

Eddie Friel talks destination development in Hills of Headwaters

By Katie Ryalen

On behalf of the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association (HHTA)

Tourism guru Eddie Friel highlighted the importance of destination development in the tourism industry, and challenged the Hills of Headwaters to tell the stories of its history, heritage and culture.

The world has changed for the tourism sector. With the internet firmly established as the go-to resource for active and potential travellers, destination marketing organizations must reinvent themselves if they wish to remain relevant to the regional economies they are mandated to support.

At HHTA's recent annual tourism symposium, destination development was a major focus. Not only is it at the forefront of the association's ongoing tourism strategy, it is also the keynote topic Friel addressed.

'Place marketing is taking two things that are the same, then telling stories about one of those things that add value to it, and differentiates it from the other,' Friel said.

But how does a sleepy and predominantly agricultural region like Hills of Headwaters, with Orangeville as its most urban centre and with an urban population of just less than 31,000, identify its place in the larger tourism landscape? And more important, he said, what does it have that differentiates it from its tourism-giant neighbour, Toronto?

'Marketing places is about the history, heritage and culture of a community,' Friel explained. 'Like the (Dufferin County) museum with its collection of things that are historic to this region . . . it's about the accumulated memories. They are the stories of this place.'

Friel is notable for turning distressed and declining urban centres like Glasgow, Buffalo and Northern Ireland into premier tourism destinations. He's done this by encouraging communities to develop their destinations, to tell the stories that make these places unique.

In his keynote, he told the story of the Belfast Europa hotel, the most bombed hotel of the Northern Ireland conflict. Inspired by the refusal of hotel staff to shut down operations after its 35th bombing (at which time Friel was a guest there and had to be evacuated from his room), he maintained that every place has a story to tell, regardless of the challenges it may face in telling them.

'We cannot apologize for our communities,' Friel insisted. 'We have to contribute something. If external forces are putting barriers in your way, you must find a way to circumvent them.'

Those barriers may be obvious in a place like Northern Ireland, where the decades-long violence left a scarred and traumatized community behind. But in rural places, like Hills of Headwaters, they are more subtle. The barriers in these places tend to be things like lack of funding, lack of infrastructure and lack of accessible information.

'Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) must manage how their assets are being utilized,' Friel advocated. 'You need to create the right infrastructure to appeal to visitors and deliver on the promises you make.'

Place marketing may be a novel idea to individual tourism operators, but for HHTA which supports them, it is a significant aspect of the organization's current marketing efforts, particularly surrounding the coming 2015 Toronto Pan-American Games, in which the region will host a number of high-profile equine events.

'The Games themselves are not our primary focus,' HHTA Executive Director Michele Harris observed. 'They are only two weeks. But they give us the opportunity to showcase what we have here, and they provide us with a template for moving forward . . . We need to take advantage of the legacy of the Games, and to brand and position ourselves as Headwaters Horse Country.'

Harris added that once visitors come for the Games, HHTA needs to figure out how to get them to stay.