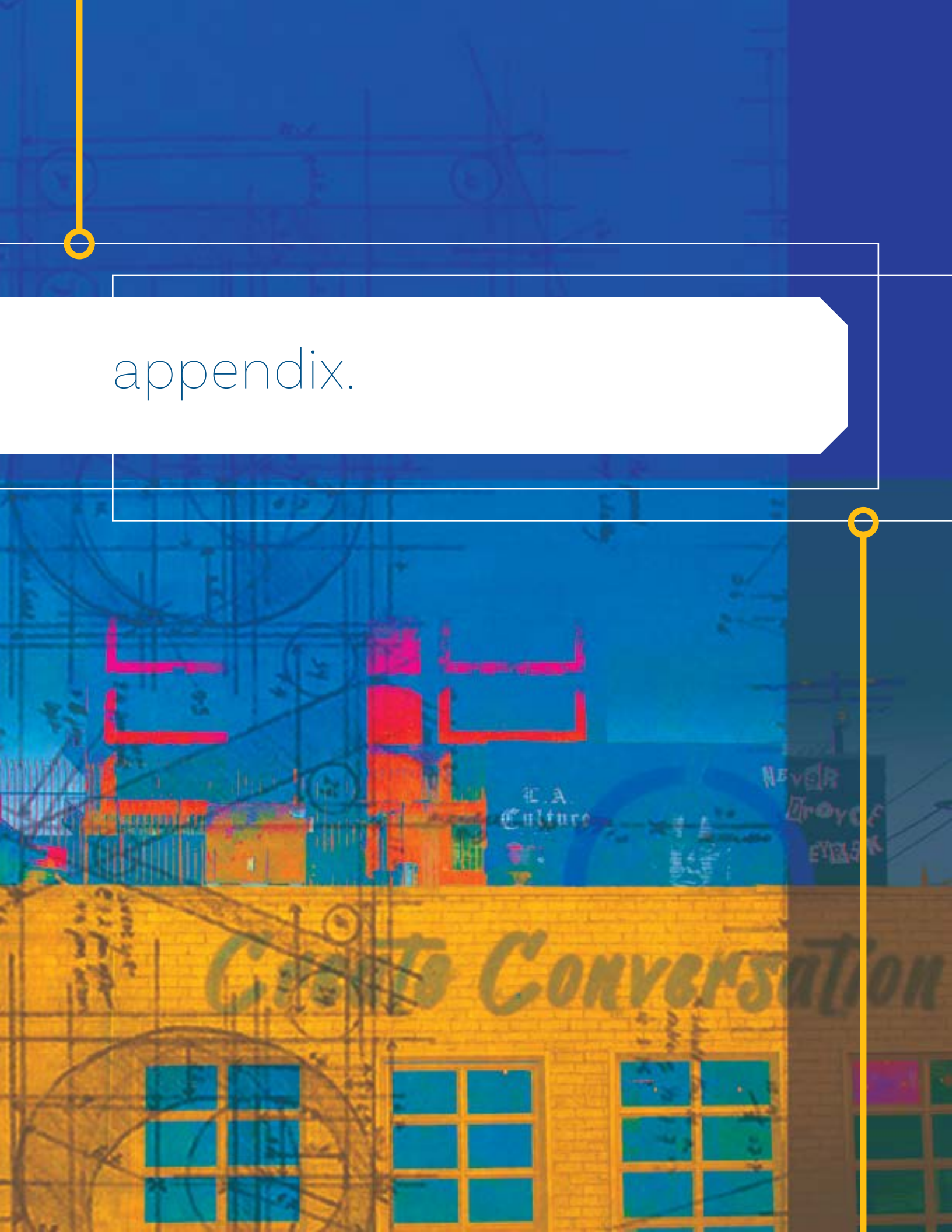
"Even if we're not hosting the event, people are going to need rooms. And we should be providing planners with listings of properties and vendors that can help."

- The Deerfield Valley offers a host of individuals that could serve as digital "locals" that provide an insider's view of the region. This is a source of information valued by potential visitors, particularly in the trip planning phase.

"Lots of us play multiple roles. We have a job, a sport, and we play a role in the community. So, we see it from multiple angles. Everybody does everything!"



appendix.





Appendix A

Stakeholders included in research:

1. Tim Dolan
2. Joanne Yankura
3. Gretchen Hevrelux
4. Mark Pedersen
5. Todd Gareiss
6. Bill Benneyan
7. Steve Butler
8. Susan Lawrence
9. Eric Durocher
10. Robert Edwards
11. Tracy Bartels
12. Shannon Wheeler
13. Sara Jasinski
14. Robert Edwards
15. Ed Metcalfe
16. Meg Streeter
17. Julie Moore
18. Charlie Foster