

Senwick Alpaca Trekking: Final Report

The idea behind Senwick Alpaca Trekking was initially conceived as a project that would enable the diversification of our farming business into the agri-tourism sector. Those behind the project were Paul Sanderson and Nicola Sanderson farming at Upper Senwick Farm, Borgue. It was Nicola who delivered the bulk of the project and who will continue to run the project into the future.

The key aims and objectives of the project were to establish the core infrastructure and digital marketing tools to get the alpaca trekking business off the ground. Firstly we wanted to establish usable and public friendly facilities from which to base the treks. As alpaca trekking is customer focused facilities needed to be of a good enough quality to provide an enjoyable and memorable experience for customers, adding to what 'visitscotland' call the 'customer journey'. We therefore will needed to invest in some basic infrastructure to provide appropriate facilities that will enhance the overall experience. These included a new alpaca shelter, toilet facilities for customers and a picnic shelter for customers on the trek.

In addition, we wanted to invest in materials to Market and promote Senwick Alpaca Trekking, reaching a wide and varied audience in order across the UK and beyond to produce sales. For this aspect good website was crucial to promoting the project and to allow potential customers to pre-plan and book treks online when planning their holidays. Our objective here was to design a user friendly website that introduced potential customers to our alpacas, the treks and what the experience can offer. In addition, a straight forward pre-booking system needed be developed to allow for on-line bookings ahead of time. We were keen to use a local web-design company who were used to working within the area of tourism as we believed that this would give us an added insight into the sector and to the tools needed to break into the market digitally. There was also money in the budget for more traditional leaflets to advertise and promote the treks in tourist information centers etc. We also aimed to make use of free social media outlets, such as facebook, instagram and twitter for the purposes of marketing and advertising the project.

Finally, we needed to establish clear and appropriate signage to Senwick Alpaca Trekking. In order to ensure that customers reach their destination. With tourist passing to arrive at nearby campsites and the popular brig house bay this signage would also act as a marketing tool for passing tourists to see what activity we offer.

In terms of the Local Development Strategy our project had most relevance with the primary theme of 'Economy'. The strategy states that the regions diverse and scenic landscapes are an important tourism resource and our Alpaca Treks take full advantage of the regions landscape. The routes taken on our farm take in views over to the Isle of Man, Galloway Hills, Ross Island, and take the visitor through farmland and forestry. Wildlife on the farm is in abundance such as Red Kites, Red Squirrels, deer, and badgers, birds, and so on. This is a great way to show case some of the regions wildlife and to

whet the appetite of visitors for discovering more of what the region has to offer in terms of its natural environment whilst strengthening the economy of the region by developing tourism in the area as highlighted in the local development themes.

Furthermore, tourism is highlighted as a particular focus within the 'economy' theme and in addition the Dumfries and Galloway SWOT refers to the potential for thematic tourism in the area to provide opportunities for developmentⁱ. Alpaca trekking fits well into this category being an experiential activity and also one that encompasses the natural environment. The Dumfries and Galloway SWOT regards inflexible and tradition business cultures as being of a particular weakness to the regionⁱⁱ. We would argue that we are aiming to break out of that mould by developing a more diverse and secure economic future for the business, by entering a new area in order to diversify into the tourism industry alongside our more traditional business. In addition, The Local Development Strategy also points out the threat that changes in CAP could have on the regions agricultural industryⁱⁱⁱ. This project will allow us to begin the process of diversifying into the agri-tourism industry and the income that can be potentially generated could soften the blow of the lessening income from subsidies. Indeed, since our project began the uncertainty regards the future of farm subsidies post-brexit (and now even future of Scottish food exports) have become even more pressing as has the need to diversify in order to become more robust in uncertain times for food and farming.

The addition of the Alpaca trekking to the farm has benefited the wider local community for example, the awarding of building the Alpaca shelter to local firm JSF, recycled picnic benches and signs from local business 'Solway Recycling', signage from Kirkcudbright based 'signet signs', branded clothing from Kirkcudbright based 'Mug Shots' and the website, logo and brochures were completed by Annan based 'Creatomatic' among others which has put money back into the local community. In fact the vast majority of the budget of £10,029.82 has been spent locally, only purchasing products unavailable in the locality from outside the region. We are able to benefit the local community further by directing visitors to other local businesses for example, we recommend where to dine, local shops and promote other attractions to visit. In 2017 we hope to offer Alpaca picnics showcasing local produce, and are working with Kirkcudbright based Station House Cookery School to do this.

In order to fund the project we applied to LEADER for 50% of the estimated cost of 10,029.82 the remaining 50% was funded privately from the business (HA Sanderson). The project took place between July 2016 and January 2017, the start date meant that we were already at the beginning of the 2016 tourist season. However, rather than get all infrastructure in place and delay the start of trekking we prioritized requirements in order that we could get a 'soft' start. This provided useful in practicing trekking and building up reviews and building a presence on social media which was initially (before the website) our core means of publicity.

In the June of 2016 we began on a publicity drive gaining articles in the Dumfries and Galloway life along with the local paper, and the well read Dumfries and Galloway Whats Going On, which publishes on the internet. These articles featured us receiving the 'big cheque' from Ellen Grant of LEADER surrounded by our alpacas and a write up about the grant awarded and the nature of the business. Many of our customers last year had stated that they had seen these articles which indicates that keeping an active presence in the local press is a useful marketing tool for future.

In terms of infrastructure penning up-gates purchased and Alpaca Shelter erected to allow for the easy penning and gathering of Alpacas before a trek. This also provides a base from which treks begin. The 'Trekkers Tipi' was ordered and erected, this provides a stop off point along the trek in which we serve light refreshment. The Tipi is equipped with picnic rug, picnic hamper, cushions, stools, tea ware etc that gives the trekker a quality 'glamping' style experience at the end of the trek.

We also held initial meetings with Creatomatic to discuss our website requirement and work was begun on creating a logo for Senwick Alpaca Trekking. We continued to develop a presence on social media, establishing a facebook page and adding to our existing Instagram and twitter. A photo shoot with the Alpacas was also arrange by the web designers to create a bank of photos for the website/leaflets.

Following on from that with the basic infrastructure in place and the Alpacas halter trained we were now in a position to begin trekking. We decided to price initial treks for the 2016 season at £10 per trekker (rather than the original £15) this was in order to attract customers and build up reviews etc on social media in order to promote ourselves further. As the website was still in progress we held off producing leaflets until we had our completed logo so promotion was largely limited to social and media. Nevertheless, we built up interest and (to date) all feedback from trekkers has been positive. There is a bank of photos and customer feedback on our facebook page (senwick alpaca trekking).

We were then able to work on our leaflets and completed work on the content of these whilst the website was still under construction. The completion of the Logo also meant that we could now commission and design signage, which will be completed in milestone 3. The second Bell tent was also purchased along with some basic accessories, this gives us different options/packages to offer trekkers. E.G. To hire the bell tent for the day and use it as a base that might encourage trekkers to come from further away, spend the day BBQ etc. It also gives a base for 'Alpaca Parties' or other visiting groups.

As we approached milestone 3 the leaflets were finalised and completed and we are now in the process of distributing these to local B&B's, hotels ect. We have continued expanding /growing our profile on social media and this is a key area of our marketing. The website was completed and includes an integrated booking system, photos, online blog and the usual details about directions ect that you would expect from a website. In order to further our marketing we

have had useful meetings with visitscotland and our local rep has distributed our leaflets in the 'ICentres' at Kirkcudbright, Castle Douglas, Dumfries and Gretna, obviously another key marketing tool. In addition we added our Senwick Alpaca Trekking to the visitscotland and visitsouthwestscotland websites as another digital marketing tool to promote the business.

In terms of budget we were able to stay in budget and due to savings made particularly with the purchase of the eco-loo were able to include some additional items such as branded garments which has allowed us to create a 'uniform' to distinguish ourselves from our customers. It is also another way of getting our brand out and about.

At the end of the project we are now completely set and ready to hit the ground running in the 2017 season. We have already taken pre-bookings for 2017 and continue to work on our marketing to reach potential customers both tourists and locals. We have added to our team of alpacas and feel that we are now in a strong position going forward. Feedback from customers and those within the industry such as visitscotland has been positive and we are looking to add new dimensions to the business, for example working with the Children's University passport scheme. We are positive about the future of Senwick Alpaca Trekking and are very much looking forward to the coming year.

ⁱ Dumfries and Galloway Leader Programme 2014-2020, Local Development Strategy, p31

ⁱⁱ Dumfries and Galloway Leader Programme 2014-2020, Local Development Strategy, p30

ⁱⁱⁱ Dumfries and Galloway Leader Programme 2014-2020, Local Development Strategy, p32