

Assessment Findings  
& Suggestions  
June 2007



# Claresholm, Alberta



## INTRODUCTION

### First impressions and some ideas to increase tourism spending

In June of 2007, a Community Tourism Assessment of Claresholm, Alberta was conducted, and the findings were presented in a two-hour workshop. The assessment provides an unbiased overview of the community – how it is seen by a visitor. It includes a review of local marketing efforts, signs, attractions, critical mass, retail mix, ease of getting around, customer service, visitor amenities such as parking and public wash rooms, overall appeal, and the community's ability to attract overnight visitors.

In performing the “Community Assessment,” we looked at the area through the eyes of a first-time visitor. No prior research was facilitated, and no community representatives were contacted except to set up the project, and the town and surrounding area were “secretly shopped.”

There are two primary elements to the assessment process: First is the “Marketing Effectiveness Assessment.”

How easy is it for potential visitors to find information about the community or area? Once they find information, are your marketing materials good enough to close the sale? In the Marketing Effectiveness Assessment, we assigned two (or more) people to plan trips into the general region. They did not know, in advance, who the assessment was for. They used whatever resources they would typically use in planning a trip: travel guides, brochures, the internet, calling visitor information centers, review of marketing materials, etc. - just as you might do in planning a trip to a “new” area or destination.

The community has five opportunities to close the sale:

- 1) Personal contact (visitor information centers, trade shows)
- 2) Websites
- 3) Brochures and printed materials
- 4) Publicity (articles)
- 5) Word of mouth - the most effective means

We tested all of these methods by contacting area visitor information services and attractions, searching the internet for activities, requesting and reviewing printed materials, looking for articles and third-party information, and questioning regional contacts. We reviewed both commercial and organizational Websites promoting the area, state tourism Websites, read travel articles, and looked at CAA and AAA Tour Book reviews and suggested activities.

The marketing assessment determined how visible the community was during the research, and how effective the marketing was in convincing a potential visitor that the community would be worth a special trip, a stop, or an overnight stay. The key to the marketing assessment is to see if you have a primary lure that makes you worth a special trip. The question on most



visitors' mind is: what do you have that I can not get closer to home? What makes you worth a special trip?

Where most communities fail is when they merely provide a “list” of what the community has, whether it's truly “unique” or not. Nearly every community in North America promotes the usual list of diversions: local museums, unique shops and restaurants, plenty of lodging, golf, outdoor recreation (bird watching, hiking, biking, and boating), historic downtowns, scenic vistas, and so on. Of course, nearly every visitor can do this closer to home. So, what makes your community worth a special trip?

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Always promote your primary lure first - what makes you worth that special trip, then your diversionary activities. Would you go to Anaheim, California, if Disneyland wasn't there? Do you think that Universal Studios and Knott's Berry Farm get upset that Disneyland gets all the glory? That they are diversions? Of course not. Eighty percent of all tourism spending is with diversionary activities. Disney does the heavy lifting in terms of advertising and promotion, and the diversionary activities ride on those coattails.

In a nutshell, the Marketing Effectiveness Assessment looks for things that make you worth a special trip and an overnight stay. The secret shoppers look for details, details and more details. To be successful you must provide itineraries and specifics - not just generalities. Are your marketing efforts good enough to close the sale?

The second part of the assessment process is the On-site Assessment. During this part of the assessment, we spent several days in the community, looking at enticement from freeways and highways (signs, billboards, something that would get a visitor to stop), beautification and overall curb appeal, wayfinding (ease of getting around), visitor amenities (public wash rooms, visitor information, parking), activities, overall appeal, retail mix (lodging, dining, shopping), critical mass, customer service, area attractions, pedestrian friendliness, gathering spaces, evening activities, and the availability of marketing materials and their effectiveness.

The community benefits from tourism when visitors spend money, and they do that in the local gift shops, restaurants and hotels. Therefore, the On-site Assessment includes a candid look at private businesses as much as public spaces and amenities.

For every shortcoming or challenge we note during the assessment process, we provide a low-cost "suggestion," where possible, on how the challenge can be corrected or overcome. The suggestions are not termed "recommendations," as they were developed without consulting the community first about possible restraints, future plans, or reasons the suggestions may not be appropriate. Hopefully, this assessment process will open dialogue within the community; leading it to adopt some or all of the suggestions; taking them from suggestions to recommendations.

It is important to note that to increase the community's tourism industry, fulfilling one or two of the suggestions may have little impact. Implementing a number of them, if not all, can have a profoundly successful impact on the community's ability to tap into the tourism industry.

Implementation of these suggestions must be a community-wide effort, involving both privately owned businesses as well as local, county, and state agencies, where appropriate. Every local organization plays a role in tourism, downtown revitalization, or economic development efforts. A Destination

Marketing Organization (DMO, CVB, Chamber, TPA, etc.) can not be successful, if the tourism effort is not community-wide.

In many cases, issues may come up that you are already aware of and are already working on. In that case, the assessment validates those efforts. But more often than not, the assessment will point out things that you are painfully aware of but can not mention or bring up without paying a political price. Local politics can be a killer of the tourism industry.

While marketing efforts are important, product development is the most important factor of a successful tourism industry. Visitors want activities, not just things to look at. How much time can a visitor spend enjoying activities that cater to their interests within your community? Does your community have truly unique attractions the visitor can not get closer to home? You must be able to deliver on your marketing promises. Otherwise visitors might come once, but they would not come back. It is much more cost effective to bring people back, than to always go out and entice new visitors into town. "Been there, done that" communities eventually run out of visitors and find they do not have a sustainable tourism industry, or simply become pit stops or gateways on the way to somewhere else.

After spending several days reviewing marketing materials and assessing the community, we have looked at all of these issues, developed some suggestions and ideas the community can discuss and possibly implement to help increase tourism spending locally.

### SUCCESSFUL TOURISM TRANSLATES TO CASH

Tourism is successful when the community imports more cash than it exports. When residents spend their hard-earned money outside the community, the community is exporting cash - often referred to as "leakage." Tourism helps fill that gap, importing cash into the local economy without the necessity of having to provide extended social and other services. Visitors come, spend money, then go home. When you import more cash than you export, you have a positive "balance of trade." Communities with successful tourism programs easily see that the industry subsidizes the community, whereas other communities find that they subsidize visitors - providing services visitors use without them leaving enough money behind to cover the costs.

The primary goal of the tourism industry is to bring more cash into the local economy. This does not happen when visitors come into the community, get out of their cars, and take photographs. And it does not happen when visitors go swimming in your city's lake while sunning, and eating the lunch they brought from home. And it does not happen when visitors hike down your trails, enjoy your interpretive centers, or stroll through



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your lovely arboretums. These are all great things to do, and you do want your visitors to do these – but, you also want to entice them into your shops, your cafés, espresso stands, restaurants, galleries, B&B's, hotels, and ultimately opening their wallets to make purchases. That is what helps your local economy, your small merchants, your hoteliers, and your tax coffers.

To entice visitors to spend money in your community, you need to have places for them to spend it. You need to have the right mix of shops, restaurants, entertainment, and lodging facilities in an attractive setting. You want to give them reason to visit you in the first place.

### THE THREE TYPES OF TOURISM

#### 1. Visiting friends and family

The number one purpose for travel is to visit friends and/or family. If you did nothing to promote tourism, you would still have tourism in your community. However, when friends and family come to visit, do local residents take them out to eat, shop, dine locally? Or do they head to a neighboring community? Do your locals even know what you have to offer? An effective tourism marketing effort also includes educating locals as to what you have and how to find it through effective wayfinding signs, gateways and advertising.

#### 2. Business travel

The second most popular reason for travel is business. Included in this category is educational travel: colleges and universities, conventions and meetings, corporate travel and vendor travel. Like leisure travelers, this group is looking for things to do “after hours” while in the area. The most successful convention and trade show towns are the result of their secondary activities or “diversions,” not because of their convention and exhibition facilities. DisneyWorld, Disneyland, San Antonio's River Walk are great examples.

#### 3. Leisure travel

The third, and most lucrative type of visitor, is the leisure traveler. They have no personal connections to the community, but are coming purely to enjoy themselves. They stay in commercial lodging establishments, eat virtually all their meals in local restaurants, and their top diversionary activity is shopping and dining in a pedestrian-friendly setting.

The average leisure visitor is active 14 hours a day, yet typically only spends four to six hours with the primary lure. They then spend eight to ten hours with diversionary activities - things they could do closer to home, but will do while in the area. A good example of this is Branson, Missouri, the “live music-theater capital of the world.” This town of 6,500 residents hosts 7.5 million visitors a year. The primary “lure” is the 49 music theaters. The aver-

age visitor attends two shows a day for a total of four hours. During the other ten hours, the visitor will participate in any number of other activities they could do closer to home, but will do while visiting Branson.

### THE THREE STAGES OF TOURISM

#### 1. Status quo

If you take no action to develop the tourism industry, you will still have an element of tourism, simply because some travelers will pull off local highways or freeways for services, but the number one reason for travel is to visit friends or family. If you have residents, you will have some tourism.

#### 2. Getting people to stop

The first priority of developing a successful tourism industry is getting people to stop. Imagine how successful businesses in the community would be if just 50 percent of the vehicles traveling through pulled off the highway for gas and spent an extra 30 minutes getting ice cream for the family?

If there is a strong pull, imagine the money spent by folks staying two hours; extra time spent (always) translates to additional spending.

The first goal is to get those travelers to stop.

#### 3. Becoming the destination

To become a destination community, you must have attractions and supporting amenities that convince visitors to spend the night. Those attractions must be different from what the visitor can get closer to home.

Overnight visitors spend three times that of day visitors, and nearly ten times that of visitors using your community as a pit stop on the way to somewhere else.

### THE FOUR-TIMES RULE

Visitors will make a point of stopping or staying in a community, when there are enough activities that appeal specifically to them. And remember - you need enough activities to keep them busy four times longer than the length of their trip.

In other words, if a person has to drive 15 minutes to visit you, do you have enough for them to do to keep them busy for an hour? (4 times 15 minutes). If a visitor has to drive an hour, do you have the activities and amenities to keep them busy for four hours?

The more you have to offer, the further visitors will come, and the longer they will stay and spend. This is why it is so important for communities to

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market more than just their immediate geographic areas. By marketing neighboring activities and attractions, you present much more for a visitor to do, and you make the visit worth the trip.

Visitors don't care about city limits or county lines – so market the broader package and you will be able to keep people in the area long enough to translate to another meal, some more shopping, and hopefully, an overnight stay.

### SELL THE EXPERIENCE, NOT GEOGRAPHY

Nearly every destination marketing organization is charged with promoting a geographic area, yet visitors could not care less about those boundaries. They are looking for activities that cater to their interests, and location is second to the experience. ALWAYS promote the primary lure first, then the location. If I want to go see Andy Williams, I do not care whether he is in Muskogee, Oklahoma or in Branson, Missouri. Visitors, by the millions, head to Disneyland, DisneyWorld, Dollywood and other attractions. They are not going to Anaheim, Orlando or Pigeon Forge.

Always sell the activity or the experience and then the location.

### LURES, DIVERSIONS AND AMBIANCE

Too often communities promote the list of diversions that nearly every community has. The primary lure is the activity that a visitor can not find closer to home.

Always promote your primary lure, then the diversions. Do not try to be all things to all people. Have you ever gone anywhere because they had "something for everyone?" Of course not - you go there because they have something specific for you. Find your niche and promote it like crazy.

Historic downtowns provide ambiance. They are not attractions, diversions, nor are they a primary lure. What is in the buildings makes a downtown a destination.

The same can be said for scenery. Unless your vista is a world-class scene, such as Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon, scenic vistas create wonderful ambiance. They do not translate to spending, and they only last a few minutes. Then what?



All too often communities promote their heritage as a primary draw. How far would you travel to visit a mining museum? A timber museum? An agricultural center? A county historical museum? Heritage must be outstanding and pervasive throughout the community to be a primary lure, such as Plymouth Plantation or Salem, Massachusetts.

Thousands of communities are the "capitol" of something. For instance, in California, Borrego Springs is the grapefruit capitol of the world. Gilroy is the garlic capitol. Modesto is the tomato capitol. Gridley is the kiwi capitol. Oxnard is the strawberry capitol. Fallbrook is the avocado capitol. But here is the question: Have you ever gone anywhere because it was the capitol of a fruit or a vegetable?

Your local heritage is important to the community and can set the ambiance, even becoming a diversionary activity. But to the vast majority of potential visitors, it is not a reason to make a special trip.

### BE DIFFERENT OR THE BEST

Why should a visitor come to your community, if they can enjoy the same activities closer to home? Too many communities promote "outdoor recreation" as their primary draw. Unfortunately, that is the same attraction



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promoted by nearly every community in North America.

If you are different, then you have a reason for travelers to choose to visit you. If you are the best, then visitors will generally flock to your doors.

If you have great hiking trails, then market their unique qualities. Be specific and paint the image of how wonderful they are in the minds of your potential visitors. If you have one fantastic restaurant in town, let people know about it – a unique dining experience is something many people will travel far to enjoy.



Ashland, Oregon, previously a depressed timber town, began a Shakespeare Festival. It now runs nine months of the year and draws hundreds of thousands of visitors who spend an average of six nights in the community. The Shakespeare Festival made Ashland different from any other community.

Leavenworth, Washington, another dying timber town, adopted a Bavarian architectural theme and produces dozens of Bavarian events every year. Some now say the town looks more genuinely Bavarian than towns in Bavaria. It is now one of the primary tourist destinations in Washington state, hosting more than 2.5 million visitors annually. They offer a different experience, an experience that is pervasive throughout town.

Okanogan County, Washington is an outdoor recreational paradise – just like 37 of the 38 other counties in Washington. So why go to the Okanogan? Because they are the best. They researched guidebooks, newspaper and magazine articles, and pulled quotes they could use in their advertising efforts.

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Like, “Pinch yourself, you’re in Okanogan Country with perhaps the best cross country skiing on the continent.” This, and other quotes like it, make it worth the drive to visit Okanogan Country. The third-party endorsements show that they are the best.

Set yourself apart from everyone else, and you’ll see that in being unique, you will become a greater attraction.

### CRITICAL MASS MEANS CASH

Although it may not be the primary reason why visitors come to your community, shopping and dining in a pedestrian setting is the number one activity of visitors. Besides lodging, it is where visitors spend the most amount of money.

Do you have a pedestrian-friendly shopping district? If not, can you create one?

Many communities have been highly successful with the development of a two or three block long pedestrian “village” including visitor-oriented retail shops, dining, visitor information and wash rooms, — all in an attractive, landscaped setting.

The general rule of thumb in those two or three blocks (not spread out all over town) is 10+10+10. You start with ten destination retail shops, which includes: galleries, antiques, collectibles, home accents and furnishings, artists in action, book stores, logo gear (clothing), souvenirs, outfitters, tour operators, activity shops such as kites, jewelry, wine or tobacco shops, and other specialties. The second ten is for food: ice cream, fudge and candy stores, soda fountains, sit-down dining, coffee shops, cafés, bistros, delis and the like. And the final ten are businesses open after 6:00 PM: bars, dance clubs, theaters (movies and performing), retail shops with activities (piano bar in a wine shop) and other evening entertainment.

The important point is to group these businesses together to create the “critical mass” in a pedestrian-friendly setting. This will attract visitors and locals, making it worth their while to stop and shop. People are always drawn to critical mass – the opportunity to have multiple choices and multiple experiences in a convenient and attractive setting.



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### TOURISM IS AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

The goal to successful tourism is for folks to come into the community, spend money and go home. Tourism is nearly a \$650 billion dollar industry in the U.S., supporting millions of jobs. Ninety percent of tourism industry businesses are small businesses of which 90 percent have less than 15 employees. Tourism provides the opportunity for entrepreneurs to get started, for small family-run businesses to thrive, for artisans and craftspeople to find a market, and creates a basis for unique niche-retail environment including wineries, artists and crafts. Tourism provides a diverse market within the community, expanding its potential. Enhancing the community through beautification efforts creates an attractive setting for both locals and visitors — key in revitalizing a community's downtown. A tourism-friendly town will attract non-tourism industries faster than others. New businesses will see the community as a visitor before they make a final determination about the community. Tourism is the front door to your economic development efforts.

The benefits of a healthy tourism industry can rejuvenate a town, foster community pride, encourage economic diversity, and lead the way to a vital, successful community.

### NEXT STEPS

The findings and suggestions in this report can provide your community with many ideas, strategies, and goals to reach for. We hope that it fosters dialogue in the community and becomes a springboard for the community in enhancing its tourism industry, leading to greater prosperity, rejuvenation, and enjoyment by all the citizens.

This report offers a first step in reaching that goal. To fully realize the benefits of this assessment, the community should take these findings and suggestions, discuss them and evaluate them, and develop a plan for implementation.

A detailed "Community Branding, Development and Marketing Action Plan" builds on the results of this assessment, adding in-depth research, evaluation, and community input to develop a unique brand and implementation program. The assessment process essentially provides a look at where you are today.

The next steps in the planning process is interviewing local stakeholders, providing public outreach, and reviewing past and current planning efforts. This determines where you want to go as a community.

The third step involves research, feasibility and market analysis, and determining your brand - what you are or hope to be known for.

Then comes the "development" portion of the plan or the "how to get there" program; determining what product development initiatives need to be undertaken to reinforce and grow the brand. This also includes defining the roles of the various local organizations. Brand-building takes a village with everyone pulling in the same direction, each with a "to-do list."

Finally, there is the detailed marketing plan: how and when you will tell the world who you are and what makes you special: the place to live, work and play.

This Branding, Development and Marketing Plan should be an "action plan," as opposed to a "strategic plan." You want a to do list, by organization, not just general strategies, goals and objectives.

For every recommendation the following elements should be detailed:

1. A brief description of the recommendation
2. Who would be charged with implementation?
3. When it would be implemented?
4. How much it will cost?
5. Where the money will come from?
6. The rationale for making the recommendation

The recommendations should provide all the necessary steps for your community to be successful in attaining its goal of a more diverse economy with an enhanced tourism industry, becoming a more attractive and enjoyable community for both visitors and citizens.

If you move forward with the development of the Action Plan and hire outside services, always hire the most qualified team you can find (issue a request for Statement of Qualifications) and then negotiate the scope of work and cost. If you are not able to reach an agreement, then move to number two on your list. A good plan will get local residents and the business community pulling together to enhance the community, building its unique image in the minds of visitors and residents alike. The result of your efforts will be a prosperous, enjoyable environment to live, work and visit.

## First Impressions Really Are Lasting Impressions

### The Rule of Perceived Value

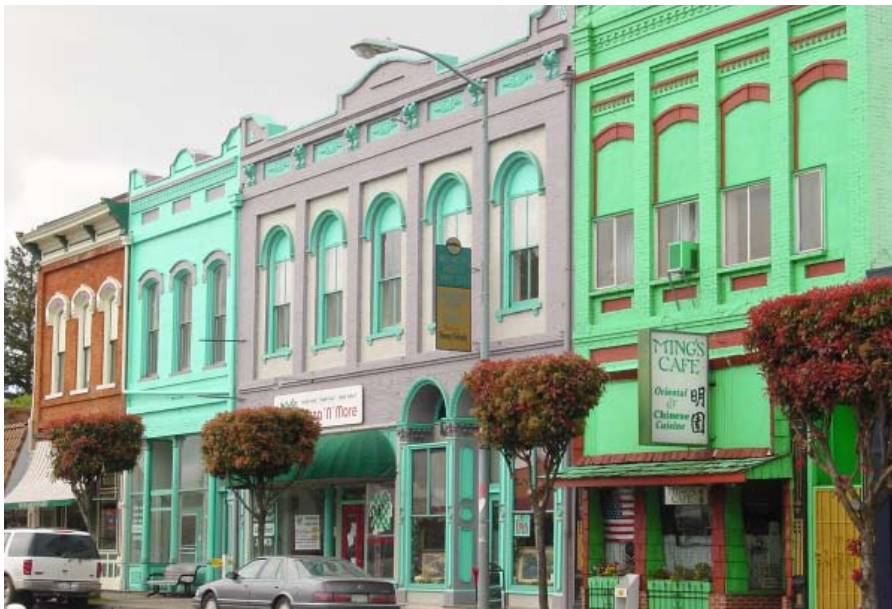
#### Suggestion:

We all make judgments about restaurants, shops, attractions, and communities based on our first impressions. We form our expectations based on what we first see since we have no other guide to help us make decisions on whether its a good place to eat, shop, stay or a great community worth visiting.

The moment visitors see your welcome signs, they begin to judge the quality of the community - they judge the book by the cover

What is your first impression of Lakeport (top right) when you see its gateway sign? The sign clutter, trash, and weeds don't create a very good first impression. And yet, the town is actually charming - see the two photos below. The sign sells the town short.

Just like residential subdivisions, your community gateways are a reflection of the community. They also create a sense of community pride. Always put your gateway signs where you will make the first, best impression.





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### Suggestion:

First impressions are very powerful. Would you eat at the restaurant shown in the above left photo? Probably not based on your first impression. It doesn't look clean, or even safe. And yet this barbecue located in Huntsville, TX, is one of the few that Gentleman's Quarterly Magazine says is one of the top ten restaurants in the world and one worth flying to.

Some communities make the mistake of allowing sign clutter at the entries (top right). Not only is it impossible for a traveler to read every sign, but it creates a very poor impression. What's your first impression of Ellensburg? They are going to replace this sign with one that says "Historic Shopping District - Ahead 2 miles." In essence, that says "Don't judge us yet, you still have two miles to go."

Quality entries state that you are a quality community, thereby increasing the perceived value of the area. The greater the perceived value, the more visitors will spend, and the longer they will stay.

Oroville, WA, built this very attractive monument sign right at the entrance to their small downtown core (bottom right) - not at their city limits. It creates a very good first impression.



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### Suggestion:

Consider changing these gateway signs to directional signs - to let travelers know they are almost to Claresholm, but not quite yet. The locations don't give a great first impression of the town.

Add "Frontier Square (or a name for downtown) - left 200 meters" beneath "Welcomes You" on the sign below left (and top left).

Add space below the sign (top right) to promote "downtown" or reasons to stop.

Always give visitors a reason to stop - and make sure it's specific, not generic like "unique shops & dining."





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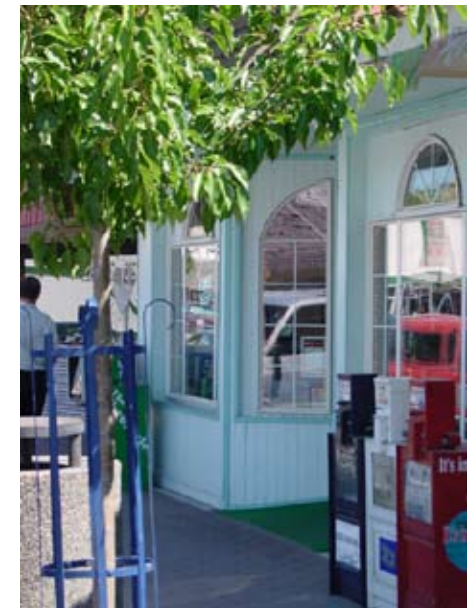
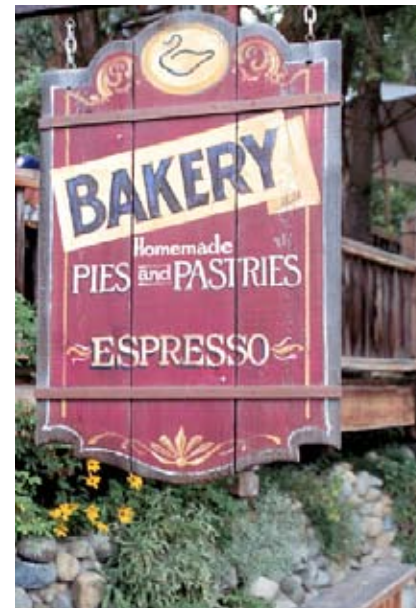
### First impressions:

From the sign (top left), Magoo's Family Dining doesn't have much appeal. But take a look at the restaurant's front entrance (bottom and top, far right). Most people aren't tempted to try Magoo's by looking at the sign, but the front of the building has a lot of appeal. Merchant signage is very important in helping to make the sale. Make sure your signs fit the image you are trying to portray.

Would you be tempted to eat at the restaurant in the bottom left photo? It has virtually no curb appeal. Imagine, though, if there were planter boxes filled with flowers all along the front of the building, hanging baskets from the eaves, shutters on the windows, and decorative signs out front. Those simple additions would add so much more appeal to this bland façade.

Are you tempted to try the Bakery advertised by the sign in the bottom center photo? It has a lot of appeal, and really helps entice customers into the store.

First impressions include the placement of community welcome signs, curb appeal of restaurants, hotels, and retail shops, signs and roadside beautification.





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### Suggestion:

Curb appeal can account for 70 percent of sales at restaurants, wineries, lodging, retail shops, and golf courses.

Overall first impressions of Claresholm were poor. Does nearly every building need to be brown or gray? Add some color! Along the highway there is virtually no landscaping, no greenery, poor signage, and no real lure to get passers-by to stop.

### Suggestion:

Consider instituting a façade improvement program to include signs, façades reconstruction or revitalization, and beautification. Just adding hanging baskets, planters, and benches would do a lot to make these facades more interesting and inviting.

Even the motel (bottom right) has little in the way of curb appeal. Also avoid the use of plastic banners whenever possible, except for special events or sales.



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### Suggestion:

Add appeal to your downtown storefronts with facade improvements. Give downtown more color and variety, with paint, awnings, hanging baskets, street trees, benches, etc., as the towns in these photos have done. Property and business owners need to take an active role in downtown enhancements.

The samples included on this page start with Nakusp, a small town located in central British Columbia (top left), Jackson, Wyoming (top right), and Lakeport, California (bottom left).

Claresholm has an “anchor tenant” in Frontier Saddles and might consider going with a western equestrian theme. Work with a university or an architectural school and have students come up with facade improvement ideas, including color schemes, that could be used to develop a “brand” or “theme” for Claresholm. Additionally, Claresholm can be the primary hub or gateway to the Cowboy Trail, a natural fit with Frontier.



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### Suggestion:

In the case of Sisters, Oregon (bottom left) a town of 1,100 residents, they developed a western facade that provided a nice overall theme with great appeal.

In Jackson, Wyoming, the “Home of Western Art” they made sure all facades were western in appearance (bottom right). This type of theme might work well for Claresholm, which currently has a mish mash of architectural styles and colors (top right) with little coordination.

Claresholm has a great opportunity to capture hundreds of thousands of visitors who pass through the community each year. But in order to do so, there needs to be a reason to stop and that starts with outstanding curb appeal followed by a good mix of “destination retail” businesses.





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### Suggestion:

Consider using trompe l'oeil murals on the sides of nondescript buildings. It's amazing what can be done.

Trompe l'oeil (French for "fool the eye") can add variety and interest to otherwise nondescript buildings. See the work being done on the building (below, left) and the finished building (bottom right). This building is actually a rectangular box - all the shadows and reliefs are painted.

Buildings such as the one in the photo top right would be good candidates for trompe l'oeil design. Once again, the architectural mural should fit the overall "brand" of the community. We recommend trompe l'oeil over standard murals.

Restaurants, like the one shown top right, are so drab we assumed it was permanently closed. There is no curb appeal whatsoever, no invitation to grab our attention, no beautification of any kind, and the unsightly plastic banner on the side looks as though it's been there a long time.



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### Suggestion:

This page shows more examples of trompe l'oeil murals.

Note the Winslow Arizona wall - even the windows and reflections are painted. (bottom left) This site is visited and photographed more than a million times annually. The trompe l'oeil was put in place to the Eagles song, which stated "Sitting on a corner in Winslow, Arizona such a fine site to see. There's a girl, in a flatbed Ford, slowing down to take a look at me." You'll see the story unfold in the mural.

Even the railings and bricks (top left) are painted, adding a lot of visual interest to an otherwise nondescript building in historic Virginia City, Nevada.

This building (top right) shows another style of trompe l'oeil. The results are only limited by your imagination. First determine what you want to be known for (your brand) then develop the facade improvements and business mix based on that.

