

Introduction

PURPOSE

The Sylvan Lake Tourism Marketing Strategy is designed to guide development and promotion of Sylvan Lake into a top-of-mind destination for regional travelers over the next three years, ultimately transforming Sylvan Lake into a sustainable year-round destination.

PROCESS

In developing this Strategy, the following engagement process was used:

- Discovery: background documents, research, and existing strategy were reviewed.
- Town tour: in an effort to get acquainted with the town, a driving tour was provided by Mayor Sean McIntyre.
- Stakeholder interviews: to gain deeper insights and context, 10 telephone interviews with key stakeholders were conducted, and one discovery session with key members of the sub-committee.
- Social listening: a social listening study was conducted to gather insights into the online conversations visitors and residents are having of Sylvan Lake seasonally, in comparison to comparative destinations.
- Analysis: insights from the previous steps were reviewed and consolidated to identify key findings and generate recommendations that shape this Strategy.

Situation Analysis

Through the discovery and stakeholder interview process, challenges and insights were uncovered, specifically surrounding the shoulder season. These findings shaped the direction of this Marketing Strategy.

KEY FINDINGS

The lake

The first association most Albertans make with Sylvan Lake is with the lake—not the town—and this is the primary reason to visit. The lack of association with the town is some cause for concern. The town and all its amenities are being overlooked or going unnoticed by single-minded visitors taken by the lake.

Closed for the shoulder season

The second association most Albertans have of Sylvan Lake is blissful summer. With the associations of lake and summer, Albertans find it difficult to imagine Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination. The lake is perceived as being closed during the shoulder season, which runs from September long week to May long weekend. The high vacancy rates along Lakeshore Drive and handful of businesses closing up shop over the shoulder season adds fuel to the perception that Sylvan Lake closes to visitors in the colder months.

Limited shoulder season offerings

While summer is filled with ample experiences for visitors to enjoy from sunrise to sunset, shoulder season offerings are limited, primarily self-directed, and unremarkable. There are no opportunities for visitors to rent winter equipment, such as snowshoes and ice skates, and there are minimal guided tours and experiences offered. Many current shoulder season activities can also be experienced in Alberta's urban centers—sometimes to a greater degree and scale.

The town

Proximity of the town to the lake makes Sylvan Lake distinct from other Alberta destinations. However, the town itself, has a few weaknesses from a tourism perspective.

1. Lack of unique or authentic touches.

As a town surrounded by farmland, there is an opportunity to showcase and celebrate the agricultural industry. Visitors have indicated that they want more culinary experiences (Beach Survey, 2017) and there has been a growing collective interest in local food, drink, and farm to fork.

2. Small town essence.

Local businesses and residents fear that Sylvan Lake's small-town essence is on the cusp of being lost or greatly diminished. Over the past decade the town has experienced significant residential growth and its heart has shifted away from the downtown waterfront.

There is very little left of Sylvan Lake's built heritage, and historical stories have been under-utilized. The inability to articulate Sylvan Lake's small-town essence may be related to residents and the Town losing touch with its historical roots. These roots will need to be reclaimed to ensure the town's essence and authenticity aren't lost as it continues to grow and evolve.

3. Place versus feeling.

The lake generates an emotional response for visitors and residents alike. In comparison, rarely were emotions used to describe the town. Much of the focus for the Town of Sylvan Lake and its businesses has been on tourism products instead of tourism experiences. Creating memorable, sensory tourism experiences that are connected or complementary to the lake—the source of greatest emotional response—will assist to extend the emotional responses within the town.

Residents

Residents are incredibly satisfied with the quality of life and sense of community in Sylvan Lake. 97% of residents rate the overall quality of life as either 'good' or 'very good' and 82% agree or strongly agree that they feel a sense of connection to the community. Residents are also one of the primary reasons visitors travel to Central Alberta and Sylvan Lake. 49% of all overnight visits to the Central Alberta region are for this purpose, and when visitors were asked why they decided to travel to Sylvan Lake, 21.4% were visiting friends and family.

Community dynamics

Sylvan Lake is communicated as being a tight-knit, energetic community with a strong quality of life, however, some interesting dynamics appeared in the research contradictory to this. The business community does not feel supported by residents, other businesses, or the Town. While at the same time, the Town feels that businesses are not open to their support. To become a year-round destination, the Town and businesses cannot go it alone. Collaboration will be essential, not only within Sylvan Lake, but also with those outside town boundaries.

Social media presence

The Town's social presence represents a large growth opportunity. Here is a present-day snapshot of Sylvan Lake's social media landscape:

- The majority of people that post about Sylvan Lake are residents, aged 35 years and up, sharing personal stories that aren't able to garner reposts and shares across platforms.
- Sylvan Lake does moderately well on Instagram and Twitter, but poorly on Tumblr.
- Sylvan Lake has a very high net sentiment across social platforms year-round.
- Visitors rarely post, but when they do, their posts aren't widely shared. 15,000 residents produce 85 posts per week in the shoulder season, however, in the summer when 750,000 visitors travel to Sylvan Lake, the number of posts only doubles to 158 per week.
- The majority of influencers for Sylvan Lake are local and official accounts, such as official resident and visitor accounts and Mayor Sean McIntyre.
- Year-round content tends to be inward looking and focused on residents and their lives, instead of appealing to, engaging, and connecting with the outside traveler.
- In the shoulder season, the majority of posts speak to an austere winter and town events.
- Other Central Alberta communities are posting more frequently and receiving more shares than Sylvan Lake.

For reference, detailed findings from the Town's social listening study, conducted in February 2019, is attached to this document as an appendix.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths

- General awareness of Sylvan Lake amongst Albertans.
- Proximity of the town to the lake.
- Infrastructure and tourism are already in place, unlike comparable destinations such as Slave Lake.
- Sylvan Lake's central and accessible location—equal distance from two major urban centers, Calgary and Edmonton (1.5 hours).
- Proximity to Red Deer (20 minutes) and location on David Thompson Highway.
- Winter opportunities for tourism are currently being developed to animate the destination through the Travel Alberta SHiFT program.
- The Town is already offering festivals and events in the shoulder season.
- The Town is investing in capital developments to support tourism year-round.
- High visitation by Albertans in the summer months (716,000 in 2018).
- The Central Alberta Tourism Alliance (CATA) comprised of multiple Central Alberta regions with one common goal in mind: increase awareness of Central Alberta (Central Alberta Destination Management Plan, 2015).

Weaknesses

- Lack of collaboration within the business community.
- Local businesses cultivate a monopoly structure within Sylvan Lake.
- Residents are not engaging with or supporting the local business community.
- Difficult to discover the Town's offerings and Sylvan Lake's businesses through search engines.
- Many local businesses use a Facebook page instead of a website to promote themselves online.
- Strong seasonality to the economy of the waterfront area with the majority of visitation between May and September (summer season).

- It is unclear who Sylvan Lake is in the shoulder season.
- Regional perceptions that Sylvan Lake is closed to visitors in the shoulder season and turns its attention to residents.
- Many businesses close in the shoulder season or have reduced hours.
- Lack of shoulder season products to entice visitors.
- Aside from the lake, there is little that differentiates Sylvan Lake from other Alberta destinations.

Opportunities

- Untapped potential in the shoulder season.
- The WCD Committee is encouraging the creation of a Destination Marketing Management Organization (DMMO).
- Economic downturn encouraging Albertans to travel closer to home to save money.
- High US exchange rates, low Canadian dollar.
- Touring routes: opportunity to join tours along the David Thompson Highway, which take visitors to and from the mountains.
- Albertans are a very active population. They enjoy being outdoors with friends and family and are not deterred by the cold, harsh winters.
- Banff National Park and Jasper National Park are reaching visitor capacity.
- Leveraging Travel Alberta programs.
- Leveraging CATA initiatives.

Threats

- Central Alberta struggles being a year-round destination due to a lack of awareness of what it offers travelers.
- David Thompson County: partnership between Rocky Mountain House, Caroline, Nordegg, and Clearwater County is well branded and enticing to visitors.
- Consumer's expecting high-quality service and sophisticated tourism products and experiences.
- Competitive destinations (i.e. Banff and Jasper) are well funded, organized, and promoted by Travel Alberta.
- Recent negative PR about Sylvan Lake: child pornography, father sex offenders, #10 most dangerous place in Canada by Macleans.
- QE2 highway is the only major artery to get to Sylvan Lake and it can be dangerous depending on drivers and weather, and slow due to construction.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS/THEMES:

- Sylvan Lake, as a year-round destination, is not yet market-ready. Take time to continue to develop and build a solid foundation first.
- Own your unique seasonal experience.
- The lake is the biggest draw for visitors. Reconnect the town to the lake—making the lake and town interchangeable in the minds of visitors, across all seasons.
- Create marketing consistency within the business community.
- Collaborate—recognize that you can't go it alone when transforming into a year-round destination. Encourage and undertake tourism-focused collaboration both within Sylvan Lake and without.
- Shift from communicating a resident-focused town to a visitor-friendly and visitor-ready destination.

Target Audiences

GEOGRAPHIC SEGMENTATION

Geographically, this Strategy primarily focuses on the regional, drive markets of Calgary and Edmonton, with consideration made to the Red Deer population.

Currently, the overwhelming majority of visitors to Sylvan Lake are Albertans (92.8%). Of these Albertans, 22% are from Central Alberta, 31% from Edmonton, and 30% from Calgary (Visitor Friendly Assessment, 2016). Most of the visitation occurs in the summer months with low visitation and awareness for the shoulder season.

VISITOR SEGMENTATION

Travel Alberta identifies Free Spirits as the Explorer Quotient (EQ) Traveler Type that is the primary target market for Alberta. Regionally, Free Spirits dominate the market in terms of size. As a result, it is recommended that the Town of Sylvan Lake focus their efforts on attracting this group.

About Free Spirits

Free Spirits in Alberta are highly social and open-minded thrill-seekers with an enthusiasm for life that extends to their outlook on travel. They prefer to indulge in high-end experiences that can be shared with others—whether in person or online. They are always planning their next trip. In destination, they prefer to see and experience a bit of everything, from the main to lesser known attractions. Appealing activities include:

- Dining at restaurants with local ingredients
- Visiting well-known natural wonders
- Visiting small-towns
- Boating and other water-based activities
- Multi-day touring on their own by car
- Attending farmers' markets
- Visiting provincial parks to participate in outdoor adventure activities

Free Spirits are 20-54 years old, with a below average household income. 66% have children at home, with the majority of children between the ages of 0-9 years.

The values of Free Spirits and their preferred experiences, media consumption habits, and sources for collecting travel information are aligned with the findings and recommendations in this Strategy.

Marketing Goals

Two primary, overarching goals were identified at the onset on this project:

1. Increase regional visits to, and spending in, Sylvan Lake in the shoulder season, with summer visitation sustained.
2. Increase awareness of Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination within Alberta.

From the research, three additional goals were identified as being necessary to meet the needs of those primary goals:

3. An aligned and engaged tourism community.
4. Product development to support and distinguish Sylvan Lake from other Alberta destinations.
5. Increased level of engagement and activity of both permanent and seasonal residents in Sylvan Lake.

Objectives

BY 2021, THE FOLLOWING MEASURES WILL BE MET:

- 5% increase in overnight visitors.
- 5% of Alberta residents agree that Sylvan Lake is a year-round destination option.
- 10% of Alberta residents intend to visit Sylvan Lake in the shoulder season.

BY 2022, THE FOLLOWING MEASURES WILL BE MET:

- 10% increase in spending within Sylvan Lake (\$3.54 increase per travel party)
- 20% of visitors have heard of Sylvan Lake's shoulder season products and experiences.
- 70% of businesses are supported by the Town of Sylvan Lake in their tourism marketing efforts.
- 20% increase in businesses partnering together to create a tourism experience.
- 50% of residents agree that Sylvan Lake has something to offer year-round.

BY 2023, THE FOLLOWING MEASURES WILL BE MET:

- 15% increase in overnight visitors.
- 10% of Alberta residents agree that Sylvan Lake is a year-round destination option.
- 18% of Alberta residents intend to visit Sylvan Lake in the shoulder season in the next three years.

Strategies

ARTICULATE A SEASONALLY DISTINCT POSITIONING

- Own and paint a picture of Sylvan Lake's unique seasonal experience through the 'Brilliant All Year' branding.
- Reframe the way Sylvan Lake is perceived seasonally and communicate this to the public.
- Facilitate consistency in positioning and messaging within the tourism community.

ENGAGE BUSINESSES WITHIN THE TOURISM COMMUNITY

- Build excitement in the business community for shoulder season tourism.
- Involve the business community in co-creating Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination.
- Establish frequent and clear open-communication and information sharing.
- Improve awareness of the tourism industry and its impact on the community.

AMPLIFY SHOULDER SEASON PRODUCTS

- Develop additional shoulder season experiences.
- Incorporate local. Showcase and celebrate the Central Alberta region and its producers.
- Connect to and pull inspiration from Sylvan Lake's history.

COLLABORATE WITH TOURISM PARTNERS

- Recognize that Sylvan Lake cannot become a year-round destination without collaboration amongst the local tourism community, and partnerships with other Central Alberta destinations and tour operators.

STORYTELLING THE SHOULDER SEASON

- Move from promoting individual products to promoting integrated experiences.

- Refresh online tourism-focused platforms.
- Create content that generates an emotional and feeling-based response.
- Communicate a visitor-friendly and visitor-ready destination.
- Elevate the online profile of all businesses in Sylvan Lake.

UTILIZE THE INFLUENCE OF SEASONAL AND PERMANENT RESIDENTS

- Invite residents to host their friends and families from out of town and explore Sylvan Lake together.
- Motivate residents to engage with local businesses.

Tactics

To more effectively and efficiently promote Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination, it's recommended that foundational pieces be in place first. This includes hiring a full-time Tourism Marketing & Product Development Coordinator as well as the development of a seasonal articulation of 'Brilliant All Year,' an online presence, seasonal assets, additional products to complement and amplify those already in place, and facilitation of collaboration and consistency across businesses. Once complete, internal and external campaigns will be more successful.

While the tactic is out of scope for this Strategy, the creation of a Destination Marketing Management Organization (DMMO) is recommended. It would not only be beneficial for tackling many of the challenges the Town is facing, as highlighted in this plan, but would also greatly assist in shepherding Sylvan Lake into a successful year-round destination.

PHASE 1: DEVELOPING THE FOUNDATION

Hire full-time marketing support

Given the amount of work that is required to develop Sylvan Lake into a year-round destination, and the need to build and maintain strong working relationships with businesses and influencers, it is recommended that the Town first hire a full-time Tourism Marketing & Product Development Coordinator.

This individual will report to the Recreation and Culture Manager and will own the management and implementation of all tactics presented within this Strategy, including earned, paid, and owned media efforts, relationship building, and campaign creation. They are an advocate for, and voice of the tourism brand and destination.

Not included in their role is the design of marketing materials and graphics required for the tactics outlined in this Strategy. This will be owned by a separate employee within the Recreation and Culture department.

The ideal candidate should have:

- A bachelor's degree in Commerce, Marketing, or Business Administration.
- At least 5 years of marketing and communications experience.
- Knowledge of, and experience within the Alberta tourism industry is required.
- A strong understanding of current social media concepts, strategies, and best practices.
- Excellent project management skills. Ability to manage concurrent projects from inception to completion with a proven success record.

- Strong communications skills (written and verbal) with the ability to effectively present ideas and information to business owners and team members.
- Familiarity with the region is considered an asset but is not necessary.
- Basic graphic design skills are considered an asset but are not necessary.

Budget: **This is a key area of investment for the Strategy.**
 \$60,000 annually for full-time Tourism Marketing & Product Development Coordinator
 (based on 35 hours per week).

Seasonal positioning of 'Brilliant All Year'

While Sylvan Lake is communicated as 'Brilliant All Year,' for it to have impact externally, it needs to be flushed out and given a seasonal articulation. This can be done by developing and communicating visual and verbal distinctions between seasons and the different "brilliance" they offer visitors based on everything from the changing weather and pace of the town, to the changing offerings and experiences available. Sylvan Lake is not the same place year-round. It is a dynamic, fluid destination that offers visitors something brilliant, but unique, season to season.

In the spring, Sylvan Lake's **brilliance blossoms**. With the budding of trees, extension of light, and melting of ice, the town, too, emerges with a sense of possibility and growing excitement.

In the summer, Sylvan Lake's **brilliance glows**. It's overt and vibrant. It speaks to an illustrious and lively beach-side destination, brimming with fun and the sense of endless adventures.

In the fall, Sylvan Lake's **brilliance welcomes** through a strong sense of community and connection. It highlights transitions. It speaks to comfort, quaint experiences, and gatherings set amongst a changing landscape.

In the winter, Sylvan Lake's **brilliance surprises**. It's more subtle than the summer and exists in its contrasting yet complementary nature. While the lake provides ample opportunities for outdoor experiences amongst vast landscapes and cold temperatures, the town is a warm and welcoming space to retreat to for rest, nourishment, and connection to community. Both are needed to experience Sylvan Lake as a whole—cold and warm, active and restorative, outdoor and indoor, connection to the land and connection to people. The lake and the town, in the winter, are interdependent upon each other, the town's yin to the lake's yang.

Using this framework, develop compelling and distinct visual and verbal guidelines for each season. Incorporate this positioning across all earned, paid, and owned media efforts, providing visitors with a clear, consistent picture and felt sense of Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination, what is offered, and why they should visit. Introduce and disseminate to local businesses for incorporation into their marketing and promotional efforts and offerings.

With this seasonal articulation of the brand, it will be important to reframe, both internally and externally, the way Sylvan Lake is currently being categorized and perceived seasonally. Shifting from summer versus shoulder, to summer versus fall versus winter versus spring, will make a big impact in transforming into a year-round destination. This won't happen overnight, but in time, the shoulder seasons will earn their place—growing to hold their own weight in visitation, offerings, and branding, year over year. Communicating this difference through internal and external marketing campaigns will be helpful to change perceptions and create momentum.

Budget: Labor only.

Shoulder season asset development

- Video assets only showcase the summer season.
- Photo assets are plentiful and strong for communicating Sylvan Lake as a summer destination. However, shoulder season assets, specifically winter, are lacking. They feature dreary weather, communicate a resident experience, and struggle to entice and draw in a potential visitor.
- Stock photography is used by businesses and the Town.

Shoulder season asset development, with an emphasis on winter, will build an inventory of professional year-round video and photographic materials that will be used by the Town for marketing purposes and will be made available to local businesses. Building a strong asset library is essential to fuel online, social, and traditional media. Compiling assets in year one ensures that later initiatives can be executed quicker and more effectively. These assets will be used in media relations, social media, online, and in advertising.

With the seasonal positioning as the brief, use internal talent to capture shoulder season imagery. Engage residents, friends, or family as talent for cost efficiency.

Suggestions for assets, include:

- Diversity of shots: landscape and people, residents and visitors, day and night, lake and town, indoors and outdoors, snowing and sunshine.
- Hero shot examples: a young family skating on the lake, a mature couple snowshoeing along the lake, a young couple enjoying a meal in a warm, well-lit restaurant, a family window shopping along 50th Street, a father and son ice fishing next to a hut, a young woman enjoying high tea at the Englishrose Tea Room.
- Capture the engagement and activity at larger, visitor-friendly events and festivals.
- Exterior shots of accommodations, shops, and restaurants to use on the 'things to do' and 'places to stay' listings on the Visit Sylvan Lake website to create consistency in visuals.
- Showcase a diversity of visitors: ethnicity, age, gender, life stage, groups/couples/solo travelers.
- Priority should be placed on winter, with fall and spring secondary needs.

Budget: This is a key area of investment for the Strategy.

Labor only. Additional costs for special projects, as needed (i.e. drone capture).

Tourism website

- Content speaks more to the resident than the visitor.
- Only some businesses are listed, advancing the perception that there are limited things to do.

The Town's tourism website recently moved from the Tourism Red Deer website to its own platform at the end of 2018. This provides an opportune time for the development of a strategy that is aligned with the seasonal positioning.

Refreshing imagery, layout, and content, as well as the architecture for how information is displayed will be important. Identify what content is most important for the visitor and needs to be most readily accessible, and then reorganize how that information is presented and found. Pages that display things to do, places to stay, and events should be comprehensive and inclusive to all local offerings, and well categorized. The website will also need to connect into Travel Alberta's ATIS platform.

Budget: This is a key area of investment for the Strategy.

While there are two options, the first is recommended. This work will be outsourced.

1. Complete redesign: \$30,000
2. Improve existing site: \$10,000

Through a complete website redesign, there is an opportunity to create a unique website that behaves like an app and can grow with the destination as products are developed. It would be optimized for mobile and search engines.

Once refreshed or redesigned by the selected third party, ownership and management of the site will be handled internally.

Web presence

- Businesses are lost or missing in search engine queries for things to do and where to stay and eat.
- Many businesses don't have a website and instead promote solely through a Facebook business page.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of influencing the online presence of a website in a search engine's organic, unpaid results to be placed earlier, higher, and more frequent in ranked listings. Generally, the higher the ranking and more frequently a listing appears, the more visitors the website will receive.

Improve search engine results to ensure the appropriate listings, including VisitSylvanLake.ca and the websites of tourism businesses, are ranked high when visitors search Sylvan Lake online.

Hire a Search Engine Optimization consultant to conduct an SEO audit, key phrase research, link building, and create meta tags. The consultant will also host webinars for the business community to provide training on SEO best practices. These webinars will be recorded and made available to new businesses that open in the future.

For this tactic to be effective for the overall destination, and beneficial for visitors, businesses that don't have a website need to be encouraged to do so. This action item has been communicated previously through the 2016 Visitor Friendly Assessment and is reinforced within this Strategy to further highlight its importance.

To facilitate the development of websites for businesses, engage an existing partner, such as Strong Coffee Marketing, or a local website developer, such as 7 Points Media, to create a simple, easy to use template that can be shared with existing and new businesses. An online webinar will be provided with training on how to use the template, connect into Travel Alberta's ATIS platform, and incorporate the Town's brand standards across content and imagery, as well as website best practices. Like the SEO webinars, this will be recorded and made available to businesses for future reference. Provide an incentive to businesses to aid engagement, such as promotions for their business across the Town and destination social media channels with direct links to their new website. Consider hiring a university student to assist.

Budget: SEO Audit

Year 1: \$2,000 for VisitSylvanLake.ca and \$1,000 per tourism business

Subsequent years: \$1,200 annually

SEO Webinars: \$100 per hour

Website template: \$2,000 - \$5,000 (depends on website developer)

Website webinar: \$100 - \$150 per hour

Social media presence

For social media, there needs to be a separation between the municipality and destination. Whereas the former is used to disseminate information to the town and engage residents and businesses, the latter is used to showcase and communicate an attractive year-round destination to entice and engage with visitors. While still being grounded in the same overarching brand, they require different strategies. Different stories are told, to different audiences, through different tones of voice. The municipality platform should push informational content, rally residents, and maintain the strong sense of place and community. The destination platform, on the other hand, should pull content that is photo-driven and highlights interesting experiences and beautiful landscapes that make Sylvan Lake a unique destination, while generating an emotional and feeling-based response within the potential visitor.

The most immediate action item is creating a social media strategy for the destination's platforms.

The following tactics need to be incorporated to begin to grow tourism's social media presence and impact:

- Take advantage of user-generated content by sharing the best of resident and visitor posts.
- Engage local influencers, such as Mayor Sean McIntyre, and amplify their posts.
- Create a tourism specific hashtag, such as #VisitSylvanLake, and encourage followers to use it in their posts for a chance to be featured.
- Ensure all photos or videos, whether self or user-generated, are high-quality and high-resolution and are consistent with your key content themes.
- Encourage the local business community to add prompts for social media use in their establishment. Provide tent cards for display.
- Collaborate with Central Alberta destinations through cross-promotion of events, experiences, and stories.
- Leverage the high summer visitation by starting to promote fall events and generate excitement for the fall season in August.
- Tagging all tourism bodies in Alberta and including hashtags specific to Calgary, Edmonton, and Red Deer, to have posts re-shared on those platforms. Examples include #DateNightYYC, #CuriosityEdmonton, and #ExploreAlberta.
- Ensure all posts have a clear and mindful call-to-action, such as clicking a bio link or encouraging tags, likes, followers, or comments.
- Storytelling Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination.

Create campaigns that are aligned with the social media strategy and seasonal positioning.

Examples of campaigns include:

- With so many visitors in the summer season, leverage these visitors and entice them to come back in the shoulder season. For example, run an Instagram story contest in the summer and have the winner receive a free overnight stay in the winter or tickets to a winter festival of their choice. This same contest could also be run in the winter with a summer incentive.
- To encourage engagement from residents, develop a photo contest. For one month, residents are encouraged to take quality photos of Sylvan Lake. The best will be put on display in a local establishment, such as an art gallery or restaurant for one evening and used in building a photo library.

- Look for opportunities and places to include social media post prompts. For example, at events, display special event hashtags with ‘share your experience’ and social media logos around the event on banners, posters or written on sidewalks with chalk. You could also create photo-ready vignettes and props, themed to the event. For example, at the Jazz At The Lake Festival, have a vignette displaying a seated orchestra with fake instruments and batons. Visitors can use the props and take photos in front of the vignette, making it appear as though they are part of an orchestra. From this, a contest could be developed to motivate sharing. Offer free tickets to next year’s event to the person who gets the most likes or shares.
- Engage residents and, together, generate a list of the 10 most Instagrammable places in Sylvan Lake (along the lake and within the town). Write a blog post and present the places on social media over the course of 10 posts. Add a social media prompt at the physical location.
- Create a campaign asking followers, “How are you Sylvan Lake brilliant?” to create a visual articulation of how others define Sylvan Lake’s brilliance. This works for engaging both residents and visitors.
- Partner with aligned or complementary businesses in Red Deer, such as Pursuit Adventures, to create a social media contest. For example, by following the Visit Sylvan Lake and Pursuit Adventure platforms and tagging 1 friend in the comments section of the post, the individual is entered into a draw to win 2 tickets to an upcoming event in Sylvan Lake.

Budget: **This is a key area of investment for the Strategy.**
\$5,000 for selfie props, business signage, and prompts.

Facilitated workshops

As a way to open and encourage communication and collaboration between the Town and businesses, a facilitated workshop will be organized annually to generate ideas and field concerns about becoming a year-round destination while obtaining feedback for how to enhance the destination. It will also provide an opportunity to learn more about the businesses—their needs, challenges, and goals—as well as communicate the previous year’s tourism highlights and statistics such as new offerings, number of visitors per season, impact on Sylvan Lake’s economy, and success stories.

This evening workshop will occur at the beginning of the shoulder season (September or October) and will be run by an outside consultant who will facilitate the workshop and generate a report of the findings to be shared back with the group and incorporated into the next fiscal year.

Budget: \$3,750 for workshop preparation, facilitation, and written report

Establish an online business newsletter

Currently, there is no formal method of communication between the Town and tourism businesses. While there is a monthly newsletter owned by the Sylvan Lake Chamber of Commerce, which disseminates event information to past and present members and other businesses, the Town does not supply content and has no influence over the running of this communication platform.

To establish frequent and clear communications with businesses and build awareness of the tourism community and its impact, develop a quarterly online newsletter. This medium will be used to communicate to the business community year-round and disseminate information, including:

- Travel reviews, visitor insights and statistics, tourism-specific research findings.
- Year-round positioning and strategies.
- How to access and use photo and video assets.

- The Town of Sylvan Lake's brand and tone of voice, and the importance of creating consistency destination-wide.
- Customer service best practices and training opportunities.
- Collaboration opportunities.
- Travel Alberta programs made available for local businesses.
- A comprehensive printable event calendar (Town and business events) that business owners can post and use to inform staff.

To encourage the business community to engage and remain open in the shoulder season, it will be important to regularly track spending and visitor data in the shoulder season and share those insights through this channel.

Consideration will need to be made over how to coordinate with the Chamber of Commerce newsletter. A separate CRM system will need to be developed to manage and keep track of contacts.

Budget: \$25 per month for MailChimp subscription.

PHASE 2: SEASONAL PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

To become a market-ready, year-round destination, there needs to be ample experiences available across all seasons for visitors. While five winter experiences have been created through the 2019 Travel Alberta SHiFT program and 10 new shoulder season events and festivals developed by the Town, additional experiences are recommended.

Short-Term Considerations

Experiential & complementary products

Developing products to create a well-rounded shoulder season experience for visitors is threefold. Develop opportunities for visitors to rent gear and equipment in town. This includes snowshoes, cross country skis, and skates. This might be a seasonal extension for a business that rents summer equipment, offered through the Nexsource Centre by the municipality, or even offered by accommodations in town providing guests with equipment to complement their stay.

Next, experiential products need to be developed. These are prepared tours and experiences for visitors to do themselves or with a guide. While CATA is in the process of implementing a Trails Tourism Plan, which identifies 5-8 signature trail tourism experiences within Central Alberta, as well as building out their website with pre-made themed and seasonal itineraries, it will be important for the Town to also build their own experiences and itineraries, with greater attention placed on the shoulder season.

Examples of experiential products:

- A guided, accessible snowshoeing excursion along the lake in the evening to experience the numinous and expansive prairie sky at night. This excursion will take visitors away from the town and motorized vehicles and into nature. Snowshoe rentals are available for rent in town or through the tour. An additional add-on to this experience could be a stop at the Sylvan Steam & Spa to warm-up, or a warm meal at a restaurant in town.
- Prepared self-guided tours, travel ideas, and itineraries for visitors. Information on where to rent equipment, what to bring, directions, and interesting facts could be included. Focus on hiking, snowshoeing, skating, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling in and around Sylvan Lake. The primary focus for product development is providing visitors with an unforgettable experience, therefore, it will be beneficial to feature offerings both within the town borders and beyond. For

example, day-trips could promote activities and trails that extend beyond town boundaries and then guide travelers back to town in the evening for a warm meal, comfortable stay, vibrant nightlife, or a community gathering like an event or festival. These itineraries would live on the Town's tourism website with optional PDF downloads, so visitors can print or access them on their mobile devices. Businesses should be educated on these offerings, including accommodations, so they can direct and speak to them should visitors inquire about things to do during their visit.

Lastly, since outdoor activities around or on the lake are the biggest draw for visitors, having complementary products and services that balance the cold by incorporating something warm will be appealing, and provides an opportunity to extend the seasonal positioning. In the shoulder season, encourage visitors to spend the day outside on the lake and then come inside in the evening to warm up. These complementary experiences could also tie into Sylvan Lake's history.

Examples of complementary shoulder season products:

- With the majority of overnight visitors in the summer preferring to stay at campgrounds, and Central Alberta travelers' general interest in camping, develop a unique shoulder season accommodation to feed this interest. Make camping a year-round experience. Working with the campgrounds around Sylvan Lake, or making use of other available land, develop 'glamping' huts near the edge of the lake to provide an experiential, outdoor experience while remaining consistent with the image of comfort and warmth that the town provides.
- Encourage local restaurants to collaborate with and source ingredients from nearby farms and local food artisans, celebrating and featuring the agricultural bounty of Central Alberta.
- When the weather is expected to reach a warmer temperature, encourage every restaurant and bar along Lakeshore Drive to open their patio.
- Play on Sylvan Lake's unique history of steam baths.
- Taking inspiration from Container Bar in Calgary, encourage a business to open a year-round container bar along the lake that features warm alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and locally-made snacks. When the weather is expected to reach a warmer temperature (let's be honest, anything above zero degrees Celsius for Canadians is considered patio weather), the container bar opens for a pop-up patio experience.

In order to identify which experiential and complementary products are feasible, conduct a feasibility study. Hire a consultant or engage a university student to complete.

Budget: Variable. Depends the product developed.
Feasibility study
Consultant: \$5,000 - \$10,000 (depends on number of products studied)
University student: \$2,000

Amplifying shoulder season events and festivals

The Town of Sylvan Lake has made events and festivals a primary focus in the shoulder season. However, a good portion of these offerings are primarily resident-focused. Develop a signature shoulder season event or festival that is visitor-focused and leverages the seasonal positioning.

Examples:

- Host a weekend food festival celebrating the agricultural bounty and culinary innovators of Central Alberta. A special farmers market could feature local farmers and food and beverage artisans from across Central Alberta. Local restaurants could be encouraged to

participate by sourcing local ingredients and food products to create a special feature dish over the weekend. Participants would be encouraged to try as many special dishes as possible. To close the event, partner with Dinner4Four to bring their outdoor dining experience to Sylvan Lake—guests dine on a 4-course meal in weather-protective, heated igloos, directly on the lake. This partnership with Dinner4Four could extend beyond the weekend and be hosted in Sylvan Lake over the course of one month.

- Taking inspiration from Festibar at Festival du Voyageur in Winnipeg, have an outdoor pop-up ice bar that is made of ice and offers drinks in ice glasses. This could pop-up multiple times during the shoulder season.
- The Jazz At The Lake Festival is successful in the summer and is an ode to Sylvan Lake's unique and rich history of big bands and dance halls. Look at expanding the festival into the shoulder season, bringing in artists over one weekend to play at various venues throughout town. Host a concert outside in the winter village using the town's new portable stage. Imagine the Red Deer Philharmonic Orchestra playing outside next to the frozen lake, while it's snowing. As a long-term strategy, consider investing in building a replica of Varsity Hall. This would provide much needed infrastructure while giving the festival a home, bringing back Sylvan Lake's lost heritage, and generating a sense of nostalgia within the town and across the province. The public relations opportunities with the resurrection of Varsity Hall and its history would be substantial. The space could also entice touring musicians to stop in Sylvan Lake and play at the venue year-round.
- Partner with Alberta Beer Festivals, Alberta Small Brewers Association, and/or Alberta Craft Distillers Association to bring a festival to town that celebrates breweries and distilleries in the Central Alberta Region. Provide enthusiasts from urban centers the ability to meet and sample smaller brewers they may never have heard of, all in one place. Activities could include intimate panel discussions, product tastings, tours to nearby breweries, and restaurants creating dishes inspired by and incorporating beers of the region.

When creating events and festivals, consideration should be had over leveraging existing and new partners who have the followers, reach, interest, and influence within regional markets. This will provide beneficial cross-promotional opportunities when going to market, reaching their customer base and drawing them to Sylvan Lake.

Budget: Variable. Depends on festival/event and partnership opportunities.

Long-Term Considerations

Central Alberta Trail (or Prairie Towns)

Like other Central Alberta towns, Sylvan Lake is challenged by a lack of shoulder season visitation and lack of awareness of its offerings. As Central Alberta provides a diverse range of experiences, more than any other region in Alberta, partnering with other Central Alberta destinations would provide visitors with a well-rounded, diverse experience that not only benefits the visitor but also the destinations.

Using Cool Little Towns in Southern Alberta as inspiration, present a partnership opportunity to Rocky Mountain House, Nordegg, Lacombe, and Blackfalds to create a 4-hour driving route that takes travelers through multiple Central Alberta landscapes, with each destination offering different types of experiences and attractions including those related to history, agriculture, and nature.

Develop seasonal itineraries, with different themes and driving times, for visitors to do along the trail, including an additional detour to Abraham Lake to experience the frozen methane bubbles in the winter. Identify scenic stops for fall colours and spring buds.

Develop a website where these itineraries will live, and which will also include an introduction to each town and promotion of events. Social media platforms can be created.

Apply for Travel Alberta's Cooperative Funding Partnership Marketing Program to receive funding and provincial support.

While Nordegg and Rocky Mountain House have already partnered to create David Thompson County, that partnership only provides one type of experience to a visitor—a rugged, backcountry excursion “for those who dare to explore” (David Thompson County, 2019), whereas this provides the visitor with a complete and accessible Central Alberta experience.

This tactic is aligned with an action item in CATA's Destination Management Plan around creating themed touring routes within Central Alberta. Recommend the trail to CATA as a way to integrate and showcase the diversity of the region.

Budget: \$20,000+/-

Engage & partner with regional tour operators

Continue to reach out to and engage with tour operators, such as Pursuit Adventures in Red Deer, to facilitate discussions around what needs to be developed in Sylvan Lake to become an attractive year-round destination for tours.

From the research, there is great interest from tour operators to partner with the Town, however there isn't the infrastructure, policies, or products in place to make it feasible. Building collaborative relationships with these important tourism groups will not only assist in ideation for destination development but will open the Town to opportunities for reaching those desirable long-haul Free Spirit travellers in the long-run.

Budget: Labor only

PHASE 3: OPEN YEAR-ROUND

Once the foundational pieces from the first two phases are in place and Sylvan Lake is market-ready as a year-round destination, implement internal and external campaign efforts.

Advertising

To support the launch of Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination and given limited budgets, a digital marketing focus is recommended to make the most impact and generate the greatest reach. This includes earned and paid media focused on the Calgary and Edmonton populations, with consideration made to Red Deer.

Earned media

It is highly recommended that this work be outsourced to an integrated marketing agency who already have the contacts and built relationships with influencers and who intimately understand the intricacies of this approach to be able to get this going right away and create the most impact with the greatest success. The hired Tourism Marketing & Product Development Coordinator would be the internal project manager working directly with the selected agency.

Earned media tactics to be run seasonally:

1. Engaging micro-influencers in Calgary, Edmonton, and Red Deer.
Micro-influencers are everyday people with a decent following (over 3,000 followers) on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, with a particular passion or niche.

Run one micro-influencer campaign per season (four total), with each campaign host to a minimum of four individuals (two from Edmonton and two from Calgary; consider an additional one from Red Deer) to experience Sylvan Lake. The curated itinerary will include exploration of experiences in-destination as well as sharing the journey to get there, being sure to highlight key messages such as ease of access and town on a lake. Primary and secondary demographic groups will be engaged, such as family travelers, mature travelers, adventurers, and millennials.

Outcomes from campaigns include editorial stories in traditional and digital media, blog posts, shareable social content (posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Instagram Stories, Facebook Live), inclusion of UTM weblinks to track conversion, and acquisition of video and photo assets for future marketing efforts.

For influencers that are scheduled to visit, develop a 'Sylvan Lake in a Box.' This package is left in their hotel room to give them a sense of the destination, guide their experience, and provide suggestions for things to do. It can include coupons for a restaurant or iconic seasonal experience, as well as samples of local products. The items in the box should be complementary to the season of their visit.

Opportunities to collaborate with other Central Alberta destinations and Travel Alberta to create new, and join existing, influencer trips in the region. This will allow for cost sharing.

2. Blogger in residence
Invite bloggers to Sylvan Lake for a short period of time and provide them with 3-4 topics to write about during their stay. This provides content for the tourism website blog as well as exposure through the bloggers website and social media channels.

There is an opportunity, while the Town is building its shoulder season offerings, to begin running these earned media tactics. This will create engagement and momentum for when the Town is ready to market itself year-round.

Budget: **This is a key area of investment for the Strategy.**
\$3,000 - \$4,000 per seasonal campaign
\$500 - \$750 per micro-influencer (variable, dependent on influencer. Many will visit the destination in exchange for coverage of hard costs and a gas card).

Paid media

1. Retargeting advertising.
This is a tactic to reach those individuals who have shown interest in Sylvan Lake or Central Alberta.

When someone in Edmonton and Calgary visits Sylvan Lake's or Central Alberta's tourism websites, an advertisement for Sylvan Lake will appear for them on Facebook and Instagram. This retargeting is done through Google AdWords. The advertisement will further encourage

them to visit. It will feature new assets (video or still) and change seasonally, highlighting the seasonal brand articulation.

Depending on the experience of the Tourism Marketing & Product Development Coordinator, consideration should be made to outsourcing this work to the same agency, given the intricacies of this approach.

Budget: This is a key area of investment for the Strategy.

Outsourcing to an agency:

Google AdWords: \$4,000 - \$6,000 per month for optimal outcomes

Set-up and ongoing maintenance: \$125 per hour (22 to 30 hours required for set-up)

Business campaign: Collaboration campaign

This is a tactic to demonstrate, through tangible results, that the Town can offer value and be in service to businesses, and that collaboration amongst businesses makes a positive difference. It is also designed to deepen visitor relationships and support their in-destination experience.

A pilot program will be implemented over a 12-month period with five highly-engaged, complementary, year-round tourism businesses approached to participate. Ideally, the group of businesses should represent all areas of a visitor experience, including accommodation, dining, retail, and experience. The 12-month duration of the program will provide insights and learning opportunities based on season.

Each business selects up to three outstanding employees to be their Ambassador(s). This role involves engaging with visitors and identifying those that may benefit from other pilot businesses' goods or services. For example, if a hotel guest is hungry, the Ambassador could refer him/her to a pilot restaurant, recommend their favourite dish, and offer them a coupon to receive a discount towards their first visit. A discount of at least 10% is recommended.

Ambassadors will be required to attend a training day, which includes a bus tour to each of the participating businesses so they can learn more about and experience the business firsthand. They will also learn about Sylvan Lake to generate greater knowledge of the town and its overall offerings as a year-round destination. Quarterly rewards and recognition will be provided to Ambassadors with high performance.

Pilot businesses will be expected to provide monthly reporting on the program. For each coupon, reporting should include total sale amount, if the customer was new or returning, if the customer was a resident or visitor, and which Ambassador made the referral. This reporting will be tracked over the course of the program, with updates provided to participating businesses quarterly. After 12 months, the program will be refined based on the reporting and discussions with pilot businesses, and then rolled out to other businesses.

Marketing support will be provided to pilot businesses including:

- Assistance with website development
- Amplification of news and events through tourism social media channels
- Printed coupons

Recognizing that residents are not as engaged with local businesses, there is an opportunity to open this campaign up to residents after the pilot, providing them with opportunities to try a businesses' good or service at a discounted rate and then sharing their experience with friends and family.

Budget: This is a key area of investment for the Strategy.
\$5,000 including printed coupons, training hard costs, and Ambassador incentives

Resident campaign: Ultimate Sylvan Lake Host/ess

To generate excitement within the town for the shoulder season and welcome visitors, run a town-wide campaign encouraging permanent and seasonal residents to invite and host their friends and families from out of town. As hosts, residents are encouraged to explore all that Sylvan Lake has to offer in the shoulder season with their guests, and then share their experiences through social media using a special hashtag.

The Town would actively engage with posts and re-share stories on their platforms. A resident influencer, such as Mayor Sean McIntyre, could take over the Town's municipal and tourism Instagram platforms and, through Stories, showcase a day touring around Sylvan Lake in the winter with friends and family from out of town. Not only will it remind residents to continue to host visitors, but it will generate interest regionally. At the end of winter, one resident who welcomes the most guests and engages with the town will be crowned Sylvan Lake's Ultimate Host/ess.

Promotions will start in September with the campaign formally kicking off in October and running through to April. A wrap-up event at the end of April will be held to crown Sylvan Lake's Ultimate Host/ess and signal the end of the winter season. An article will be written in the Sylvan Lake News about the winner and their experience.

Communications will run for the duration of the campaign, both online (i.e. Town website) and through print sources in town (i.e. Sylvan Lake News, posters, direct mail), to remind residents and maintain campaign momentum.

Budget: \$14,500+/- blanketed direct mail campaign to 14,900 residents
\$5,000 - \$10,000 for wrap-up event. Opportunity to sell tickets and engage partners to cover some costs.

Visitor newsletter

As a way to push event information out to visitors, create a monthly, visitor-focused 'Brilliantly Sylvan Lake' newsletter. Visitors sign-up through the tourism website and are provided with an incentive upon subscription, such as a 10% off discount to a restaurant or experience. The incentive will change quarterly, providing businesses with an opportunity to be featured.

Each month, subscribers receive information on upcoming events run by the Town and local businesses with links to the tourism website for ticket purchasing. The platform could be extended over time to incorporate more content topics such as features on local businesses, social campaign integration, or a featured blog post chronically a visitor's seasonal experience.

Local businesses and their employees should be educated on this tactic so they can recommend visitors subscribe to the newsletter to stay current on what's being offered throughout the year. The platform should also be promoted through tourism social media channels.

Recommended Activity Plan

	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3
PHASE 1: DEVELOPING THE FOUNDATION			
Hire full-time marketing support	X		
Positioning 'Brilliant All Year'	X		
Shoulder season asset development	X		
Tourism website	X		
Web presence	X		
Social media presence	X		
Facilitated workshops	X		
Establish an online business newsletter		X	
PHASE 2: SEASONAL PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT			
Experiential & complementary products		X	
Amplifying shoulder season events & festival		X	
Central Alberta Trail (or Prairie Towns)			
Engage & partner with regional tour operators			
PHASE 3: OPEN YEAR-ROUND			
Advertising: earned and paid media		X	
Business campaign: Collaboration Campaign			X
Resident campaign: Ultimate Sylvan Lake Host/ess			X
Visitor newsletter		X	

Outcomes + Performance Indicators

<p>Increase regional visits to, and spending in, Sylvan Lake in the shoulder seasons, with summer visitation sustained.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total visits • Occupancy rates • Revenue per available room (RevPAR)
<p>Increase awareness of Sylvan Lake as a year-round destination within Alberta.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency in which Sylvan Lake is featured in organic social media traffic • Tourism related social media sentiment • Net Promoter Score – visitor satisfaction rate
<p>An aligned and unified tourism community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in partnerships, participation, and support from tourism businesses • Degree of business owner satisfaction with tourism
<p>Product development to support and distinguish Sylvan Lake from other Alberta destinations in the winter.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the number of tourism businesses • Number of market-ready experiences
<p>Increased level of engagement and activity of both permanent and seasonal residents in Sylvan Lake.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of resident satisfaction with tourism • Number of visitors visiting local friends and family • Number of participants for resident campaign