



Building Meaningful
Partnerships Around a Shared
Vision for LGBT+ Tourism

Community Engagement Guide



“Nothing About Us Without Us” is a political slogan often used by marginalized groups to advocate that anyone affected by a policy should be directly involved in the conversations behind its development.

While not typically linked to destination marketing, that sentiment is the ruling force behind this guide. You’ll see periodic “Authenticity Checks” to keep in mind throughout these recommended LGBT+ outreach efforts to ensure you’re always thinking about the people involved first.

By now, you’ve extolled the virtues of the LGBT+ travel market and see the benefits these communities can bring to your destination. Perhaps you’re even ready to devote some marketing budget, employee training and labour to attracting and retaining this profitable market.

However, before generating a plan for engaging this market and satisfying them upon their arrival – you need to first hit pause and think about:

- why you’re after this market; and
- what external perceptions might be if you started your efforts today.

The LGBT+ travel market loves supporting destinations that actively engage with their communities, their causes and their community groups. In other words, they are loyal to the places and businesses that prioritize their communities’ wellbeing, in addition to inviting them to be patrons. They are also a discerning market and they’re good at sniffing out a misaligned attempt to engage them.

In order to develop a successful marketing strategy to attract the LGBT+ travel market – you have to first involve these communities – and ideally, demonstrate that you support them. Your “why” and “how” needs to be bigger than simply chasing a new revenue stream.

So, what does this look like in practice?

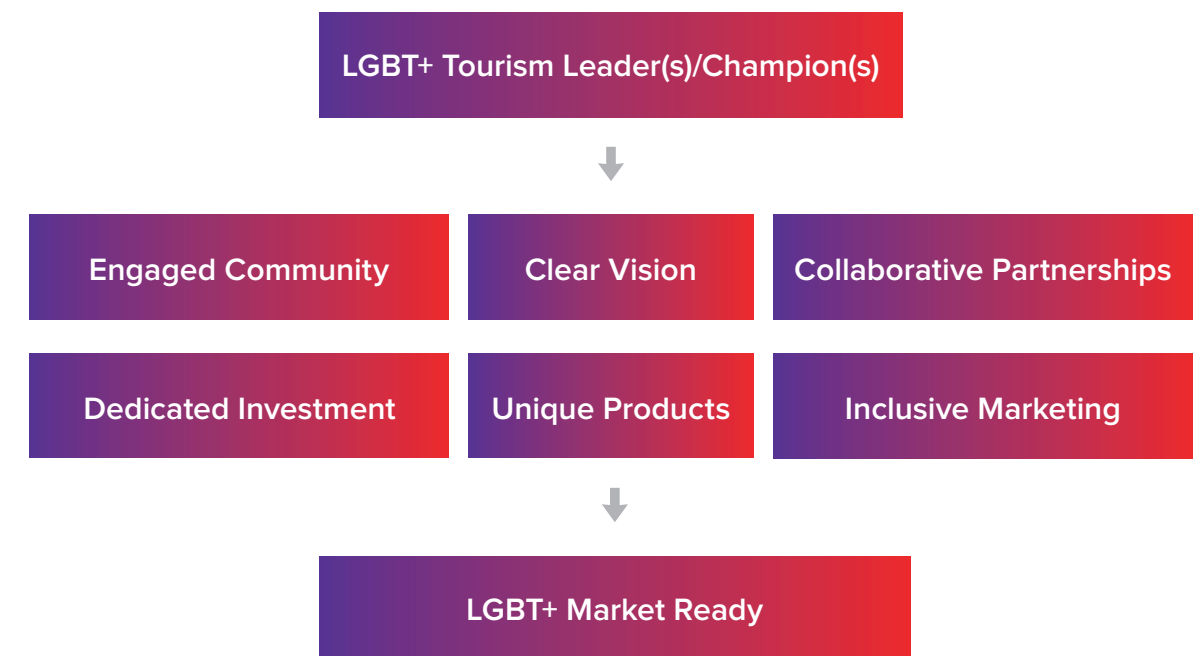
In this guide, we’ll follow the journey behind Pride Winnipeg’s successful bid to host Fierté Canada Pride’s (FCP’s) national Canada Pride Festival.

Winnipeg’s Pride Festival is already the city’s most-attended festival and the fourth largest Pride festival in Canada, attracting over 42,000 people over the weekend’s festivities. As host of the Canada Pride Festival, Pride Winnipeg was preparing to welcome more than double the number of usual participants – between 90,000 and 95,000 attendees. A component of the Canada Pride Festival is hosting a Human Rights Conference, which up until its postponement, saw one of the city’s largest downtown hotels booked to 50% capacity for the upcoming Pride weekend. The Human Rights Conference alone was expected to generate 175 room nights.

“The impact on hosting it can be everything.” -Barry Karlenzig, president, Pride Winnipeg

While previously scheduled for 2020, the festival has been postponed until 2022 (at the time of this publication).

As we walk through the steps Pride Winnipeg took to prepare for this successful bid, we’ll point out the relevant community engagement framework you can follow to help plan for your own LGBT+ tourism success.



LGBT+ Tourism

Leader(s)/Champion(s)

In 2015, Jonathan Niemczak, then-president of Pride Winnipeg, elected himself LGBT+ champion of the Canada Pride Festival bid. He then drove his organization's efforts to prepare their proposal to host, ultimately leading to its success. (This honour has since been passed to Barry Karlenzig to uphold as the current president.)

For any organization, the initial step to achieve LGBT+ community engagement is to find and appoint an LGBT+ tourism leader to champion your destination's goals.

This person (and/or persons) can be an internal member of your tourism business, or you can find a local LGBT+ community member or marketing partner who has the time and resources to devote to co-leading your LGBT+ tourism strategy development and chairing a committee to support these goals. This committee of LGBT+ community members and allies can share the responsibility of moving your strategy forward, ensuring no one person is left without the resources or time needed to reach your destination's goals.

Authenticity Check: If the leader comes from outside of your organization, make sure that they are either compensated for their time or otherwise stand to benefit from the success of your marketing strategy.

Having someone from the local LGBT+ community engaged as a leader for your tourism efforts will serve as a compass for the project – it ensures an authentic link to the community you're seeking to engage with, and it will result in a grounded and realistic approach to help build your team and make your efforts a long term success.

So, Jonathan took point. Then what?

Have an engaged and visible local community

As part of the bid, Jonathan needed to provide letters of support from LGBT+ businesses and resource groups, any major destination marketing organizations and all three levels of government in order to show that not just Pride Winnipeg – but the wider Winnipeg community – stood behind it.

While in this case, he was sourcing a tangible show of support in the form of a letter – you could informalize this process by setting up meetings, hosting an information session, or simply reaching out to relevant stakeholders with your genuine interest in connecting over a shared vision or LGBT+ tourism goal.

Authenticity Check: Make sure you're not just treating this step as something to cross off your to-do list. Connecting with people to share your vision will help you stay on track and motivated by holding you accountable to a larger group. These connections will also set the tone for your authenticity when reaching out to the larger LGBT+ travel market.

Engaging LGBT+ community leaders

Immediately after Pride Winnipeg's bid was won, a task force was created within the Pride Winnipeg committee to action the expansion plans and activities for Canada Pride.

Engaging tourism industry champions

Beyond the internal team, executives from the City of Winnipeg and Downtown Winnipeg BIZ rounded out the committee to ensure many tourism businesses would stand to profit from the city's hosting of a large-scale tourism event and that the city's major stakeholders were in the loop.

Tourism Winnipeg helped with research for the proposal, uncovering LGBT+ travel trends and potential partnerships, and both Tourism Winnipeg and Travel Manitoba supported Pride Winnipeg with grants, which would help offset costs of things like Human Rights Conference scholarships to ensure the event was accessible.

Engaging multi-sector LGBT+ and allied businesses and organizations

In 2015, the city's Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) had just opened and it's still unique in the tourism marketplace. There was set to be a tour offered to Conference attendees, encouraging a visit to CMHR with a reduced \$5 entrance fee, in addition to walking tours of historic neighbourhoods and special discounts for LGBT+ and allied businesses.

Every year, Winnipeg's Pride parade is hosted along Portage Avenue (one of downtown's largest thoroughfares) and the concerts and Pride festival are hosted at The Forks' historic site.

In order to continue this, Pride Winnipeg needs all businesses' (and the City's) support along Portage Avenue since the street is closed to thru-traffic for the parade. They also work with the local LGBT+ Chamber of Commerce, sending web traffic directly to their site to find LGBT+-friendly businesses.

The Forks' relationship has been key for Pride Winnipeg, as they approach their 10th anniversary hosting on these grounds. The operational guidelines created by Pride Winnipeg are shared with all other festivals keen to host on The Forks' site, as it takes all things into consideration (i.e. recommending that all Forks' vendors triple their food inventory), setting the tone for smooth operations of the city's largest festival.

Engaging the local LGBT+ community

Pride Winnipeg's Canada Pride bid featured letters of support from Rainbow Harmony Project (Winnipeg's choir for the LGBT+ community and their allies); Rainbow Resource Centre (which offers counselling, education and programming for LGBT+ individuals of all ages and their families, friends and employers); and Reel Pride Film Festival.

At least a half-day of the Human Rights Conference was set to feature youth programming delivered by the Rainbow Resource Centre and Two-Spirited People of Manitoba Inc. and the festival was to include a full weekend of Indigenous programming for the first time.

While 2020's festivities were moved online, the festival continued with its new kid zone initiative for its second year, seeing an expansion of local performers such as Madame Diva – a French country music artist by day/drag queen by night who taught kids how to speak French with puppets and drag.

In the summer of 2020, Pride Winnipeg had planned to host local community consultations regarding the Canada Pride Festival, but due to COVID-19, knew they couldn't expect proper representation.

“We weren’t going to have all voices at the table – and it’s not fair until everyone’s voices are at the table.” -Barry Karlenzig, president, Pride Winnipeg

While the diverse local LGBT+ community doesn’t always agree on every one of Pride Winnipeg’s initiatives, “We try to work with all of the groups that want to work with us,” says Karlenzig. “As a community, we work for the greater good. We need to put our differences aside – we’re not always going to agree. We always look for the common good to help both organizations to be better for who we serve in the community.”

While planning the Human Rights Conference, there was a national committee made up of diverse individuals across Canada to ensure “no group was forgotten,” says Karlenzig. Pride has a “resurgence fund” for socially-excluded groups to cover performance fees at the festival up to \$750 per group. They are also diligent about researching companies that want to participate at Pride each year – ensuring they have inclusion or diversity policies at their company and are “not just going after the pink dollar,” says Karlenzig.

Authenticity Check: Make sure anyone you collaborate with also has a genuine desire to work with the LGBT+ community and ideally has inclusion training or diverse hiring practices to back it up.

Engaging the community at large

Perhaps the best way to see Pride Winnipeg’s vested community engagement in action was surrounding their decision to postpone the Canada Pride Festival.

Considerations had to be made to protect everyone’s profit margins (including their own). Strategic partners like the City and Destination Marketing Organizations were involved in the decision, and local organizations were made aware of the decision beforehand – and in some cases, were even consulted.

“Club 200 (a local LGBT+ establishment) is booking performers 8 months in advance. We don’t want them to lose this,” says Karlenzig, when discussing factors that led to the postponement.

Of course, this example is for a large-scale initiative. But there are plenty of smaller ways you can start to form meaningful relationships with the LGBT+ community – and smaller-scale approaches can be easier to initiate and may even maximize your impact on a single group or individual.

For example, could you consider a new LGBT+ vendor; host an LGBT+ entertainer once a month; or support a local LGBT+ organization with \$1 per a certain menu item sold during Pride? These types of smaller initiatives can lead to better long-term relationships and multiply the support from the wider LGBT+ community.

Chances are, there are LGBT+ organizations, groups or people around you who stand to gain from something you have to offer – whether it’s exposure, a business opportunity, or a physical space to host an event or committee meeting.

Do some brainstorming with your LGBT+ tourism champion to uncover who might be your perfect collaborator.



Establish clear values, a vision and plan

Exactly how did Pride Winnipeg get so many community stakeholders on board? Ultimately, by engaging with the right partners who could share their same vision, values and plan.

The very first Canada Pride took place in Montreal, and led to the festival doubling in size, and the parade tripling. Winnipeg had every reason to share this vision of doubling their expected turnout, and went to work building plans to deliver against this goal.

They approached collaborators with this vision in mind, and a certain pro-Winnipeg mantra and unrelenting value placed on diversity to ensure no group was left out. The committee met regularly with stakeholders and shared plans as they unfolded.

Authenticity Check: How do you get this type of buy-in from community stakeholders? Show an interest in them and find out about them – and what they stand to gain from sharing your vision and values.

For example, Pride Winnipeg has an incredible relationship with the mayor's office. The current mayor, Brian Bowman, has vowed to meet quarterly with non-profit organizations to hear about what's working for them, what's not, and how the City of Winnipeg can better support them. He has continued to stick to this schedule with Pride Winnipeg, giving them a direct line to the mayor each quarter.

Pride also knows a few key things about the city's reputation and the mayor's goals to help further garner the mayor's support:

1. There is a stain left on the city's public image due to a [2015 Maclean's article](#) declaring Winnipeg to be "where Canada's racism problem is at its worst,";
2. The mayor has a vision for a more dynamic downtown and is very pro-business as a past president of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce; and
3. The mayor would like for Winnipeg to be the "mini Geneva of Canada," a leader in diversity and diplomacy

In other words, Winnipeg hosting the Canada Pride Festival and Human Rights Conference would help the mayor meet some of his own strategic goals. What better way to resolve the stain of a racist reputation than by welcoming a diverse community and creating a stage for discussions on topics covering marginalized groups and human rights issues?

As the festival is hosted downtown, the festival is one of the most dynamic uses of the downtown core, and showcases it in its best light. Downtown businesses especially would stand to benefit from all the added foot traffic.

Indigenous programming was also made a key component for the Canada Pride Festival, which would help highlight improved race relations in the city.

Making your own bid

If it helps, you can think of your LGBT+ tourism goal as your "bid," and think about all of these steps as elements of your successful "proposal" or plan.

In order to be successful, you need those figurative letters of support. The best way to get these is through finding your most authentic matches in collaborators who will share (and stand to gain from) your vision.

If they are the right fit, they will add to, elaborate on and improve your vision – but they will also respect where you're coming from and see you as a true collaborator. They'll share your values and will never make it about just them, but rather the grander vision.

By emphasizing the ways a potential collaborator stands to benefit from your work together, you'll create a meaningful connection and ensure you meet your shared goal: welcoming and delighting LGBT+ tourists at your destination, so they'd be likely to return again.

Build collaborative local, regional and broader partnerships

With the right LGBT+ tourism champion in place and an engaged group of partners with a shared vision and plan, Pride Winnipeg was set to bring in the tourism that was expected for Canada Pride, and to widely showcase an amazing local experience that only Winnipeg could offer – with the shared value of bringing all voices to the table.

Their programming would have been expanded to three days across three stages (its largest festival to date), and they would have welcomed more noteworthy headliners alongside local/Indigenous and kids performers.

They had a discounted flight rate worked out with Air Canada as a major sponsor; special hotel room rates at the Radisson Hotel (to double as an effective measuring tool); and they were investigating a potential multi-destination partnership with the world-renowned Churchill, Manitoba. They were even set to invite post-event feedback with on-site surveys (incentivized thanks to a giveaway sponsored by Tourism Winnipeg) so that they could measure and evaluate the festival's reception.

Without the right local, regional and strategic broader partnerships in place, in short, "We wouldn't have been able to submit (our bid)," says Karlenzig. "You have to have buy-in to show your community's going to work. It would've also backfired within the community, because they'd say, 'why weren't we consulted?'"

In other words, community engagement sets the tone for success with any niche market destination marketing initiative – or anytime you're aiming to meet the needs of a marginalized group at all. *Nothing about us without us.*

For further information on the 6 Essential Elements for Successful LGBT+ Tourism Development and Marketing Strategies, please see CGLCC's resources on Developing LGBT+ Products and Tours, the LGBT+ Marketing Toolkit, the Inclusive Procurement Guide and the Navigating Diversity and Inclusion in the Tourism Industry workshop and Travel Market-Ready seminar.



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