

Promoting Eco-Tourism to Kitakata, Japan

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Executive Summary: Promoting Eco-Tourism in Kitakata

Kitakata City's local tourism officials and community groups seek to expand tourism to combat economic decline and depopulation. Drawing foreign tourists to Kitakata requires reaching tourists at the time that they decide on their itinerary in Japan. The Kitakata area is rich in experiences that have the potential to attract tourists and students. This summary document provides marketing recommendations on how Kitakata might increase awareness and more effectively reach and engage tourist markets.

English-Language Eco-tourism Website

An engaging, strong internet presence is crucial to attracting foreign visitors. To this end, we created a sample eco-tourism website (<http://pages.stolaf.edu/rural-japan>). The website highlights the culinary, natural, and cultural experiences that have the potential to draw visitors to the area. Our goal was to highlight the information and aesthetic that appeal to English-reading foreign tourists and provide content that can be added to the official English-language site promoting Kitakata. Additionally multimedia stories and videos add richness to the website. We recommend that Kitakata city share videos and content through social media to lead potential visitors back to the main webpage.

Marketing Report

This report provides a summary of the market research that was conducted during a site visit to the area and subsequent secondary research that is presented in three main sections:

1. Assets & Challenges for Tourism in Kitakata

- Natural beauty, local culture, and fresh food provide a substantial foundation to build an eco-tourism destination attractive to foreign visitors.
- Limitations such as language, accessibility, and availability of accommodations create barriers the city must overcome to attract foreign tourists.

2. Potential Target Market Recommendations

- Kitakata could offer educational experiences to schools and universities in areas of environmental, cultural, and historical studies.
- Kitakata could attract foreign tourists seeking culinary and natural experiences.

3. General Recommendations for Increasing Visitors/Tourists

- A greater English-language internet presence through travel websites, social media, and a tourism website reaches the greatest network of overseas tourists.

FULL MARKETING REPORT: PROMOTING ECO-TOURISM IN KITAKATA

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Introduction and Methodology

Rural Japan is fundamentally changing as it faces depopulation, population ageing, and general economic decline. Ecotourism could be a potential partial solution. Our recommendations are supported by two months of research, including two weeks of field research in Hokkaido and Fukushima, Japan. A number of community partners in Japan assisted our investigation by providing varied activities that highlighted the history, natural beauty and cultural significance of the Kitakata region. On returning to the United States, we gathered additional primary and secondary sources, including scholarly journal articles, books, academic papers and case studies of rural Japan. We found that overseas tourism could be a viable market in aiding rural Japanese communities. To present these findings, we developed a sample website (<http://pages.stolaf.edu/rural-japan>) and this summary plan for Kitakata. We hope that this information assists the Kitakata Tourism Agency, Kitakata Green Tourism and local community advocates, such as Akihiro Asami, to develop strategies to increase visitors to the area.

1. Assets and Challenges for Tourism in Kitakata

A. Strengths of the Kitakata Region for Attracting Foreign Tourists

i. Food

The Kitakata area offers a wealth of fresh, distinctive, and delicious food items. This is a key strength for both foreign and domestic tourism. Kitakata City already is renowned for its ramen, and to a lesser degree, Yamato is known for its soba. Farm fresh products and high quality sake also characterize Kitakata's food landscape.

ii. Rural-life & rich history

Kitakata offers tourists experiences with rural culture, locally owned products, small shops, and opportunities to meet locals. The atmosphere and pace of life in Kitakata contrasts many other popular tourist destinations, such as Tokyo and Kyoto.

- Aizu and Kitakata's rich history and historical significance shape local architecture and landscape.
- Many successful tour companies, such as Oku Japan and Walk Japan, sell vacations in Japan to Western audiences, with a promise to show tourists the "real Japan" in the rural countryside.¹

iii. Natural Landscape

- Due to the wide range of elevation, great ecological variety characterizes Kitakata. A distinctive mix of landscapes, including mountain slopes, plains, and rivers and lakes, allows visitors to partake in a wide range of outdoor activities across varied ecosystems. For example, flower blooms, such as the yellow native day lilies at Oguninuma, attract seasonal visitors.

¹ *Oku Japan*. <http://www.okujapan.com>. Accessed July 13, 2016.

- The Ministry of the Environment’s 2007 report “*The Nature of Japan*” takes note of the distinctive biota of rural areas due to the satoyama landscape.²

B. Limitations of the Kitakata Area to Attract Tourists

- Tourism pamphlets for Fukushima Prefecture generally lack information about Kitakata, which limits foreign visitors’ awareness of the area.
- Travel to Kitakata from the nearest shinkansen (bullet train) station takes nearly two hours, which could be inconvenient and complicated for potential visitors.
- Signs, menus, and other information are primarily in Japanese, which creates a barrier for foreign tourists to participate in activities and patronize local shops and restaurants.
- Tourist infrastructure such as accommodations, car rentals, and tour services is limited in the area.

C. Opportunities for Expanding Kitakata’s Potential as a Tourist Destination

- Kitakata has points of interest for tourists, including hiking, food, and history and an already established a reputation as a tourist destination for ramen. Connecting Kitakata’s preexisting reputation with surrounding towns and areas (like Yamato), to offer more options and activities to visitors, strengthens the potential for attracting tourists. Each area offers distinct attractions and opportunities, which draw a wider range of visitors.
- According to “*Marketing the Uniqueness of Small Towns*,” small towns can strengthen their local economy by identifying the town’s “uniqueness” and then “capitalizing” on it through strategic marketing.³ Many tourists seek an “authentic” travel experience. For example, AirBnB’s latest ad campaign demonstrates an appeal to the desire for authentic experiences.⁴
- Government agencies see the potential of tourism in rural areas. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries emphasizes promoting rural areas through ecotourism and educational efforts in their 10-year Basic Plan.⁵
- The possibility exists to host educational programs for school groups:
 - 92.5% of elementary schools, 96.7% of junior high schools, and 96.2% of senior high schools take multi-day school trips as part of their curriculum.
 - 62.1% of junior high school trips focus on experiences, with 7.9% involving experiences related to agriculture, fisheries, and forestry.⁶

² Ministry of the Environment. 2007. “The Nature of Japan”. *Ministry of the Environment*. Accessed July 13, 2016.

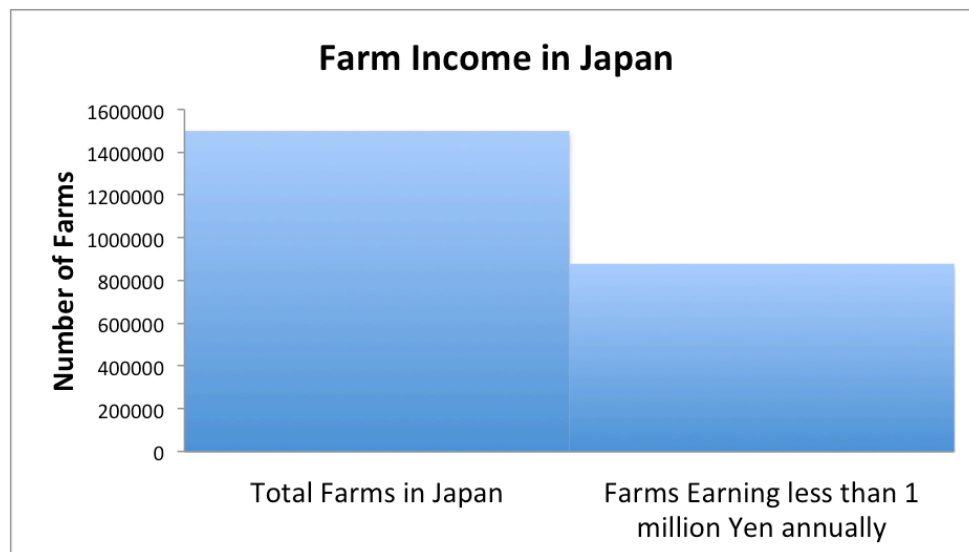
³ Dun, Douglas, and David Hogg. 1995. “Marketing the Uniqueness of Small Towns”. *Western Rural Development Center*. Accessed July 15, 2016.
http://wrdc.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/pub__4990670.pdf

⁴ Richards, Katie. 2016. “Put Away the Selfie Stick and Live Like a Local, Urges Airbnb’s New Campaign ‘Don’t go there. Live there’.” *Adweek*: April 19, 2016. Accessed July 13, 2016.

⁵ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. *Summary of the Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas*. April 2015.

D. Barriers to Growing Tourism in the Kitakata Area

- Aging populations in small towns and cities such as Kitakata lead to fewer people working in the area to support agriculture and promote tourism activities
- Japanese tourists generally do not travel far for tourism. The majority of internal tourism in Japan involves traveling two prefectures or less.⁷
- There negative associations exist with the words “inaka” and “Fukushima” among Japanese people. After the March 11, 2011 disaster, Fukushima acquired a stigma attached to radiation.
- The globalization of food systems makes Japanese agriculture vulnerable to difficult economic conditions. According to Harada, “Among the 1.50 million farms in Japan, 878,000 claim sales of less than 1 million yen per year; the average household income in Japan, incidentally, is 5.48 million yen.”⁸



(Harada 2013)

- Tourism, if improperly managed, increases the likelihood of damage to the environment. According to Kreag (2001), tourism often degrades an environment because visitors may generate waste and pollution (air, water, solid waste, noise, and visual). Improper use and overuse jeopardize natural resources.⁹

⁶ Ohe, Yasuo, Sinichi Kurihara, and Shinpei Shimoura (2010). "Evaluating Linkage Between Operators' Satisfaction and Potential of Local Resources for Rural Tourism: Evidence from Matsuura in Japan". *Abstract: Applied Studies in Agribusiness and Commerce*, No. 4: 33-41.

⁷ Hibino, Naohiko, Shigeru Moriuchi, and Yasuhisa Suganuma. 2011. "Trend Analysis of Domestic Tourist Travel in Japan Based on Data from Tourism Statistics". *Journal of the Eastern Asia Society of Transportation Studies*. No. 9: 826-841.

⁸ Harada, Yutaka. 2013. "Japan's Agriculture and the TPP". *The Tokyo Foundation*. <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2013/japan-agriculture-and-tpp>

⁹ Kreag, Glenn. 2001. "The Impacts of Tourism". *Minnesota Sea Grant*. <http://www.seagrant.umn.edu/tourism/pdfs/ImpactsTourism.pdf>

2. Potential Target Market Recommendations

A. Students

Attracting students to Kitakata for various potential programs, such as study abroad, internships, and school trips, could introduce a new kind of eco-tourism market. Kitakata can cooperate with faculty who seek to offer distinct educational experiences through its hands-on activities such as planting rice, learning traditional crafts, and exploring other environmentally relevant activities.

i. Japanese Students

Primary/Secondary School

- School curriculum for Japanese middle, and high school students commonly include school trips. These trips increasingly focus on experiences.
- Within Kitakata, students can participate in a variety of experience-based activities including working in the rice paddies, learning local crafts, or hiking on a local mountain.

Recommendations

- Basic necessities for school trips include accommodations and classroom facilities. With minor renovations, the city can repurpose currently unused or underutilized buildings such as empty schools and houses for use by visiting groups.
- Building relationships with neighboring towns' schools provides a potential market for school group visits.

Seminar "zemi" Students

- Seminars participate in school trips multiple times a year.
- Groups of seminar students from Tokyo International University, Niigata University of International and Information Studies and Hokusei Gakuen University recently participated in study trips to Yamato. Other university groups interested in agricultural, environmental, or rural studies provide a market for school group visits.

Recommendations

- Prior to effectively attracting more students, the city must ensure consistently available accommodations.
- Reaching this market segment requires reaching out to and forming relationships professors and universities. Contacting universities' international studies offices or environmental studies departments serves as a starting point.

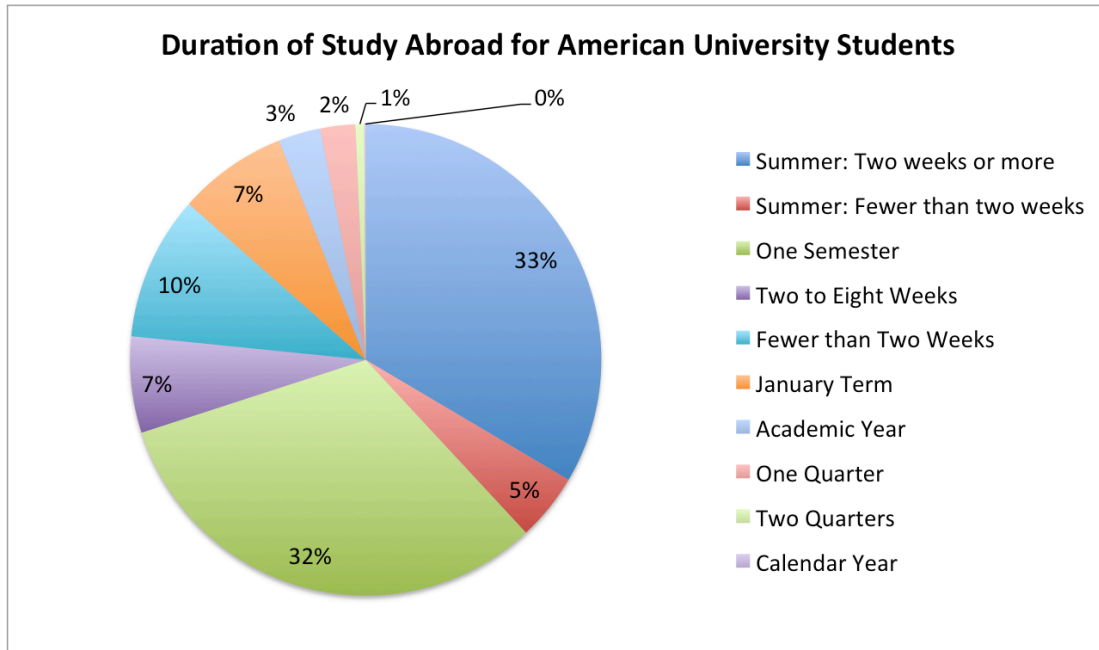
ii. Study Abroad Students

American Study abroad

- A promising potential market for Kitakata tourism lies in international study abroad. According to the Institute of International Education's Open Doors report, over 5,900

American students study abroad in Japan each year, making it the 10th most popular study abroad destination among American bachelorette students.¹⁰

- American university students most commonly study abroad during the summer. A high percentage of students at liberal arts colleges study abroad, with the greatest number of these students studying either the social sciences, or business and marketing.¹¹



(Institute of International Education 2015)

Recommendations

- The success of an international studies program in Kitakata relies on creating a structured, reliable program. Students require a place to stay that includes internet access and locking, full-size bathrooms. Additionally, students need reliable transportation as well as easy access to food. If students stay in Kitakata or even downtown Yamato, access to the train may be sufficient, depending on the students' itinerary.
- International groups require a reliable contact person to answer questions and provide information about the area. Group leaders need to be able to easily reach this person and receive a timely, informative response.
- College consortia and other networks such as ASIANetwork may be able to help connect interested study abroad students and professors with Kitakata.

¹⁰ Institute of International Education. 2015. "Top 25 Destinations of U.S. Study Abroad Students, 2012/13 -2013/14." *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. Accessed July 10, 2016. <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>.

¹¹ Institute of International Education. 2015. "Institutions by Total Number of Study Abroad Students, 2013/14." *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. Accessed July 10, 2016. <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>

International Internships

- Students at US colleges learning Japanese often seek ways to go to Japan. Summer internships provide an avenue to attract these students.

Recommendations

- As with the study abroad student, these students need a stable program with reliable accommodation and means of transport. They also require a supervisor to aid with the transition to life in rural Japan, provide direction for the internship, and answer any questions pertaining to the program.
- Contacting study abroad offices at colleges and universities facilitates the process of recruiting international interns. As a higher percentage of liberal arts students study abroad, organizers should contact these types of institutions first.

B. Foreign Tourists

i. General tourists

- Western tourists, in particular Australians, Americans, Canadians and British, represent a strong potential tourist market. Japanese Government data shows that historical and agricultural attractions are of most interest these tourists, who are most likely to spend money on traditional Japanese crafts and foods. One fifth of American tourists purchase traditional Japanese crafts as souvenirs, and half buy some kind of food or alcohol based souvenir.¹²
- Many tourists desire to get away from cities in nature and enjoy the nostalgia associated within it. They prioritize seeing the “real Japan” in rural areas.¹³

Recommendations

- Promote the city through the internet, guidebooks, and word-of-mouth.
- Develop tourism around pre-existing attractions and infrastructure, including specialties, crafts, and landscapes.
- Package Yamato as a “real rural lifestyle experience” in Japan to attract tourists who search for the “real Japan.” For example, build a travel package with a farming experience, a cooking experience, a local craft, and hiking or flower viewing.
- Provide transportation options within Kitakata/Yamato. For example, public bicycles at Yamato train station would allow travelers to easily access more of the area.

ii. Western Hikers and eco-tourists

- Trekking tour companies target Western audiences. Typically trekking tour participants include couples and solo travellers ranging in age from the mid-30s to mid-70s. These customers tend to come from upper and upper-middle class backgrounds.¹⁴
- 86% of American eco-tourists prioritize experiencing culture, and 79% plan their trips around historical sites.

¹² “Tourism Statistics.” 2016. *JTB 総合研究所*. <http://www.tourism.jp/en/statistics/>.

¹³ McMorran, C. 2014. “A Landscape of ‘Undesigned Design’ in Rural Japan.” *Landscape Journal* 33 (1): 1–15. doi:10.3368/lj.33.1.1.

¹⁴ “Walk Japan Ltd. - Walk Japan Is the Pioneer of off-the-Beaten-Track Walking Tours in Japan.” 2016. *Walk Japan Ltd.* Accessed July 15. <http://www.walkjapan.com/>.

- Most American eco-tourists begin planning international trips 6-12 months before their trip.¹⁵
- This segment must have information about early in their planning process in order to include it in their itinerary.

Recommendations

- Promote the Mt. Iide pilgrimage as a distinctly local experience.
- Promote a hiking package for tourists where they enjoy walking, staying in traditional, local family-run accommodation, and eating freshly prepared, seasonal food.

iii. Food-Interested Tourists

- Food and drink items represent the most commonly purchased souvenirs by Americans, with an approximate 50% purchase rate in 2015.¹⁶
- Food tourism skyrocketed in popularity among western tourists in recent years, with around a third of American tourists claiming that culinary options play a major role in determining their vacation destination.¹⁷
- Westerners consider the regional nature of a dish and its perceived prestige increasingly important, especially Americans. Of the 171 million American adult leisure travelers in 2012, an estimated 31.3% utilized culinary availabilities as a key factor when determining their destination.¹⁸

Recommendations

- Brand fresh, local, organic, tasty food products from the area.
 - Advertise more about Yamato Soba and Kitakata Sake.
 - Make Kitakata's Ramen front and center in marketing materials for the city.
 - Organize promotional events for Ramen.
 - Create a foodie experience and package it in the travel plan of Kitakata/Yamato.

¹⁵ Tourism Queensland. 2000. "The US Ecotourism Market". *Destination Queensland*. Accessed July 20, 2016. https://manuelmiroglia.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/the_united_states_ecotourism_market.pdf.

¹⁶ Japan Tourism Agency. 2015. *Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan*. January 2015 to December 2015. Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. <http://www.mlit.go.jp/common/001088587.xls>

¹⁷ Mandela Foundation. 2012. "The American Culinary Traveler Report". *Mandela Research*. Accessed July 13, 2016.

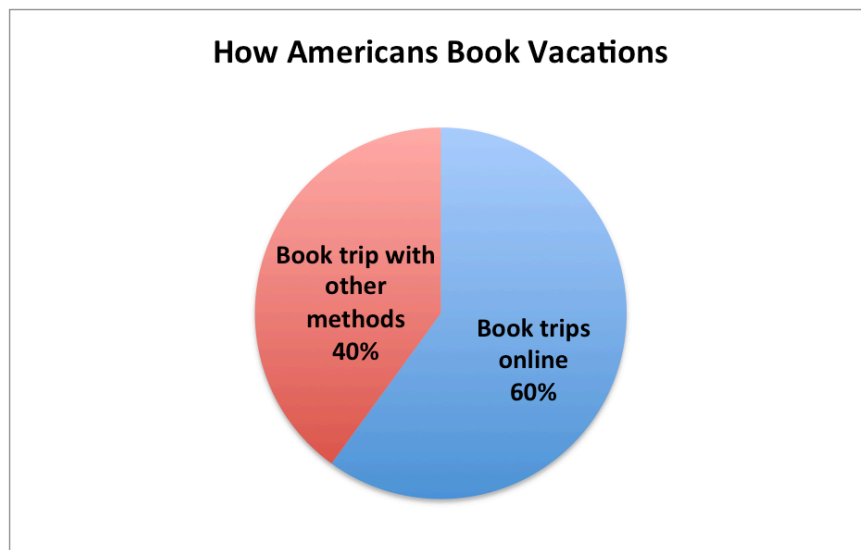
¹⁸ "The American Culinary Traveler Study." 2016. *Hotel, Travel & Tourism Market Research Reports*. Accessed July 15. http://mandalaresearch.com/index.php/purchase-reports/view_document/75-the-american-culinary-traveler-study-.

3. General Recommendations for Increasing Visitors/Tourists¹⁹

A. Internet

i. Website

- Most global travellers today start planning their vacations online. Therefore successful tourism destinations need a strong internet presence with accessible and organized information. The majority of westerners book their accommodation online via websites such as Tripadvisor, AirBnB, booking.com, and hotels.com. Drawing these individuals to Kitakata requires the ability to conveniently book lodgings.²⁰



(Japan Tourism Agency 2016)

- A website for the area should include appealing information and be attractive, but need not look fancy. Well-organized websites clear from excessive text and graphics ease navigation for English-reading tourists. Visitors should find information about activities, accommodation, and transportation on the site.
- Western audiences prefer media, including website, with clean, simplistic styles.
- Tourists should be able to find the website on Google or linked through other tourism sites.
- Make the main page of the website accessible in several major languages so that the potential tourists can find important on the website.

ii. Social Media

- Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and blogs can be useful tools for boosting internet presence. Sharing pictures, videos, and short

¹⁹ Unless noted otherwise, most conclusions in this section are based off of suggestions from the book *Integrating Business Skills into Ecotourism Operations*. (IuCN, Gland, Switzerland and Kuoni Group, 2012. Integrating Business Skills into Ecotourism Operations. Zurich Switzerland.)

²⁰ Japan Tourism Agency. 2016. *Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan: October 2015 to December 2015*. Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

updates on the area through these sites reaches a broad audience with easily digestible information.

- Short videos, hosted on YouTube, can supplement your website and be easily shared via the other social networking sites. Working together, social media sites create a trail of links and information potential tourists can follow.
- Kitakata should set up an English-language Facebook page. When well utilized, such a page promotes the image of an active, vibrant community. Town officials can use the page to make announcements, shops can advertise special promotions, and organizers can post festival details and times. Users, including visitors and residents, can post photos of their experiences in Kitakata. More activity draws more conversation and interest to the area.



- Sites like Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest provide a platform for compiling appealing visuals that foreign tourists can easily access. Many potential visitors already frequent these sites, making them a convenient way to reach this market.
- Creating hashtags on Twitter for Kitakata ramen, or an upcoming festival, or another promotion facilitates the spread of information. Hashtags should be a small phrase that encourages conversation about an exciting topic, such as #ramenshrine or #breakfastamen. As people use it, the hashtag becomes better known, and draws interest. Visitors should be encouraged to use these hashtags in a relevant way.

iii. Existing Travel Sites

- Contact sites such as Lonely Planet, Footprint, Rough Guide, Frommers, Fodor, Bradt, Moon, and others to request a listing in their materials. According to a report by TripAdvisor, an online tourism site frequented by Americans, 42% of travelers worldwide plan or book trips using their smartphones.²¹
- To get a listing in guidebooks, curate detailed information about Kitakata, and invite researchers from travel websites to come visit. Online sites such as Travelfish provide services to set up a listing as well. Any online presence should be mobile friendly to increase accessibility.

²¹ Carter, Kevin. June 30, 2015. TripAdvisor Study Reveals 42% of Travelers Worldwide Use Smartphones to Plan or Book Their Trips. <http://ir.tripadvisor.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=919990> (accessed July 14, 2016).

B. Brochures

- Tourism brochures and pamphlets play a significant role in spreading information and awareness about a place if visitors pass such materials along to others. Many Japanese youth use paper information to plan their trips. In contrast, U.S. tourists typically plan their trips using digital media. A professional designer should craft brochures with a uniform theme with other tourism materials. Distribution plays as important a role as design when it comes to brochures. For foreign tourists, tourism agencies targeted at foreign visitors would be a good place to distribute brochures.
- Overseas visitors typically decide what cities to visit early in their Japanese vacation planning process, even before they leave their home country. Therefore, for start-up tourism operations, producing brochures for distribution in Japan may be ineffective.

C. Language Use

- Tourists need access to core services such as accommodation and transportation. Tourists can better access local businesses when crucial information about accommodations, food, location, and activities is in their native language. Greater ability to find and access businesses leads to greater spending.
- Kitakata already documents some attractions with photos and descriptions in Japanese and English. The Kitakata tourism site also provides maps, brochures, and detailed access information available online in a variety of languages. The translations, however, rely currently on Google, which often leads to inaccurate or incomplete translations. Provide visual aids and other resources to help foreigners bridge the language barrier. Images on menus and storefronts or simple English names encourage foreign visitors to feel comfortable at local businesses.

D. Sample Website (Pages.stolaf.edu/rural-japan)

- The two videos on the site provide a highly sharable and easily consumable form of media. In addition adding to the website, Kitakata city, residents, and visitors should share the videos on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. Doing so would allow the media to reach the largest number of people through a variety of networks.
- The “Personal Stories” addresses the desire of tourists to visualize the type of experience they might have and provides testimony recommending the area from previous visitors. This adds credibility to the site.
- Maps powered by Google Maps, such as the ones found on the ramen and access pages, provide tourists information to get around the area that they can easily download to their smartphones or other mobile devices.
- The clean, easy to navigate design caters to the appeal of this style to Western audiences, who often feel overwhelmed by excessive graphics, colors, and information.
- This site should be viewed as an example, but not an extensive or complete tourism website. In a complete site, the developer should include crucial information such as accommodations and contact information for activities as well as expand on the current material.