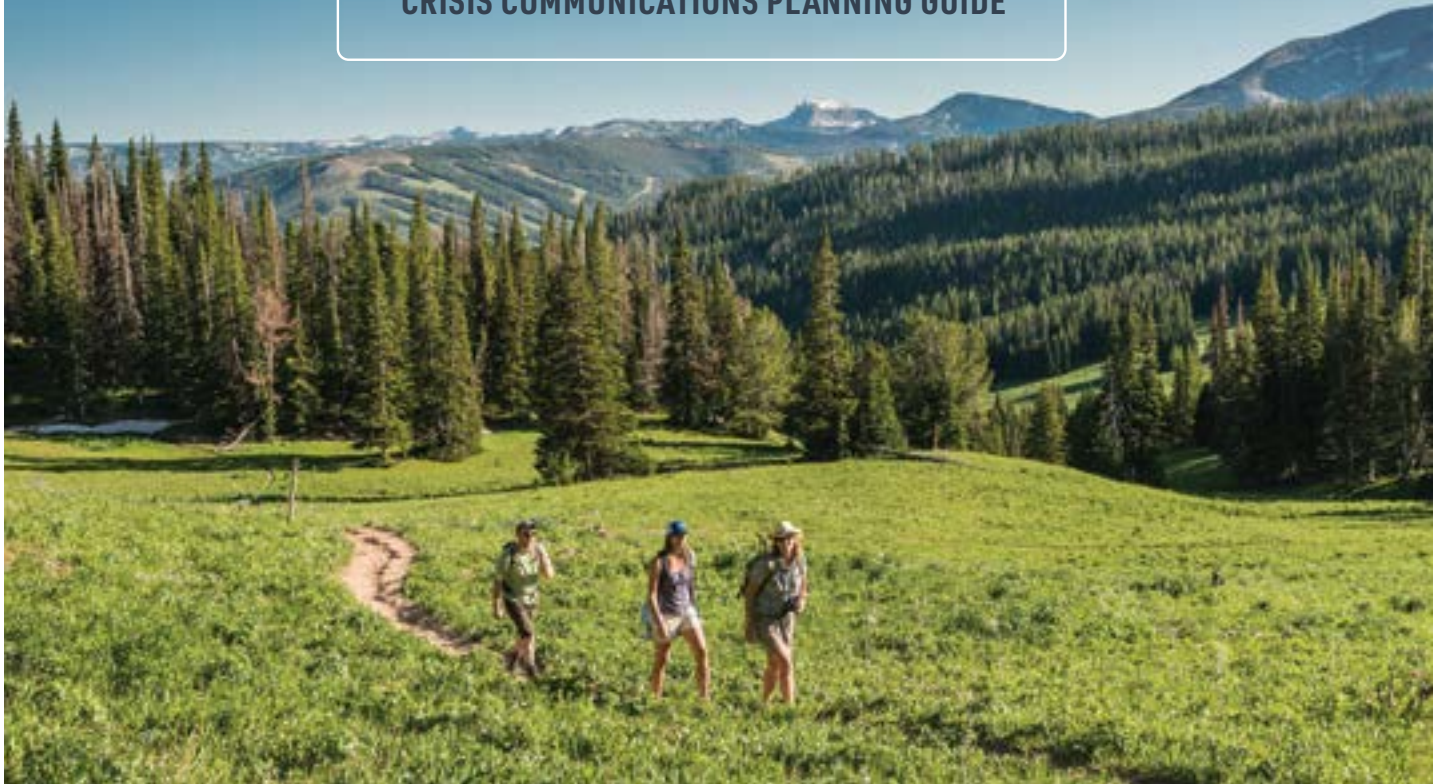




MONTANA'S
YELLOWSTONE
COUNTRY

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING GUIDE



BIG SKY. AUDREY HALL

Crisis Communications Planning Guide

When a crisis arises, it's essential to communicate quickly, clearly, and with an accurate, thoughtful and consistent message. The following is guidance for your organization to develop a plan for communicating with your primary audience during and after a crisis, which may include the public, stakeholders and members of the media.

Use this guide during less busy times of the year for your organization to create a process that works for your team. Once you've done so, make a plan to revisit the guide at least once a year to keep it up-to-date. Look for things, like personnel changes and out-of-date contact information, and incorporate or change your process based on lessons learned that can be applied to your guide. Change the date at the bottom of the page each time you update the guide.

DEFINING A CRISIS

A crisis is any event that occurs suddenly and brings about the possibility of disruptions—like changes to day-to-day operations and long-term impacts—and requires public response. What constitutes a crisis will vary in terms of intensity, implications, and your organization's corresponding response.

Below is a sample framework to think about different types of crises your organization may face, the appropriate response to that crisis, and the goals your organization should work toward when thinking about how to respond.

CRISIS LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	COMMUNICATIONS GOALS
1	<p>A “Level 1” crisis requires the highest degree of escalation. It is an immediate situation that disrupts day-to-day operations and creates impacts that may be felt for years. It involves an all-hands-on-deck, drop-everything response.</p> <p>Take time to think about and write down what types of things might constitute a Level 1 crisis for your organization. [Example: Flooding in Yellowstone National Park at the height of the summer tourism season.]</p>	<p>SHORT-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 2-3 short-term goals for during/the immediate aftermath of a Level 1 crisis. Your goals may be to get ahead of misinformation or to inform the public about what your organization is doing to mitigate the problem. [Example: Work to ensure news reports contain accurate information about your organization and what actions your organization is taking in response to the flood.] <p>LONG-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 1-2 long-term goals to work toward and keep your organization focused in the weeks and months following this type of crisis. A Level 1 crisis may take years to fully recover from. What are your goals once the immediate crisis has passed? [Examples: Minimize financial hardship for your organization, or simply keep your doors open.]
2	<p>A “Level 2” crisis poses the possibility of significant risk or long-term impacts to operations and public perceptions.</p> <p>Take time to think about and write down what types of things might constitute a Level 2 crisis for your organization. [Example: Significant wildfires affecting your community.]</p>	<p>SHORT-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 2-3 short-term goals for during/after a Level 2 crisis. Your goals may be to get ahead of misinformation or to inform the public about how your organization is affected or isn’t affected by the problem. [Example: Publicly communicate whether there are—or aren’t—changes to your operations.] <p>LONG-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 1-2 long-term goals following a Level 2 crisis. [Example: Work with local authorities to identify long-term fire-readiness plans.]
3	<p>A “Level 3” crisis has the potential to cause immediate and long-term harm but is an emerging crisis that can be anticipated and potentially warded off or minimized by addressing it early.</p> <p>Take time to think about and write down what types of things might constitute a Level 3 crisis for your organization. [Example: Public criticism in the news, personnel problems or policy changes that negatively impact your organization.]</p>	<p>SHORT-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 2-3 short-term goals for a Level 3 crisis. A Level 3 crisis is significant, but often something your organization may have time to prepare for or even have some degree of control over. The key with an emerging crisis is to think ahead: anticipate and address the issue before it becomes a crisis. [Example: De-escalate the situation by responding quickly and thoughtfully with empathy and understanding about the criticism. In some cases, an apology may be appropriate. Include any immediate steps your organization can take to resolve the issue.] <p>LONG-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 1-2 long-term goals for a Level 3 crisis. Consider concrete steps you can take to resolve it and prevent future, similar crises. [Example: Work to fully resolve the issue by making a plan for meaningful organizational changes to address the public criticism. Then consider an in-kind level of response—penning a thoughtful op-ed in the newspaper. Express empathy and announce relevant changes you’re making to address the issue.]
4	<p>A “Level 4” “crisis” is a more urgent or visible version of the issues that arise on any given day. It can usually be addressed with some additional effort.</p> <p>Take time to think about what types of crises might constitute a Level 4 crisis for your organization. [Example: Negative social media comments about your organization lacking accessibility for people with disabilities.]</p>	<p>SHORT-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 2-3 short-term goals for a Level 4 crisis. This the type of crisis your organization will run into most often, and likely will have some control over or responsibility for. The key is to be prepared for it and address the issue before it becomes a crisis. [Example: If you know your building lacks accessibility, don’t wait until someone posts about it to address it. When they do, show you hear them by responding on the same platform, thank them for their comment and express any immediate actions you can take to address the problem. If appropriate, invite that person to a longer conversation about how your organization can improve.] <p>LONG-TERM:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish 1-2 long-term goals for a Level 4 crisis. [Example: Work to fully resolve the issue by making infrastructure upgrades to make your organization more accessible. Announce those changes when you’re ready.]

Crisis Communications Plan Worksheet for

CRISIS LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	COMMUNICATIONS GOALS
1		SHORT-TERM:
		LONG-TERM:
2		SHORT-TERM:
		LONG-TERM:
3		SHORT-TERM:
		LONG-TERM:
4		SHORT-TERM:
		LONG-TERM:

THE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

PRIMARY TEAM

Note: Establish who will be the primary communications team responding to the crisis. Create a chain of command and an approval process for reviewing all communications before public distribution to ensure messaging consistency and accuracy.

NAME/TITLE	CONTACT	ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES
First/Last Name Title [This person is likely in leadership for your organization and should be well-versed in your day-to-day operations and overall mission.] [Examples: executive director, CEO, board chair, etc.]	Email Phone Number	Media spokesperson <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stays on-message and communicates publicly in an informative and calm, thoughtful way Activates phone tree Convenes communications team Approves all outgoing communications
First/Last Name Title [This person is usually responsible for your social media accounts.]	Email Phone Number	Digital media manager <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitors social media relevant to your organization during the crisis Posts approved statements and alerts the primary communications team of relevant, important social media posts and conversations Shares appropriate content from partners on your organization's official accounts Responds to social media messages with approved messaging
First/Last Name [This person may serve multiple roles, including one of the roles specified above.]	Email Phone Number	Primary press contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinates responses and interviews Proactively reaches out to and follows up with media Writes statements and messaging for web, social and other content updates Monitors news stories and follows up in case corrections are needed Posts updates to webpage as needed (this could also fall to your digital media manager)

THE CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM FOR _____

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NAME/TITLE	CONTACT	ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

GREATER RESPONSE TEAM

NAME/TITLE	CONTACT	ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES
<p>First Name/Last Name Title Affiliated Organization</p> <p>[This could include partner organizations or loyal customers who you trust to get your message out.]</p>	<p>Email Phone Number</p>	<p>Secondary spokespeople for media, working in close coordination with your media spokesperson.</p> <p>Third-party validators for human-interest stories or additional information for reporters. Must be prepared to speak with reporters and able to be responsive to media requests from the primary press contact.</p> <p>Think of these contacts as essentially a list of references. Build this list by reaching out to potential third-party validators who know your organization well and can bring a validating outside perspective (i.e., loyal customers, partner organizations, etc.). Include their contact information. Finding possible sources for media interviews before a crisis increases the likelihood they will be ready to respond to requests for help on short notice.</p>
<p>First Name/Last Name Title Affiliated Organization</p> <p>[This could be local officials, chambers of commerce, etc., who are working to respond to the crisis, if a Level 1, 2, or possibly 3 crisis.]</p>		<p>Stay in close contact to receive relevant updates, get on relevant listservs or sign up for text updates related to the crisis (Level 1 or 2 crises).</p>
<p>State of Montana</p>		<p>Communicate as needed (Level 1 or 2 crises).</p>

Note: Appendices A-C at the end of this document contain contact information for Montana’s Yellowstone Country tourism partners (chambers of commerce, CVBs, etc.), board members and additional tourism partners (Yellowstone National Park). These are provided as a resource for Montana’s Yellowstone Country board members.

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Process

LEVEL 1 CRISIS

1. Convene the primary crisis communications team.
 - Review what is known and unknown about the situation.
 - Review and assign the roles and responsibilities of each member of the primary communications team.
 - Tailor responsibilities to the crisis at hand. What sort of communication is needed with partners/stakeholders/government entities, the public?
 - Designate immediate tasks for each member of the team.
 - Designate the main point of contact for local businesses, for government entities, and other partner entities.
 - Establish a regular meeting time to ensure close communication within the team while time is of the essence.
2. Activate web and social media strategies.
 - Begin active social media monitoring (see Sample Social Media Posts section). The primary social media accounts for the crisis should remain focused primarily on your who your audience was before the crisis arose. This is where any official statements will be posted and may be the fastest way for your organization to reach your audience.

These accounts are:

 - Facebook: _____
 - Instagram: _____
 - Twitter: _____
 - YouTube: _____
 - If your organization has a website, determine what type of web presence your organization is able to maintain during the crisis. Are you able to create a web banner to alert people to rapid changes in your organization's operations? Keep in mind any website changes will need to be kept up-to-date in real time.
3. Convene the greater response team.
 - Activate the phone tree. Before a crisis, decide on the method of contact: who needs a phone call, who can be on a text thread, and who can be on an email chain.
 - Ensure all team members have the necessary information to respond to their own organization's needs.
 - Establish a regular time for partners to meet to share information and coordinate messaging and outreach efforts while the crisis is ongoing.
4. Draft appropriate messaging.
 - Approve all messaging through the media spokesperson from your team before distributing it.
5. Begin responding to press inquiries.
 - Coordinate interviews.

EXAMPLE: LEVEL 1 CRISIS TIMELINE

DATE/TIME	TASK	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE	DETAILS
9:00 am (News Breaks)	Convene the primary crisis communications team	Media spokesperson	
9-COB	Communications, Social Media and Information Monitoring	Primary press contact, media spokesperson, digital media manager	Monitor news reports to determine the scope of the event.
9:30 am	Activate online strategy	Primary press contact, media spokesperson,	Create a webpage to relay new information about the crisis and how it affects your organization, create a web banner that appears across all of your webpages.
10:00 am	Greater Response Team/Partner Information Sharing Meeting	Primary press contact, media spokesperson, digital media manager	Share on-the-ground information and determine what's needed from partners going forward. Establish a regular time for this meeting while the crisis plays out. Meeting regularly helps key players stay informed, reinforces a consistent message, and avoids duplicating efforts when time and staff resources are scarce.
10:00 am	Prepare messaging and reaction statements	Primary press contact with media spokesperson	
10-COB	Stand by for fielding press and other inquiries	Primary press contact	
10:30	Post messaging on social	Digital media manager	
10:30-weekend	Monitor social media	Digital media manager. Also: primary press contact, media spokesperson	Respond per approved language and policy.
Week 2	Monitor news reports, proactively seeking out media opportunities	Primary press contact. Also: digital media manager	

Dealing With a Level 1 Crisis

The scope of a Level 1 crisis may seem overwhelming. However, you can narrow the focus of your organization's response and get through the necessary steps by remembering your organization's primary audiences and responsibilities. Remember that the first days and weeks will be the most information intensive. Responding quickly and accurately is key.

EXAMPLE OF MEDIA TIPS + TALKING POINTS

Crisis Scenario: Historic Flooding in Yellowstone National Park

Visitors likely won't understand the scale of the crisis on the ground. In addition, they may not have a reference point for where things are in relation to one another, or how big Montana is (just because one community is impacted, it doesn't mean the whole state is off-limits). It's important to inform visitors about what is open and available, even if some areas or accommodations are closed.

We can help encourage safe travel to the region by getting the word out about where visitors can travel in Montana's Yellowstone Country and what they can experience while they're here. Help communicate the resilience and strength of our communities, including recovery efforts underway.

- Authenticity is key. You, your business, and your neighbors may be affected by the crisis. It's okay to say how this has changed things. If visitors or others are interested in helping, direct them toward websites and places they can volunteer.
- Don't dwell on the negative. Many of our communities rely on our state's robust tourism economy, so it's important to share information about resilience and recovery efforts.
- Educate visitors. Inform visitors about what they can do and where they can go. While some areas may not be able to welcome visitors at this time, it's important to remind folks that there is a good portion of Montana's Yellowstone Country region (and the rest of the state) that is eager to host visitors.
- Accuracy is vital. Be specific about communicating which restaurants, lodging facilities, recreation areas and attractions are open. You know best what's happening on the ground—what's open, what will soon be open, and which businesses are ready to serve guests right now. Don't speculate or speak to what you don't know.
- Events are great reasons for people to visit. Let visitors know what events are happening in your community right now and in the coming days, weeks and months that they might be interested in planning a trip around. Direct them to places they can get more information.
- Remind visitors to pack their patience and "Know Before You Go":
 - Check with local businesses for hours of operation and ability to accommodate.
 - Make reservations in advance.
- Pack your patience, understanding and sense of adventure—travel plans may need to adapt as impacted communities adjust.

SAMPLE TALKING POINTS

- As many of us have witnessed time and again, Montanans are stepping up to help their neighbors and communities.
- There is a lot we don't know yet about how our communities will ultimately be impacted, but we are continuing to stay in close contact with them and offer our resources in support.
- For communities that were not impacted or are already welcoming visitors back, we want visitors to know they can still have their Yellowstone adventure here—it just may look a little different.
- We invite folks to come and explore alternative places in Montana north of the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park.
- Many events are still going on in our area as planned—everything from live music events happening today to rodeos throughout the summer.
- You can go to visityellowstonecountry.com to find more events, itineraries, and information about traveling to all our communities. And, check with our local chambers, convention and visitors bureaus and social media pages for the latest.
- We want to remind visitors to "know before you go." Before visiting, check with local businesses for hours of operation and ability to accommodate. Make reservations in advance.
- Also, please pack your patience, understanding and sense of adventure—you can find many things you were looking for if you venture farther into Montana.

General Social Media Do's + Don'ts

DO:

- Check the facts before posting.
- State the facts only. Do not make assumptions, speculate or repeat unverified information.
- Proofread your copy before posting. Grammatical and spelling errors can be distracting and take away from the purpose of the message.
- Focus on the positives and businesses/services that are open. Always emphasize what is open first, and then list what is closed if necessary.
- Assist visitors by redirecting them to alternative activities.
- Encourage visitors to continue their travel in Montana. Remind them this is a big place with unaffected areas and hidden gems for visitors to see.
- Remind visitors to check ahead with their destinations to see which services, businesses and activities are open.
- Use words like “resilience.” Our communities have been through crises before, and their strength is tested.
- Only post images/videos your organization has permission to use. If you are unsure, ask the photographer directly for permission to use the photo before posting it.
- Share positive messaging:
 - Post photos of what is open.
 - Post close-up photos—of people, flowers, animals, food, drinks, etc.—rather than photos of flooded or damaged landscapes and buildings.
 - Post links to activities that can be done safely both outdoors and indoors (dining, breweries/cideries/distilleries, concerts, museums, theaters, local shopping, spas, etc.).
 - If you have permission to use professional photographs, give the photographer credit wherever possible.
 - Use proper images sized for the correct media outlet:
 - Instagram: 1080x1080 pixels or 1080x1350 pixels
 - Facebook: 1200x630 pixels or 1200x1200 pixels
 - Twitter: 1024x512 pixels

DON'T:

- Use words like “indefinitely” when referring to closures (roads, businesses), ongoing repair work, or services that may resume. Use “currently” or “temporarily” if it is uncertain when something might open.
- Dwell on the negative. Instead, work to help visitors have a great vacation despite some hurdles caused by the crisis.
- Share photos or news of the crisis on your personal or company/organization’s social media channels. Remember, your audience is visitors and potential visitors. Show the beauty of your community and other activities still available.
 - Our social audiences often include friends, family and customers from around the world. Not everyone who views, comments or shares your post understands Montana’s vast landscape.
 - Don’t misinform visitors when it comes to current conditions. Instead, try to focus on positives rather than negatives.
 - If you need to share crisis-related information because your business hours are affected, your business is closed because of the event, etc., be sure to use words such as “temporarily” and “currently” and avoid over-dramatizing.
- Use grainy or poor-quality images/videos.
- Post photos you don’t know the origin of or have the appropriate rights or permission to use.

Sample Social Media Posts

Below are sample social media posts written in response to the historic flooding in Yellowstone National Park in June 2022, starting immediately after the flooding to the days and weeks following.

Immediately following the crisis:

- If you're looking for travel-related safety updates about the flooding in Yellowstone National Park, please visit [webpage with links to services like MTDOT, USGS, and Yellowstone National Park].
- If your travel plans have been affected by the flooding in Yellowstone National Park, please visit [webpage] for alternate lodging and itineraries.

When the crisis had subsided, but impacts remained:

- There's still so much to do and see in Montana just north of Yellowstone National Park. Go to visityellowstonecountry.com to plan your Yellowstone vacation.
- If you've ever wanted to experience @YellowstoneNPS without the crowds, now's the time! Here's how to visit the park right now: [Link to YNP resources or news stories about traveling to the park following the flood].

Important Links + Resources

COMMUNITY UPDATES

For the latest information about what’s happening in each of our communities, please visit:

- **Belgrade**
 - Chamber of Commerce | Convention and Visitors Bureau visitbelgrade.org
- **Bozeman**
 - Chamber of Commerce bozemanchamber.com
 - Convention and Visitors Bureau visitbozeman.com
- **Big Sky**
 - Chamber of Commerce bigskychamber.com
 - Convention and Visitors Bureau visitbigsky.com
- **Cooke City**
 - Chamber of Commerce cookecitychamber.org
- **Gardiner**
 - Chamber of Commerce | Convention and Visitors Bureau visitgardinermt.com
- **Livingston**
 - Chamber of Commerce livingston-chamber.com
 - Convention and Visitors Bureau explorelivingstonmt.com/cvb
- **Manhattan**
 - Chamber of Commerce manhattanareachamber.com
- **Stillwater County**
 - Chamber of Commerce stillwatercountychamber.com
- **Sweet Grass County**
 - Chamber of Commerce bigtimber.com
- **Red Lodge**
 - Chamber of Commerce redlodgechamber.org
 - Convention and Visitors Bureau redlodge.com
- **Three Forks**
 - Chamber of Commerce threeforksmontana.com
- **West Yellowstone**
 - Chamber of Commerce | Convention and Visitors Bureau destinationyellowstone.com
- **Yellowstone National Park**
 - National Park Service nps.gov/yell/index.htm

STATEWIDE PARTNERS

For places to direct visitors to in the rest of our vast state, check our tourism partner pages:

- Visit Montana visitmt.com
- Central Montana centralmontana.com
- Glacier Country Montana glaciermt.com
- Missouri River Country missouririvermt.com
- Southeast Montana southeastmontana.com
- Southwest Montana southwestmt.com

TRAVEL RESOURCES

- Call 511 for continual updates about weather-related road conditions, road work, commercial vehicle restrictions, road closures, chain requirements and other travel information via the phone or the internet.
- Montana Department of Transportation road conditions 511mt.net
- U.S. Geological Survey water resources waterdata.usgs.gov/mt/nwis/current?type=flow
- Yellowstone National Park nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/flood-recovery.htm
- Stillwater County stillwatercountymt.gov/stillwater-county-alerts
- Carbon County carboncosheriff.org
- Park County facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064731036817
- Gallatin County readygallatin.com

Recreation Alerts and Restrictions:

- Custer Gallatin National Forest fs.usda.gov/main/custergallatin/home
- Beartooth Ranger District 406.446.2103
- Bozeman Ranger District 406.587.6701
- Gardiner Ranger District 406.848.7375
- Hebgen Lake Ranger District 406.823.6961
- Yellowstone (Livingston) Ranger District 406.222.1892
- Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks experience.arcgis.com/experience/ba378e9a50ec4d53bbe92e406b647d3e
- Bureau of Land Management Montana/Dakotas blm.gov/montana-dakotas
- Montana Department of Transportation mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/detailed.aspx
- Federal reservation system for recreation sites in the U.S., including camping, lodging, tours, permits and passes mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/detailed.aspx

Follow local news for additional updates:

- Belgrade News belgrade-news.com
- Big Timber Pioneer bigtimberpioneer.net
- Bozeman Daily Chronicle bozemandailychronicle.com
- Carbon County News carboncountynews.com
- Livingston Enterprise livingstonenterprise.com
- Lone Peak Press
- Stillwater County News stillwatercountynews.com

Appendix A

Montana's Yellowstone Country Partners - Chambers and CVBs

CHAMBER/CVB	NAME	CONTACT	ADDRESS
Belgrade Chamber of Commerce	Hannah Gee	406.388.1616 hgee@belgradechamber.org	10 E. Main Street Belgrade, MT 59714
Big Sky Chamber of Commerce	Brad Niva	406.995.3000 brad@visitbigskymt.com	88 Ousel Falls Rd., Unit A1 Big Sky, MT 59716
Big Timber (Sweet Grass County) Chamber of Commerce		406.932.5131 chamber@bigtimber.com	1350 Highway 10 West Big Timber, MT 59011
Bozeman Area Chamber of Commerce	Daryl Schliem, executive director	406.586.5421 dschliem@bozemanchamber.com	2000 Commerce Way Bozeman, MT 59715
Bozeman CVB	Daryl Schliem, executive director	406.586.5421	2000 Commerce Way Bozeman, MT 59715
Colter Pass-Cooke City-Silver Gate Chamber of Commerce	Autumn Pitman, executive director	406.838.2495; exec.cookecitychamber@gmail.com	206 West Main Cooke City, MT 59020
Gardiner Chamber of Commerce & CVB	Terese Petcoff, executive director	406.848.7971 executivedirector@gardinerchamber.com	216 Park Street Gardiner, MT 59030
Livingston Area Chamber of Commerce	Leslie Feigel	406.222.0850 info@livingston-chamber.com	303 East Park Street Livingston, MT 59047
Explore Livingston	Kris King, executive director	406.224.3904 info@explorelivingstonmt.com	124 South Main, Suite 210, Livingston, MT 59047
Madison Canyon Earthquake Area and Visitors Center	Jason Brey, district ranger	406.682.7620	US Highway 287 West Yellowstone, MT 59758
Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce	Brittany Braaksma, executive administrator	406.284.4162 bnbservices.brittany@gmail.com	112 South Broadway Manhattan, MT 59741
Red Lodge Area Chamber of Commerce/Visitors Center	Sherry Weaver	406.446.1718 director@redlodgechamber.org	701 Broadway Ave. N. Red Lodge, MT 59068
Stillwater County Chamber of Commerce		406.322.4505 admin@stillwatercountychamber.com	546 North 9 th , Suite 50 Columbus, MT 59019
Three Forks Chamber of Commerce		406.595.4755	110 North Main Three Forks, MT 59752
Visit Big Sky	Brad Niva, executive director	406.995.3000 brad@visitbigskymt.com	88 Ousel Falls Rd., Unit A1 Big Sky, MT 59716
West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce/Convention and Visitors Bureau	Katrina Wiese	406.646.7701 president@destinationyellowstone.com	30 Yellowstone Ave. West Yellowstone, MT 59758
Yellowstone Association		406.848.2400	308 Park Street Gardiner, MT 59030

