

How to Conduct a Familiarization Tour

WHAT IS A FAM TOUR?

FAM stands for “familiarization” tour. It is bringing people (in this case, travel media, tour operators and Travel agents) to Idaho to experience what the state has to offer first-hand.

WHY DO WE DO FAM TOURS?

Because when journalists, tour operators and travel agents experience a destination first-hand, they are able to better relay information to their readers and clients. Since their jobs involve dispersing information to large numbers of people, this is a valuable tool.

Imagine if you saw a photo of the Sawtooth Mountains in a brochure. By looking at that photo or reading information about the Sawtooth Mountains online, you would probably have a good idea of what a vacation in the Sawtooth Mountains might be like. However, if you visit the Sawtooth Mountains yourself, you are able to describe to others in much greater detail what there is to see and do, in addition to how it feels to be there.

IS A FAM TOUR RIGHT FOR YOU/YOUR COMMUNITY?

Ask yourself:

- 1.** Do I want tourists to visit my community and are we able to accommodate the needs of individual tourists and group tours? This may seem like a silly question, but in reality, some communities are not equipped to handle tour buses and large groups of people.
- 2.** Are the partners in your community willing to work with the local destination marketing organization and others to provide complimentary or discounted services for FAM tours? For example, a hotel might need to offer a free room or a special rate for a journalist, but if they get mentioned in the article, the advertising equivalency value of the article will far exceed the value of the complimentary room, making it a great return on investment. They also have to keep in mind that if they are not specifically mentioned in the article, providing a complimentary hotel room is still good for the community as a whole because it is bringing positive publicity to the destination.

TYPES OF FAM TOURS

TRAVEL INDUSTRY MARKETING – The purpose of hosting a travel agent or tour operator FAM tour is to either increase product knowledge or the amount of product an agent or operator is selling.

Travel Agents – A travel agent will most likely participate in a FAM tour to increase their product knowledge about a destination so they can better sell it to their clients. Travel agents have become extremely niche-focused, so it is important they are experts in the area in which they specialize. Travel agents also often work in tandem with tour operators in selling their tours. Tour operators will sometimes arrange FAM tours for their top-selling travel agents to make sure they are completely up-to-date on the product the tour operator is selling

Tour Operators – If a tour operator features Idaho product in their brochure, they will often arrange a FAM tour to the state for their reservation agents. This gives the agents the opportunity to experience the product first-hand so they can adequately sell it to their clients. Sometimes a tour operator has little or no Idaho product in their brochure. In this instance, we would organize a FAM tour for their product manager so they could see all that Idaho has to offer, which would ideally result in increased Idaho product offerings.

Media Relations – The purpose of hosting a media FAM tour is to garner positive editorial publicity about a destination and/or organization. This is different than paid advertising in the sense that the

publicity generated through media relations efforts is the editorial opinion of the writer, which is often considered more valuable than paid advertising.

Individual—Many journalists prefer to conduct individual FAM tours, meaning that they want to experience a destination on their own as opposed to with a group of other writers. When journalists travel on their own, they typically have a particular story assignment or they are writing on “spec” and they have a specific story idea in mind.

Group - Create an itinerary geared for 6-8 journalists, which is comprised of a mix of domestic and international writers.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Develop Itinerary

There are several factors that go into developing an itinerary and the way in which you handle each itinerary varies depending on the needs of the group.

1. As a rule of thumb, it is best to first determine which areas of the state or a community the FAM needs to cover, then think about what ties these places together and come up with a theme.

2. You must also take any special requests into consideration. For example, if a tour operator specializing in high-end, luxury resorts wants to arrange an Idaho FAM tour, it would not be beneficial to anyone to have them spend time in a community that only has limited service properties. There is a fine line between balancing the needs of the FAM tour participants and the hosts and it is important that both parties walk away with what they need.

3. Once you have determined a theme and a general idea of the location, the next logical step is to decide the duration of the FAM and the locations where you will spend the night. Generally, anywhere from three to five nights is acceptable and most FAM tour participants expect that they would move hotels nearly every night so they can maximize their time in a destination.

4. Once you have an outline of the itinerary, you will need to secure transportation. If it is a small group, a minivan could suffice. With larger groups, it may be necessary to rent a 15-passenger van or small bus. It is often beneficial to hire a knowledgeable driver that can also serve as a guide and answer questions from the participants. As the host, this allows you to focus on the needs of the group and someone else can focus on the road. Determine ahead of time which activities and meals the driver will be included in so there aren't any uncomfortable situations.

5. Once you have an outline and you know where your overnights will be, begin to fill in the days with activities and assign specific times to these activities. Try to anticipate all of the questions that a FAM tour participant could possibly ask about the itinerary and be sure to include that information. Always tell people when they are expected to be checked out of the hotel. For example, if you want them ready to go by 8:00 a.m., tell them to check out at 7:45 a.m. so they're in the van loaded up and ready to go at 8:00 a.m. Don't forget to pad your time or you will find that you will be perpetually running late throughout the day. Sometimes, that “one last picture” can add another 10 minutes on to the schedule. It's a good idea to allow 15 more minutes than you'll think you need to get from one place to the next. That way, you won't be late and disappoint your hosts. In addition, it is essential to include free time in the itinerary so the participants can have time to explore on their own, catch up on work and have some time away from the group.

6. When planning the itinerary, make sure it only includes activities and experiences that an average tourist is able to do. For example, do not arrange for Native American dancers to perform during dinner if that is not a regularly scheduled activity at the restaurant. They cannot write about or tell clients about things that the clients themselves won't be able to do. An exception to this rule is allowing the participants to experience a particular activity on a day that it is not normally available. For instance, if a museum is only open on weekends, but the group will be there on a Wednesday, it is acceptable to open it especially for them so they can have the experience of visiting the museum.

7. It is beneficial to develop one itinerary for the host/escort, and one for participants. The host/escort itinerary would include more detailed information about the group, special instructions and contact information for all of the hosts. The participants' itinerary, in general, will be "cleaner" and will only include the necessary information.

8. Send the final itinerary to the participants at least a week ahead of time so they know what they'll be doing and seeing. This way, they can do some research before the trip so that they can ask appropriate questions upon arriving at the destination.

Invite Participants

1. First and foremost, you need to determine the ideal number of participants. You must be able to manage the group size and your partners must have the resources to provide rooms, meals and activities for that many people.

2. If you are organizing a media FAM tour, you will want to develop a targeted invite list based on the theme of the tour. This will require some research to determine which freelance writers and publications write about the activities that will be covered in the tour. The best way to find potential writers for a FAM tour is to read other magazines and newspapers so you have an idea of the topics they cover.

3. If you are organizing a trade FAM tour, it is often the tour operator or travel agent that requests the FAM. In these instances, it is important to make sure that their needs match your goals and objectives before agreeing to host the group.

4. All participants should be required to fill out a Release of Liability Form and document: emergency contacts, food allergies and physical limitations.

Execution

1. Always have a host/escort with the FAM tour that is responsible for the daily schedule and to address any needs that might arise. Not having an escort is essentially like leaving the kids at home without a baby-sitter and it is amazing how quickly things will get off course if someone is not there to lead the group. The escort is responsible for keeping the FAM on schedule and serving as the liaison between the participants and the community hosts. This person should be prepared to handle uncomfortable situations and to intervene when necessary.

2. Before the FAM tour participants arrive at the airport, you should communicate a meeting plan and let them know how they will connect with the host. When meeting FAM tour participants at the airport, it is a good idea to hold a sign with their name and the name of your organization. Make sure that you have flight numbers and arrival times with you so you can track the progress of their flights and determine back up plans for delayed flights.

3. Once the FAM finally begins, it is imperative you follow itinerary and stay on schedule. This is important because the hosts have gone through a lot of work to partner with you on the itinerary and you want to deliver what you've promised. When you arrive at a destination, gently remind the host how much time they have with the group. Everyone is passionate about the destination and/or attraction they represent and they can sometimes lose track of time when they are speaking with a group. It puts the participants in an uncomfortable position to point this out to a host, so it is the responsibility of the escort to keep the tour on track. It's also appropriate to discreetly remind the host when you have 15 minutes left so they can wrap up and allow time for questions.

4. Many of the hosts generously give the participants gifts and collateral materials from their destination or attraction. With the intense weight restrictions on baggage these days, it is nice if you can offer to ship everything back for the participant at the end of the trip so they don't have to worry about cramming everything in their luggage. This way, you are also guaranteed they receive the information instead of it ending up in the trash.

Follow Up

- 1.** Within a few days of the conclusion of the trip, send thank you notes to all of the hosts and FAM tour evaluations to participants.
- 2.** There is great value in hosting FAM Tours, but if you don't have a way to measure your return on investment it is difficult to substantiate them. Ask all of your hosts to report the value of the services, accommodations, meals, etc. they donated. This is called in-kind services. Compare the value of the in-kind services to the value of the FAM trip to determine your return on investment. The value of the FAM trip can be measured in several ways including the value of publicity generated, the value of new business created when working with a tour operator or the value of increased sales attributed to a travel agent or reservations staff person who attended the FAM tour. Please note there is typically a time lag of several weeks to several months for a FAM tour to generate results. When reviewing individual trips you may not always have a positive return on investment, but when reviewed as a group the value of FAM tours should greatly exceed the in-kind value.
- 3.** If you organized a media FAM, be sure to keep the hosts apprised as articles are published.

BUDGET

Although many aspects of a FAM tour are complimentary, there are certain aspects which will require some budget.

- 1.** Most journalists do not have the budget to purchase their own airline tickets, so it is often expected that a host destination will cover that cost. If a freelance writer has to pay for their own ticket, that cost is often greater than what they will be paid for writing the article, so it does not make financial sense for them to pursue that story. If you are organizing a media FAM tour, you should seriously consider setting aside the budget to pay for airline tickets.
- 2.** It is quite the opposite with travel industry marketing FAMs, as it is generally expected that the travel agent or tour operator will secure their own airline ticket. An airline will often sponsor the tour and provide airfare for all of the participants.
- 3.** Outside of airline tickets, ground transportation is the greatest expense involved in a FAM. It is beneficial to get price quotes from several companies so you can be sure you are receiving the best value. Transportation costs can vary quite a bit depending on the size of the group and the size of vehicle you require.
- 4.** You should also anticipate that you might not be able to secure every single aspect of the FAM tour on a complimentary basis, so you should have a small amount of money set aside for incidentals. This could include meals, accommodations and admission fees.
- 5.** Many hosts will cover the cost of gratuity as part of a meal or activity, and FAM tour participants are also usually expected to cover gratuity for services they receive. It is beneficial to outline in the itinerary where they will be expected to provide a gratuity and where it will be covered. You will want to have money on hand to cover some gratuities and also to provide a tip for the driver.
- 6.** It is a nice touch to provide snacks in the van, and it saves time so you don't have to stop as much along the way

Time line

Six months to one year out: Determine the theme of the FAM and develop a basic outline of the itinerary to share with potential invitees. Many travel writers and travel industry professionals determine their schedules up to a year ahead of time.

Four months out: Begin working with the hosts on finalizing the larger parts of the itinerary, such as the accommodations. If you don't have an adequate number of people signed up for the FAM tour, start

pursuing your primary and secondary target lists. Send out a request for bids to transportation companies and award the transportation contract to the winning bidder.

Two months out: Start securing the finer details of the trip and make sure that all of the elements are secured. If you are paying for airline tickets, work with the individual participants to make reservations. Send the confirmed participants an updated itinerary and send the hosts an updated list of confirmed participants.

One month out: Do any necessary troubleshooting with the itinerary and make sure that times and locations are all clearly identified. Communicate any changes to the hosts and the transportation company. Send the confirmed participants an updated itinerary and send the hosts an updated list of confirmed participants.

Two weeks out: Send the participants a final itinerary and make sure that everyone involved in the FAM is on the same page so you can anticipate and handle any last minute issues.

One week out: Send all of the participants a final e-mail giving them an update on the weather conditions and letting them know any special packing instructions, especially if an event requires a certain dress code. Give them a way to contact you in case they have an emergency on their day of departure. Go grocery shopping to stock up on snacks and medicine for the van. Print off final copies of the itinerary and include them in a gift bag for the participants that also has destination information and maps so they can follow along. Check in with the hosts before departing and ensure that everyone knows how to contact you while you're on the road.

Tricks of the Trade

- 1.** Carry a cell phone—besides being a good way for you to contact the hosts and vice-versa, a cell phone can be essential for emergencies and unplanned occurrences (flat tires, etc). Get phone numbers (office and cell) for all hosts and be sure to give them yours.
- 2.** Call ahead—it's always good to call your hosts a day ahead of time to reconfirm and make sure you are on the same page as far as time, number of people in the group and more. In addition, you should call if you are running late or even if you're on time. It's nice to touch base with the hosts when you're a few minutes away so that they can greet the group if they wish.
- 3.** Beware of weather—In Idaho, our weather goes to the extremes—from hot to cold and wet to dry. Have a plan "B" in place in case of an unexpected storm. Realize that many of your guests will not be used to these extremes and let them know ahead of time what to expect and what to pack for these situations. Always have plenty of water in the bus or van to hydrate the guests and tell them to drink more water than they think they need so they won't feel dehydrated. No matter what time of year, it's a good idea for the host to have sunscreen on hand in case someone unexpectedly starts to get a sunburn.
- 4.** Build in free time—this is essential. We typically build in free time in the late afternoon, in between an activity and dinner. People prefer at least one hour of free time per day. This way, they can relax, take a shower or just be alone for a bit. Sometimes, journalists use this time to write their stories. Tensions can run high if free time is not provided.
- 5.** Emergency contact—Make sure you have emergency contact information for each participant.
- 6.** Credit cards—Inform everyone in your group that they will usually need to provide a credit card when checking into a hotel for incidentals.