

Tourism Grants as Tools for Community Identity in Utah

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A Small Grant with Local Impact

Grand County recently received \$146,250 in state tourism marketing grants to strengthen visitor outreach efforts (Ramirez, 2025). While the dollar amount is modest compared to the size of Moab's visitor economy, the investment is strategically significant. For county officials and residents, these funds are not just about marketing for higher visitation—they are about shaping how the region presents itself to the world in ways that meet both community and visitor needs.

In rural Utah, cooperative marketing grants are best understood as tools for defining identity, showcasing stewardship, and ensuring that tourism growth reinforces rather than undermines quality of life. They allow communities to market with purpose: aligning campaigns with values residents care about while maintaining competitiveness in the broader tourism economy.

Why These Grants Matter

For counties across Utah, tourism revenues are tied to sales tax, hotel occupancy, and seasonal employment. But marketing is also about **control over narrative**. Communities must decide whether they are known only for scenery and adrenaline, or also for culture, dark skies, local businesses, and small-town character.

Research shows that digital and social media platforms can empower communities to amplify these narratives in ways that are economically and socially beneficial. A recent study on AI-driven social media in rural tourism entrepreneurship found that targeted campaigns help small businesses reach broader markets while creating opportunities for empowerment and local identity-building (Roy, 2025).

State grants provide the seed funding to make such campaigns possible, especially for rural counties that lack the resources of larger cities or national marketing organizations.

Utah's Model of Cooperative Marketing

The Utah Office of Tourism has long invested in [cooperative marketing](#) as a way to support rural communities. These programs typically match local funds, encouraging counties to partner with chambers of commerce, nonprofit groups, and businesses to stretch limited dollars further.

For Grand County, this means marketing can be designed not only to bring people into Arches and Canyonlands, but also to highlight diverse experiences, distribute visitation across seasons, and promote stewardship values. This flexibility is critical, allowing leaders to craft campaigns that reflect the needs of residents as well as visitors.

The Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University plays a key role in evaluating these programs. By bridging research and practice, IORT helps counties and the state assess whether marketing is achieving intended goals—such as reducing crowding at popular sites, encouraging off-peak travel, or showcasing cultural assets. These evaluations ensure that grants are more than advertising dollars: they are investments in sustainable tourism strategies.

Lessons from Research and Practice

Peer-reviewed scholarship offers several insights directly relevant to how Grand County and other Utah counties can make the most of cooperative marketing funds:

- **Defining tourism on local terms.** Studies of rural tourism entrepreneurship emphasize the importance of communities using grants to highlight their unique assets, whether cultural, natural, or historical. Doing so not only attracts visitors but also deepens resident buy-in (Roy, 2025).
- **Preparing for shifting demand.** Advances in data analysis and forecasting can help counties anticipate visitation surges and adjust marketing accordingly. These tools, when paired with grant-funded campaigns, allow rural communities to be proactive rather than reactive (Zheng, et al., 2025).
- **Centering community benefits.** Research on tourism and community identity shows that branding built around authenticity—such as small businesses, farmers' markets, or community events—creates more resilient visitor economies than campaigns focused solely on adventure or spectacle (Rickly, 2025).

Together, these findings reinforce that cooperative marketing grants are valuable not simply because they

boost visitor numbers, but because they provide counties with resources to design campaigns that reflect and reinforce community priorities.

Complexities and Tradeoffs

Even as we recognize the value of cooperative grants, counties face challenges that marketing alone cannot solve. Housing shortages, seasonal labor constraints, and infrastructure pressures remain pressing concerns across gateway communities. However, marketing can help manage these pressures by shaping when and how visitors arrive. Campaigns that promote shoulder-season travel or encourage visits to lesser-known attractions, for example, can spread impacts more evenly and reduce strain on local systems.

At the same time, counties must balance innovation with transparency and fairness in digital marketing. Campaigns should be designed to respect both visitors and residents, ensuring that messages are accurate, ethical, and aligned with long-term community goals.

Implications for Utah's Gateway Communities

Grand County's grant is part of a broader strategy that other gateway communities can learn from:

1. **Use grants to tell local stories.** Cooperative funds should support campaigns that elevate regional narratives, whether about cultural heritage, dark skies, or stewardship practices.
2. **Leverage partnerships.** Collaborations among county governments, nonprofits, state agencies, and research institutions like IORT ensure that campaigns are data-informed and locally grounded.
3. **Plan for resilience.** Marketing should be adaptive, anticipating climate impacts, changing visitor preferences, and shifts in the global tourism economy.
4. **Measure outcomes.** Counties should track whether marketing investments lead to more balanced visitation, stronger local businesses, and improved resident satisfaction.

Looking Ahead

Grand County's \$146,250 grant is more than a financial boost—it is an opportunity to show how marketing can serve both visitors and residents. By tailoring campaigns to local needs, and by drawing on research and partnerships with organizations like the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, counties across Utah can ensure that

tourism marketing is not just about growth, but about resilience, stewardship, and community well-being.

References

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