



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Obuse Mini-Marathon: a “Run & Eat & Interact” opportunity to enjoy unexplored charms of rural Japan

Destination, Country: Obuse, Japan

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In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

About 8 thousand runners enjoy true treasure of rural Japan.



Summary:

Obuse town is famous for its cultural heritage such as historic landscape, artwork by Katsushika Hokusai, and chestnut confectioneries. Although more than 1 million visitors come to the town annually, most visitors surge at a few specific blocks around the central area, where most cultural sights are located, and the number of visitors fluctuates heavily between the peak period in autumn and other seasons.

“Obuse Mini-Marathon” (“mini” also means “to see” in Japanese) is held in July as an attempt to tackle both geographical and seasonal concentration that the local tourism is facing, and provide an opportunity for visitors to run through the beautiful nature and farm lands across the town and enjoy the true treasure of rural Japan with their eyes, palates (full of local food and drinks at the aid stations), and hearts (interaction with local residents.)

It has also become an important occasion for local cultures, where many town residents not only participate as volunteers, but also express themselves through music and performances, creating an atmosphere of hospitality for the runners throughout the town.

Each year, approximately 8,000 runners and their families and friends visit the town for the marathon, out of which 70 percent have joined the event in the past. This high repeat ratio shows the level of satisfaction by the participants and contributes to the town’s enthusiastic fan base, in contrast to unsustainable “one-off” visitors. There are even 30 runners who have participated in every marathon from the first one in 2003 to this year's 20th marathon.





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Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Obuse, a beautiful town blessed with an abundance of nature, prospered as a transportation and economic hub during the Edo period. It is now a popular tourist destination that draws nearly 1.0 million people every year as a "Town of Chestnuts, Hokusai and Flowers."

Obuse chestnuts have been renowned for their deliciousness since the Edo period, and were even offered as a gift to the shogun. Inheriting this tradition, many chestnut confectioners are located in the town. One of the reasons Obuse became a booming tourist destination was the opening of the Hokusai Museum in 1976, which exhibited the ukiyo-e and paintings of Katsushika Hokusai. Hokusai stayed in Obuse in his later years and left many excellent works.

In the 1980s, the "Townscape Beautification Project" began, which was a bottom-up initiative by the local stakeholders to discuss the ideal state of the town and redesign the town's central area. Under the concept of "Landscape Amendment," instead of the traditional "Landscape Preservation," the town sought a community where residents and visitors could both spend time comfortably by introducing new elements while also making use of the traditional assets.

Since then, the philosophy of "what's inside is yours, while what's outside is everyone's" has spread throughout the town, and the warm-welcoming attitude towards visitors by the locals has become one of the town's important charms. The "open garden" culture is a good example, in which the local households let visitors enter and wander around their gardens to appreciate the beautiful flowers together, lifting up Obuse to be known as the "Town of Flowers" by visitors.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

A large percentage of the visitors to Obuse has been participants of large-scale bus tours. Most of these visitors have come for the chestnut confections offered in town from September to November, with much of the visitors concentrated during this period. This has had a negative impact on the lives of the town's residents, as they are unable to enter restaurants as usual during the height of the period. Then as if the town were hit by an infectious disease or disaster, at the tailend of the period, the number of visitors would decrease significantly, posing a major economic risk to the town's businesses.

In addition, the area visited by visitors is concentrated in a small area in the center of town, causing road congestion that has a negative impact on the quality of life of town residents and visitors' satisfaction. Visitors have had little opportunities to enjoy the charm of the beautiful rural landscape in the surrounding area of Obuse.

Besides its chestnuts, Obuse also has other specialty products such as grapes, apples and cherries, along with their by-products. However, compared to the traditionally famous chestnuts and chestnut confections, these specialty products have not received as much media exposure so their appeal has not been fully communicated to visitors.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

- A half marathon to enjoy Obuse's food and culture was planned to attract visitors during the summer season, rather than the busy fall season.
- Named "Obuse Mini-Marathon" with the concept of "going to the embankment, running on the field roads, running in the alleys of a town unlike a city with many visitors, the event is designed for runners to enjoy the beautiful rural scenery of Obuse Town and discover new attractions. Since the runners would be running on roads that are among residential roads and farmland, the understanding and cooperation of the townspeople was essential, and the consent of the leaders of all 28 neighborhood associations in the town at the time was obtained. Discussions were also held with the police to ensure safety.
- Planning began in April 2003, and the first event was held three months later in July 2003, with 752 participants.
- With the cooperation of local businesses and farmers, the support provided along the route are not limited to chestnut confections, but also include a variety of local specialties, such as locally grown fruit, sweets made from locally grown fruits, and milk produced by local businesses.
- With the cooperation of local companies that handle EVs, a small EV will be used as the lead vehicle. In 2022, Allbirds will sponsor the event to calculate CO2 emissions and offset carbon dioxide emissions, and there will be teams of "Zero Garbage Runners" who will pick up trash after the participants run. Also, the event will be operated in consideration of environmental sustainability, such as local train operators will run extra trains to reduce the use of private cars.
- Not only do many local residents participate in the event as volunteers, but they also perform traditional musical instruments such as taiko drums, shamisen, and shakuhachi (bamboo flute) and green tea ceremony along the route, providing opportunities to preserve and pass on the culture of the town.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

- Not only do many town residents participate as volunteers, but in addition play traditional musical instruments, play in bands and dance, providing an opportunity for the town residents to express themselves and creating an atmosphere of hospitality for the runners throughout the town. For runners, the constant cheering is the biggest reason for their high satisfaction, and 70% of participants are repeat runners.
- In the 1980s, the town initiated a "Townscape Beautification Project" to create a townscape space where residents and visitors can spend time comfortably. This heightened the townspeople's awareness of the landscape, and the concept of "what's inside is yours and what's outside is everyone else's" permeated the entire town of Obuse. This concept is to use the areas along the street that are visible as public space, even if they are on private property. This culture that had been fostered also influenced Obuse to accept marathons on the streets of part of daily life.
- Businesses in the town offer their products as aids at aid stands and sponsorships to promote the event to participants, and the event is managed with the cooperation of the businesses in the town.
- Unlike most marathons, "Obuse Mini-Marathon" is easy for people to participate in, with specialties from Obuse available at the aid stand to eat, a "Best Costume Award" that allows participants to wear a costume, and a longer time limit of 5 hours due to the small differences in course elevation. The course is designed to make it easy for participants to enjoy the charms of Obuse.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

- Initially, there was much opposition and concern from the townspeople about using residential roads and farmland as the course, and police permission could not be obtained.

Following persistent negotiations with the leaders of the 28 neighborhood associations in the town at the time, the executive committee members were able to obtain the approval of all leaders.

After repeated discussions with the police, we were able to obtain permission to review the course more than 10 times.

- The time limit was set at 5 hours, a very long time for a half marathon, to make it easier for people to participate and to allow them to enjoy the charms of Obuse, but this required longer hours of traffic control and safety for participants.

With the cooperation not only of the town of Obuse, but also of the sports associations, traffic safety associations, and schools in the surrounding areas, we were able to double the number of volunteers as planned. As a result, we were able to gain the understanding of the police.

For many elementary school students, this was their first volunteer experience, and in addition to the learning experience, the number of town residents who supported the project through their children as a family increased.

- Many participants visited the town in their own cars to participate in the event, which caused greenhouse gas emissions and congestion along the town's roads, negatively impacting the lives of the town's residents. There is also the issue that a lot of garbage is generated as a result of the provision of aids.

By working with local train operators to provide temporary train service, we were able to reduce the use of private vehicles and alleviate road congestion in the town.

Greenhouse gas emissions from the convention were calculated and partially offset in 2022 with the sponsorship of Allbirds.

As for waste, we are working with Zero Waste Japan to determine the amount of waste emissions and formulate measures to reduce them, and plan to implement measures from 2024 with a focus on reducing plastic containers and packaging used in providing aids.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

- With a population of 11,000, it is the smallest municipality in Nagano Prefecture, yet about 8,000 runners and their families and friends visit the town each year to watch the marathon. The first edition had 752 participants, but from there the number has increased by about 1,000 each year, and since the 8th edition in 2010, about 8,000 people have participated each year, excluding the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Seven in 10 of the participants are repeaters, and there are 30 runners who have participated in every race from the first race in 2003 to the 20th race this year.

- Approximately 1,500 volunteers, mostly town residents, participate in the operation of the event annually.

- Due to the long time limit of 5 hours for a half marathon, the finish rate has exceeded 99% every year since the fourth race in 2006, suggesting that participants have plenty of time to enjoy the attractions of Obuse. The oldest runners are over 70 years old every year (the oldest being 93), making the event accessible to people of all ages.

- Approximately 15 aids featuring local specialties, such as local agricultural products including apricots in syrup, nectarines, tomatoes, and nozawana (a local species of turnip greens), as well as processed local agricultural products such as gelato, fruit crepes, and miso pickles, are displayed each year, contributing to the support and promotion of local businesses and farmers in the town. The event is sponsored by Allbirds.

- Through the sponsorship of Allbirds, CO2 emissions from the event were calculated (approximately 180 tons), 50 tons of which were offset through forest planting activities in Nagano Prefecture.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

- By including in the course places that are not visited by many visitors, but places that are not usually visited by out-of-towners, it is possible to show visitors new attractions of tourist attractions.
- By providing local specialties as aids, it will support local businesses and encourage the local products.
- By creating opportunities for local residents to showcase their traditional culture, in addition to being involved in the event's operation, the event will contribute to the preservation and transmission of culture and provide an opportunity for self-expression by local residents.
- Understanding and cooperation from the local community is essential, and dialogue with community leaders, such as the head of the local community, is important.
- By allowing various ways of participation other than competition, such as lengthening the time limit or allowing participants to dress up in costumes, a wide range of participants can be attracted, and as a result, the charm of the tourist attraction can be conveyed to many people.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

- "Obuse Mini-Marathon" official website
<https://www.obusemarathon.jp/>
- The highlight of the 19th "Obuse Mini-Marathon" (movie)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x91yDiKJdJA>
- The collaboration website of Allbirds with "Obuse Mini-Marathon"
<https://www.allbirds.jp/pages/obuse>
- The RUNNET (the largest portal website for runners in Japan) page for "Obuse Mini-Marathon"
<https://runnet.jp/entry/runtes/user/pc/competitionDetailAction.do?raceId=313353&div=1>
- NHK World "Creative Solutions Spark Rural Revival, Journeys in Japan" (issued on September 28, 2021, retrieved on June 30, 2023)
<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/tv/journeys/20210928/2007454/>