

5 Questions on Innovation with Victoria Clarke, Executive Director, Discover Saint John:

1. How do you encourage innovation in your organization?

Our organization was born out of innovation and thinking ‘outside of the box’ is our daily goal. We have made some strategic changes to our marketing approach and sales cycle. We listen and act on our data and that keeps programs fresh. Our goal is to get the message that Saint John is worth visiting or bringing your event or meeting to – we do that by challenging perception both inside and outside of our city.

2. What are some of the biggest barriers to innovation?

The biggest barrier to innovation is risk-aversion. When you are risk-averse, you miss opportunities. A lot of our success has been about risk-taking and investment leveraging. You need to set and reset aggressive goals, consistently. We want and strive to be the destination of choice in Atlantic Canada – you get there by taking a chance and doing the unexpected.

3. Why do you think innovation is important for Saint John and the province?

If the winner is the one that has the most to invest – we can’t win. But we (Saint John and New Brunswick) are small enough to try and test new methods or approaches that larger regions/populations/companies aren’t ready for. I equate innovation to being agile and our size allows us to be nimble and take chances. I think we need to double-down and leverage the optimism we’re seeing among businesses in our region. The hotel industry alone, in the last 3 years has invested tens of millions of dollars in upgrades and renovations to their facilities. These are businesses with long sight lines that require return on investment.

4. What are some simple things you’ve done to drive change?

The things I’ve done management-wise have been possible because while I have a small team, I have the privilege and luxury of working with experts in their fields of sales, administration, communications and marketing. We’re doing the unexpected. Inviting Sean Yoro aka “Hula” to #SaintAwesome in the summer of 2017 to create a 40-foot-wide by 28-foot-high mural along Pugsley Slip – is one example. His performance art installation revitalized an unused waterfront area. The video his team produced of the creation of his work landed on the front page of CNN.com and went viral with over 20 million views worldwide. Those user-to-user shares reached markets we hadn’t been able to reach before through traditional marketing.

5. What success have you had with innovation in your organization?

Where we shine, is using our marketing expertise to put #SaintAwesome on the map. The partnerships we developed have allowed us to be in more markets and more effective. We've won 4 summit international awards for marketing strategies, including last year's inaugural Emerging Media award for the marketing of Festival of Sail.

As a destination, our city is punching way above our weight in hosting national and international major events, sporting events and meetings and conventions compared to other cities our size. We look around Canada and the world and pursue opportunities, but we rely on local champions in the Greater Saint John region. I think about Aaron Kennedy in Quispamsis helping to lead the charge on the Telus Cup, QMJHL Draft and the World Under-17 Hockey Challenge, Bill MacMackin, who came up with the idea of the East Coast Games and has led the Saint John Fieldhouse project, or Ray Gracewood who created and leads the very successful Area 506 Festival. Discover Saint John doesn't have to create and own everything. We leverage our network to connect people who have similar goals and help them succeed.