

Experiential Tourism Standards:  
The Perceptions of Rural Tourism Providers

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Prepared for the  
International Journal of Services and Standards

Key Words: Experiential Tourism, Rural, Standards, Experience Economy, Regional  
Planning Process

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The Perceptions of Rural Kansas Tourism Providers

Abstract

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study of the perceptions of a group of rural Kansas tourism providers to a set of twenty experiential tourism standards. The results of the exploratory study are examined and discussed in the context of current experiential tourism literature and implications for future research are discussed. Finally, implications for management practice are reviewed and discussed.

**Introduction**

In June 2001, the phrase, “experiential tourism,” was used to describe a “rapidly emerging trend” in a tourism industry report in Australia [1]. The report distinguished the ‘new’ tourism of the 1990s from ‘mass’ tourism of the 1980s. This decade of the 1990s “witnessed the evolution of a more experience-based domestic traveler,” the report continued, especially with respect to self-drive visitors and to a lesser extent, organized tours. Through the late 1990s and into the new millennium, then, “experiential tourism” has begun to appear regularly in tourism practitioner literature around the world [2, 3, 4, 5, 6].

Simultaneously, in the United States, the work of Pine and Gilmore [7, 8, 9] on “The Experience Economy” was permeating many facets of the service industry, including entertainment attractions, hospitality venues and customer services of all kinds. Here is a useful quote from their recent work:

“And don’t stop at just one experience – you should create a series of related experiences that flow one from another, creating demand up and down at every level, both generating new forms of revenue and driving

sales of whatever you currently offer. In other words: Create a rich portfolio of experiences.”

Richard Florida, in writing about what he calls the “creative class,” estimates that this group has 38 million members, constitutes more than 30 percent of the U.S. workforce, and profoundly influences work and lifestyle issues. He defines this class as those whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content. In general, this group shares common characteristics, such as creativity, individuality, diversity, and merit. He then goes on to say that this “creative class” of people “prefers active, authentic, and participatory experiences which they can have a hand in structuring.” [10, 11]

These concepts were among the key ingredients that led to the compilation [12] of a set of suggested “experiential tourism standards.” In this paper, we report the results of an exploratory study to gather feedback on practitioner perceptions of the suggested standards [13, 14].

We begin with a brief review of the suggested standards as they were compiled followed by a description of the exploratory study. The results of the exploratory study are presented in the next section and implications of these results are discussed. Finally, implications for future research and for practitioners are presented.

### **Review of standards**

For this discussion, we have arbitrarily divided the twenty standards into four groups of five each. Here are the first five:

1. People create meaning through direct experience.

2. The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in and the memories created.
3. The experience includes pre-departure trip planning and post-trip follow-up.
4. Experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture and history.
5. Experiential tourism is low impact, low volume, and high yield.

Experiential tourism has been created, at least partly, from the global movement toward experiential learning. In “experiential learning,” people create meaning through direct experience; thus, our first standard. The second standard expands on that concept by specifying one process that is now becoming more common to the tourism experience: Going places and meeting people, immersing themselves in the activities there, whatever they may be, and, in the process, creating their own, unique, personal, emotion-based memories. Each person will have a unique memory set, with not everyone having the same set of memories, as may have been the experience in the past, where everyone on a tour, for example, went the same place and did the same thing [15, 16].

Pre-departure trip planning and post-trip follow-up is a relatively new phenomenon, greatly enhanced by the Internet and advancing global telecommunications technology [17, 18]. Individual experience providers can now easily interact with individual travelers, to plan that truly unique, personal travel and visitation experience. Following such a trip, further exchange of photographs or video clips from the experience may occur. Recommendations and suggestions for follow-up activities often will begin. It is much more likely that a personal relationship will have been built, and can be

continued into the future. This is all part of the immersion, the experience – of experiential tourism!

Standard four speaks to “local nature, culture, and history.” This is at the heart of the “content” of the experiential activity [6]. It is the personal interaction, with this depth of content, that is what makes “experiential tourism” special – and a unique experience to each person. Each of us brings to the current situation a unique level of understanding of these three elements (through a combination of reading, education, and life experiences to this date). We each learn, grow, and experience at a different pace. Therefore, we leave each new encounter with a new, upgraded, unique (special) experience, like that of no other person.

Standard five, “Experiential tourism is low impact, low volume, and high yield,” is the statement of contrast with the mass tourism of the 1980s and even early 1990s – the oft-mentioned “Disney model” of tourism: high environmental impact, high volume of people in one place, and relatively low monetary yield to the provider per person processed. Experiential tourism is intended to leave the physical location visited virtually unchanged. This can be done because there is a low volume of people moving through the individual location, the venue of interest. Because this is a highly personalized experience, the traveler is willing to pay a premium price, and will also want to purchase “memory enhancing” local merchandise, often local lodging and other support items and services. This results in a higher yield to the experience provider(s) per visitor.

Here is the second set of five standards:

6. Experiential tourism is very personal, unique and individual for each visitor.

7. Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider.
8. Experiential tourism opportunities allow for personal growth and reflect the values and interests of the individual visitor.
9. Experiential tourism provides diverse experiences that match the visitor's interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories.
10. The desired outcome of experiential tourism is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences.

Standard six clearly states what has been alluded to in the early discussion: the direct outcome! Standard seven emphasizes the role of both the visitor and provider in the relationship. Neither will be successful without the full participation of the other, they are totally interdependent. Standard eight focuses on the internal impact on the visitor. This also was alluded to in discussion of earlier standards, but here it is very specific. Standard nine takes the provider point of view. The provider takes the lead in making these unique experience opportunities available to the visitor, for their participation. Standard ten adds the elements, “new knowledge and authentic experiences.” The experiential traveler seeks to grow in knowledge, so “new knowledge” is critical. In addition, the experiential traveler seeks “authentic” experiences. He/she wants “the real thing!” If this is to be something “Native American,” it needs to be provided in a place and by personnel that are in that setting and have “authentic” Native American relationships, experiences and

services to offer. An Irish immigrant with a European accent, dressed in a buckskin coat manufactured in China, reading from a script at a theme park in Greenland, will not pass the “authentic” test, for example.

This is the third set of five standards:

11. Experiential tourism opportunities encourage the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential.
12. Cultural elements are shared in an atmosphere of traditional ways of life.
13. Experiential tourism shows rather than describes.
14. Experiential tourism opportunities expand personal horizons.
15. Experiential tourism opportunities should provide personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators.

Standards eleven and twelve delve into the “cultural” aspects of experiential tourism with a bit more detail and specificity. Respect for other cultures is at the center of each of these standards [3]. Sharing cultural elements, problems and potentials require trust from each party. This trust includes respecting the “traditional ways of life” of each of the cultures involved. A person can only learn and grow in knowledge of another culture by seeing it in the full panorama of the “authentic” setting and “traditional ways of life” that they embody. Standard thirteen is the classical “show, don’t tell” of storytellers of all kinds [2, 5]. To be experiential, each activity must have involvement and participation; just being told, just having it described, does not get the job done. Standard fourteen is a direct outcome statement for the traveler: “expand personal horizons.” This takes “new knowledge” and “authentic experiences” and makes them personal and

unique to that person. Research findings show that seventy-six percent of U.S. travelers say they “would like to visit someplace they have never visited before [6].”

Standard fifteen may be viewed as a charge to the provider: “provide personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators.” These are what will bring the individual experiential traveler to your particular venue [5]. The provider web site should assure this is obvious to each visitor.

This is the final set of five standards:

16. Experiential tourism attracts people to places.
17. Experiential tourism attracts markets to merchandise.
18. Experiential tourism engages all five senses.
19. Experiential tourism opportunities include learning a new skill or engaging in a new activity.
20. Experiential tourism includes “the story of the place.”

Standard sixteen follows from standard fifteen. Where the provider has shown the “right stuff,” the people, the experiential travelers, will be drawn to the provider’s venue. Standard seventeen is a corollary to sixteen. “Markets” in this context are the experiential travelers willing (and even anxious) to spend their money. Not only will they be attracted to the venue, where the experience will take place, they will be attracted to purchase the “authentic” merchandise of the locale, to enhance the memories they take home with them [6]. Standard eighteen should “go without saying,” but, needs to be said anyway. To be truly “experiential” – all five senses must be involved: sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. If they are each engaged and intimately involved with each experience, it will be

memorable. Standard nineteen is a specific suggestion for the provider that is simple but can get overlooked, “learning a new skill or engaging in a new activity.” What better way to be involved, and create a memorable experience. The final, the twentieth standard, is to tell the story of the place. People love to hear stories. They love to see pictures of the old days. Successful providers include these “story-telling” elements about their place of business, their location, their “nature, culture and history,” as a normal part of their everyday routine.

We next turn to the exploratory study conducted to gain a better understanding of how these twenty “standards” are perceived by a group of providers.

### **The exploratory study**

Partial results of an earlier unpublished study conducted by our research team yielded a list of 57 providers of agritourism services in a well-defined region of a Great Plains state in the USA, each of whom had expressed an interest in participating in further research activities. These were all farm and/or ranch operations where the agritourism business is a secondary revenue source. Most of these providers had been exposed to one or more of a series of six information workshops on agritourism, nature tourism, or experiential tourism over the six months preceding the above study. The current exploratory study questionnaire was sent to these 57 service providers approximately four months later. A self-addressed, postage-paid return envelope was enclosed with the questionnaire. Thirty-four questionnaires were returned (59.6% response rate), thirty-one (54.4%) of which had valid responses that were used in our

analysis. Individual answers were missing on one or two items on three questionnaires (see Table 1).

A copy of the survey questionnaire (one sheet, both sides) may be viewed in Appendix A. On the front page, each person was asked to rate each of the twenty proposed standards on a five point scale. The general instruction was: “Circle the number rating on left that best fits your Tourism Venue, where: 5 equals “What we most try to do” and 1 equals “What we least try to do.” The back side of the questionnaire asked a series of demographic questions.

Some demographic information collected, that is of interest:

1. Gender: 15 Female, 10 males, 7 couples, 2 did not respond
2. Age category of primary responder: 25-34 (2); 35-44 (3); 45-54 (7); 55-64 (10); 65 and over (9), no response (3)
3. Education level of primary responder: HS or less (4); Two years of college (5); Four years of college (14); Masters degree (9); no response (2)
4. Year of operation of tourism business: Two or less (5); two through five (6); five through ten (7); ten through twenty (5); twenty through forty (5); no response (6)
5. Number of workers involved in tourism operation during peak season: 1 (3); 2 (9); 4 (2); 5 (3); one each for 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 25 employees; no response (8)
6. Number of workers involved in tourism operation during off season: 0 (3); 1 (3); 2 (9); 3 (4); 4 (1); 5 (2); 6 (1); 9 (1); 14 (1); no response (9)
7. “We operate primarily by appointment/reservation:” Yes (15); No (14); no response (5)

8. “We welcome ‘drop-by’ tourists, who are passing through the area:” Yes (21); No (8); no response (5)

### **Results of the exploratory study**

A summary of the mean response rates, ranked in order, with the number of usable responses per item, for each of the twenty proposed standards is presented in Table 1. In the table, PS 01 refers to the first proposed standard, as listed above, “People create meaning through direct experience,” and so forth through the twenty standards.

**Table 1. Mean Responses to the Twenty Proposed Standards, ranked in order.**

<b>Proposed Standard Number</b>	<b>Good Responses</b>	<b>Mean Response</b>	<b>Rank</b>
PS 02	31	4.77	1
PS 01	31	4.71	2
PS 06	31	4.65	3
PS 07	31	4.58	4
PS 16	31	4.48	5
PS 18	31	4.45	6
PS 13	31	4.45	7
PS 10	31	4.45	8
PS 04	31	4.45	9
PS 20	31	4.29	10
PS 15	31	4.29	11
PS 14	29	4.10	12
PS 09	31	4.10	13
PS 19	31	4.03	14
PS 08	31	4.03	15
PS 17	31	3.84	16
PS 12	31	3.81	17
PS 05	29	3.66	18
PS 11	31	3.35	19
PS 03	30	2.63	20

The results appear to fall into three categories of agreement among the providers responding to the survey. None fall below a 2.5 mean score, which could be interpreted as no agreement. The first four (mean equal 4.5 and above) might be categorized as High Level of Agreement. The eleven in the middle (mean between 4.0 and 4.48) can be categorized as General Agreement. The bottom five (mean below 4.0, but above 2.5) might be categorized as Questionable Agreement. We will use these categories in our discussion in the next section.

### **Discussion of the implications of the results of the exploratory study**

Proposed standards 1, 2, 6 and 7 received a high level of agreement in our exploratory study. Here they are summarized, in order of rank:

1. PS 02: The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in and the memories created.
2. PS 01: People create meaning through direct experience.
3. PS 06: Experiential tourism is very personal, unique and individual for each visitor.
4. PS 07: Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider.

These four standards essentially represent an extended definition of experiential tourism.

The eleven “generally accepted” standards appear to represent the various aspects of carrying out the detailed aspects of fully involving the guests in the various aspects of the provider service experiences.

The balance of this discussion section will focus on the five proposed standards that fell in the bottom five, rated less than 4.0 out of 5.0 and have been categorized as “questionable agreement.” Each appears to have some unique characteristics that may help explain the lack of “general agreement.”

Let’s begin with the last, the twentieth, the least agreed upon (2.63 out of 5.0) standard, PS 03: “The experience includes pre-departure trip planning and post-trip follow-up.” Current literature and outstanding current practice would suggest that this standard should rank very high with successful experiential tourism practitioners. Success with this standard, of course, is largely based upon the availability and the use of modern telecommunications tools, such as email, web-browsers and other Internet based capabilities. A number (many?) of the providers (who are represented in the population of these survey results), in the information workshops mentioned above, anecdotally (one author was present at these meetings), expressed concerns about their development of and usage of these very same technology tools. Until recently, many of these providers had simply not considered that either “pre-departure trip planning” or “post-trip follow-up” were possible, let alone that they were issues with which they should even concern themselves – in addition to essentially not having the capabilities. This is an area of opportunity for education and training services to these providers.

The nineteenth ranked (with a mean of 3.35 out of 5) standard was PS 11: “Experiential tourism opportunities encourage the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential.” Because there may be some common issues, let us also consider, at the same time, the seventeenth ranked (with a mean of 3.81 out of 5) standard, PS 12: “Cultural elements are shared in an atmosphere of traditional

ways of life.” Each of these standards incorporates elements of the consideration of “culture.” We should note that PS 04 (ranked at a four-way tie for sixth, mean of 4.45 out of 5) also mentions “culture:” “Experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture and history.” However, in this now oft used phrase “local nature, culture, and history,” culture can get lost – people may have a tendency to focus on “nature,” on “history,” or both, and overlook the “culture” reference. They also may assume that the “culture” comes along as part of the history. In many settings, this may even be largely true. If most of the history of an area or group of people is all part of the same general cultural background, the issues of “culture” may not always be obvious. If this is true, of course, important elements of the “local nature, culture, and history” are being overlooked or ignored – at the peril of missing some critical “experiential tourism” experiences! On the other hand, this is a quite different experience, perhaps, than the references to the other two, lower ranked, standards: “the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential,” and “cultural elements are shared in an atmosphere of traditional ways of life.” These actually focus their attention on “different cultures” and “cultural elements.” It is very likely that a number of the respondents to our exploratory study have not really considered their tourism offerings as being related to these aspects of “culture.” They are, of course. These are farmers and ranchers in a portion of the country that required a strong culturally based character-set to survive hardships of climate and environment in the past, and these very same people continue to struggle with economic and social survival in the current environment. In most cases, they simply fail to recognize that these “cultural elements” are such vital factors in the potential “experiences” of their guests and visitors.

We will now turn our attention to the eighteenth ranked (with mean of 3.66 out of 5.0) standard, PS 05: “Experiential tourism is low impact, low volume, and high yield.” This phrase or expression, while very descriptive once it is understood, is still new to many people in the tourism business and still a bit cumbersome both to say and to understand. We will consider it along with the fifth of our lowest ranked standards (with mean of 3.84 out of 5.0), the sixteenth, PS 17: “Experiential tourism attracts markets to merchandise.” Each of these expressions comes directly from the work of Fermata, Inc., a leading consulting group on experiential tourism [5]. In the first case, the expression “low impact, low volume, and high yield” is used to contrast nature-based tourism with the mass tourism concepts Disney and other theme-park type of attractions where high numbers of people are brought to a destination and the destination is never the same again, with relatively low dollar revenue per person visiting. Nature-based tourism, in contrast, seeks visitors in relatively low numbers who are willing to generate much higher revenue levels per visitor and yet leave the destination environs virtually unchanged, thus, low impact. In the second case, “markets to merchandise” means getting your visitors (the “markets”) interested in your “merchandise” for its contribution to their overall experience. Purchasing locally produced goods and products enhances the “experience” and creates and sustains memories in unique ways. Authentic, locally-produced goods and products are an essential part of the full experiential tourism process that these special visitors seek.

## **Implications for future research**

This paper has taken one tiny step toward a better understanding of the twenty service standards for experiential tourism. The exploratory study presented here was a first step toward checking the perceptions of one small, non-representative group of actual providers with respect to these proposed standards. Did they see them as reasonable and reasonably well associated with what they are trying to do with and for their visitors in their agritourism venues? The answer to this question appears to have been: Yes.

Two directions for future research efforts seem most apparent. There are no doubt others. First, there is some redundancy among the twenty standards. Some of this may be desirable, to get at different nuances, as noted briefly in the discussion above. Studies involving content analysis and, perhaps, cluster analysis, with a larger sample of knowledgeable subjects would be useful. This might be done by asking a group of “subject matter experts” to evaluate each standard, both on a numerical scale and with evaluative comments, for example [19, 20]. This would also almost certainly reduce the overall number of standards, and, perhaps, group them in a meaningful way to aid in general use and understanding.

Second, the standards must be tested on much larger population samples. These should include practitioners around the world, as well as consumers of all level and types of experiential tourism services. These population samples should also include supporting services, such as travel and tourism departments staff personnel and tour guides of various types, for example.

In addition, these concepts need to be periodically reviewed for updates to the list of standards for travel services [21, 22, 23].

### **Implications for practitioners**

These service standards for experiential tourism have direct implications for practitioners. Results of the exploratory study presented here indicate general agreement with most of these standards by this small group of providers. Will this result hold up in a much larger, more diverse sample population? This needs to be determined, as suggested in the previous section. Even the level of agreement obtained in this study, however, is probably sufficient, if desirable, to proceed with using these proposed standards in educational and training exercises with individual groups of practitioners. Feedback and discussion from such exercises would also add to further understanding and refinement of the standards.

The five least agreed upon standards certainly provide an opportunity for certain groups of practitioners to re-examine their views, assuming they do perceive themselves to be experiential tourism providers. As noted in the discussion, opportunities appear to be available for additional education and training in some aspects of service provision that would be beneficial to these providers. Additional opportunities to further identify these and other related needs should also be sought.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Experiential Tourism Rating Standard Survey – page 1 of 2**

Circle the number rating on left that best fits your Tourism Venue, where

**5 = What we most try to do, and 1 = What we least try to do**

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Proposed Standard</b>
5 4 3 2 1	1. People create meaning through direct experience.
5 4 3 2 1	2. The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in and the memories created.
5 4 3 2 1	3. The experience includes pre-departure trip planning and post-trip follow-up.
5 4 3 2 1	4. Experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture and history.
5 4 3 2 1	5. Experiential tourism is low impact, low volume, and high yield.
5 4 3 2 1	6. Experiential tourism is very personal, unique and individual for each visitor.
5 4 3 2 1	7. Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider.
5 4 3 2 1	8. Experiential tourism opportunities allow for personal growth and reflect the values and interests of the individual visitor.
5 4 3 2 1	9. Experiential tourism provides diverse experiences that match the visitor’s interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories.
5 4 3 2 1	10. The desired outcome of experiential tourism is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences.
5 4 3 2 1	11. Experiential tourism opportunities encourage the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential.
5 4 3 2 1	12. Cultural elements are shared in an atmosphere of traditional ways of life.
5 4 3 2 1	13. Experiential tourism shows rather than describes.
5 4 3 2 1	14. Experiential tourism opportunities expand personal horizons.
5 4 3 2 1	15. Experiential tourism opportunities should provide personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators.
5 4 3 2 1	16. Experiential tourism attracts people to places.
5 4 3 2 1	17. Experiential tourism attracts markets to merchandise.
5 4 3 2 1	18. Experiential tourism engages all five senses.
5 4 3 2 1	19. Experiential tourism opportunities include learning a new skill or engaging in a new activity.
1 2 3 4 5	20. Experiential tourism includes “the story of the place.”

## Experiential Tourism Rating Standard Survey – page 2 of 2

This information applies to the person completing the attached form:

**Gender:** Female \_\_\_ Male \_\_\_ A Couple \_\_\_

**Age Category:**

Person 1:

Under 25 \_\_\_ 25-34 \_\_\_ 35-44 \_\_\_ 45-54 \_\_\_ 55-64 \_\_\_ 65 and older \_\_\_

Person 2:

Under 25 \_\_\_ 25-34 \_\_\_ 35-44 \_\_\_ 45-54 \_\_\_ 55-64 \_\_\_ 65 and older \_\_\_

**Highest level of formal education:**

Person 1:

HS or less \_\_\_ 2yr college \_\_\_ 4 year college \_\_\_

Masters \_\_\_ Doctoral \_\_\_

Person 2:

HS or less \_\_\_ 2yr college \_\_\_ 4 year college \_\_\_

Masters \_\_\_ Doctoral \_\_\_

**I/we have operated this tourism business how many years?** \_\_\_

**The land involved has been in my/our family how many years?** \_\_\_ N/A

**Distance in Miles** to (fill in the closest 2 or 3) (Circle the city, if part of that community):

Wichita \_\_\_ Hutchinson \_\_\_ Emporia \_\_\_ Topeka \_\_\_ Lawrence \_\_\_

Manhattan \_\_\_ Salina \_\_\_

**Highest level of formal education:**

Person 1:

HS or less \_\_\_ 2yr college \_\_\_ 4 year college \_\_\_

Masters \_\_\_ Doctoral \_\_\_

Person 2:

HS or less \_\_\_ 2yr college \_\_\_ 4 year college \_\_\_

Masters \_\_\_ Doctoral \_\_\_

**Number of workers involved in Tourism operation: (Paid and unpaid - total)**

Peak season \_\_\_

Off season \_\_\_

We operate primarily by appointment/reservation: Yes No (circle one/ write comment)

We welcome “drop by” tourists, who are passing through the area: Yes No Comment: