



Good Practice Story Title:

“NEO Neon “The Project to Connect the Community with the Future

Destination:

Chikuma city, Nagano prefecture

Country:

Japan

Submitting Organization:

Shinshu Chikuma Tourism Bureau

Category:

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- X Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

Destination description:

Togura Kamiyamada Onsen in Chikuma City is one of the leading hot spring towns in Nagano, boasting a history of 120 years and over 50 hot springs. The hot spring town, surrounded by countryside to the east and west, is rich in nature and is formed on the banks of the Chikuma River. There are also over 70 “sunakku,” or snack bars, in the hot spring town, and the townscape has a distinctive retro atmosphere reminiscent of the mid-50s to early 80s (the latter half of Japan’s Showa era). With so many snack bars, the neon signs in the snack bar district shape the landscape of the hot spring town, maintain the hot spring town's identity, and function as nighttime entertainment for guests. They also function as a community for local residents and help create jobs in the hot spring town.



Summary of Good Practice Story:

In Togura Kamiyamada Onsen, one of Nagano's leading hot spring towns, there are still more than 70 snack bars, and the townscape of retro neon signs and other elements has established its identity. In recent years, the town has been in decline due to changing travel styles, and with fewer tourists and the aging tourist population, it has become difficult to maintain the town's operations. In order to protect and preserve this culture, Shinshu Chikuma Tourism Bureau has launched the "NEO Neon Project," utilizing the snack bar culture that remains in the hot spring town and is working to establish the hot spring town's identity and maintain the local community.

Issues faced:

■ Decrease in restaurants in Togura Kamiyamada Onsen Town

Due to changes in travel patterns and the recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, many stores that have long been loved by locals and tourists have been forced to close, accelerating the decline of snack culture. This has led to an increase in vacant stores, making it difficult to maintain the landscape of the hot spring town. As a result, the survival of the hot spring town is also in jeopardy.

(Number of members of the Togura Kamiyamada Chamber of Commerce and Industry Food and Beverage Division: 89 companies in 2013, 64 companies in 2022)

■ Concerns about a significant decrease in tourists in the future due to the aging of Japanese tourists
About 55% of tourists are over 60 years old, while the proportion of young people under 30 years old is a very low 14% (2019). In addition, 54% of tourists to this area have visited more than twice, and the tourism industry has been supported by stable repeat customers. If we cannot attract young people, the number of visitors to this area will decrease significantly as existing elderly repeat customers age out of travel.

■ Low awareness due to lack of solid branding

Togura Kamiyamada Onsen was selected as one of the "100 Hot Springs Recommended by Spa Therapists" and is known for its skin-beautifying effects, but it lacks any other strong keywords and is unable to differentiate itself from other hot spring resorts to attract customers. There is an urgent need to create key content utilizing local resources that will make people want to visit Togura Kamiyamada Onsen.



Solution:

To solve the above issues, Shinshu Chikuma Tourism Bureau is implementing the "NEO Neon Project".

This project utilizes the snack bar culture that remains in Togura Kamiyamada Onsen to establish the identity of the hot spring town and maintain the local community.

For Togura Kamiyamada Onsen, the neon district is the core of creating a retro townscape, and this project will increase the number of customers visiting snack bars by making it easier to understand how to enjoy and enter snack bars.

In addition, by turning the Showa retro townscape and snack bar culture into content, we aim to attract young fans and a new generation of tourists. This will also solve the problem of aging tourists.

These efforts will increase the number of tourists visiting snack bars, increase the profits of snack bars, prevent them from going out of business, and lead to the preservation of the hot spring town and its townscape.

In addition, the best way for travelers to understand the regional characteristics of their travel destinations is to interact with local people, and communication in the casual space of snack bars may produce new fans of Chikuma and ultimately attract new migrants to the area. In addition, promoting the nighttime economy through snack bars is expected to encourage consumption not only by tourists but also by locals and lead to the revitalization of the entire region.

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

Overview of the NEO Neon Project

- 1 We created a website to introduce snack bars, posting information such as prices, business hours, and images, making it easier for tourists to visit snack bars.
- 2 We held snack bar tours and experience tours for people who have never visited snack bars, aiming to acquire new customers.
- 3 We held briefing sessions and snack bar experience monitor tours for accommodation business operators and restaurant business operators to deepen project understanding in the region and build momentum.
- 4 We held briefing sessions for customers outside the region who have never visited snack bars, aiming to acquire new customers. We also communicated with other regions with similar resources and tried expanding the project.

The project has been carried out as follows.

• Explanation to snack bars

→First, in order to invite participation of snack bars in Togura Kamiyamada Onsen, we explained our project and the significance of doing the project to 20 snack bars that are members of the tourism





bureau. At first, it was difficult to get them to understand the new initiative, but we negotiated persistently.

- Involvement of local stakeholders

To promote the involvement of residents and various stakeholders (Togura Kamiyamada Onsen Ryokan Association, Togura Kamiyamada Food Service Union and Chikuma City), we held briefing sessions to foster understanding of the project. As a result, we were introduced on the websites of accommodation facilities and other businesses, and our efforts expanded.

- Establishment of the NEO Neon brand

We actively promoted the establishment of the brand by creating a dedicated website to embody the image of NEO Neon and holding briefing sessions regularly in other areas. We also regularly held tours using snack bars to gain new customers and appeal to various generations.

- Community penetration, including local residents

To deepen the understanding of local businesses about our project, we held snack bar experience tours for restaurant business operators, accommodation businesses operators and local residents. This deepened understanding of the business that accept tourists, established a good business system for both tourists and the business that accept tourists. As a result, we received cooperation in putting up posters at the restaurants and inns and posting on their website.

Achievements and Results:

As a result of these efforts, there are currently 17 participating snack bars in the "NEO Neon Project," which accounts for 85% (17/20) of snack bars that are members of the tourism bureau.

In addition, snack bar experience tours have been held 7 times, with a total of about 80 people participating.

In addition, in the "Visitor Satisfaction Survey" conducted annually by the tourism bureau, visitors in their 20s and 30s accounted for more than 25% of the total. These results suggest that efforts are being made to appeal to younger generations in their 30s or younger, an important customer segment that we need to acquire.

Appeared in media outlets such as television, radio, local newspapers, and magazines about 30 times. Established new content for the hot spring town and succeeded in differentiating it from other hot spring towns.

By taking advantage of the unique scenery created by the neon signs of snack bars and restaurants scattered throughout the hot spring town and targeting a younger audience (in their 20s and 30s), the project effected an increase in the number of social media posts using photos of the hot spring town. It can be said that it has become a tourist spot attracting young people by young people.

Through the branding of this project, it has led to an increase in customer traffic to snack bars and other establishments and increased profits for them. It can be said that this has deepened the understanding



of participating snack bars and has reduced the number of establishments that are forced to close or lose their jobs.

We were able to reaffirm the possibility of digging up dormant assets and the importance of nighttime content.

By promoting "snack bar culture" that exists in the hot spring town, we were able to acquire new customers and repeat customers. In addition, by holding snack bar tours as nighttime content, it will attract overnight guests and revitalize the hot spring town. At the same time, an increase in the number of customers visiting snack bars helps maintain the snack bars and other establishments. This has led to the establishment of the identity of the Showa retro townscape formed in the hot spring town.

In addition to this hot spring town, there are many other areas that have formed similar snack bar areas and entertainment districts. By spreading this project to these areas, we hope to connect it to a nationwide movement and contribute to further revitalization.

Recognitions and Additional References

NEO Neon Project Homepage

<https://neoneon.jp/>

List of featured media

https://neoneon.jp/?page_id=4378

2023 Visitor Satisfaction Survey

<https://chikuma-kanko.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/1c0015bf2119f2f9356550dcb536e5b5-1.pdf>



