BuildUp BOOKINGS

04

BONUS 04 OF 11 · MASTERING VACATION RENTAL MARKETING

Brand & Style Guide for Vacation Rentals

A companion resource to the 2nd edition

WHAT YOU'LL HAVE WHEN YOU FINISH

A completed style guide anyone on your team — or any contractor, designer or agency — can follow without asking you a question.

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PART 1

Do this now

Start here. Each one works on its own.

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1 **Find out how bad it is first.**

Open your website, your Google Business Profile, one OTA listing and your last guest email side by side. Same logo? Same colors? Same voice? Same property descriptions? If you have never looked, expect to find drift.

2 **Write down your hex codes.**

Not “our blue.” The hex values. If nobody can produce them in ten seconds, every design decision anyone makes is a guess.

3 **Name your fonts, including the fallback.**

The one for headings, the one for body, and what gets used when your brand font is unavailable — which is most of the time in email.

4 **Write three words for your voice, and three for what it is not.**

The second list does more work than the first.

5 **Fix your image alt text standard now.**

Describe the actual image. Repeating your target keyword across every image on a page is a decade-old tactic that Google’s own image guidelines say can get your site treated as spam.

6 **Pick your one canonical property description per property.**

The same property should not be described three different ways across your site and two OTAs. Decide which version is the source of truth.

7 **Write the AI voice prompt.**

Your team is already using these tools. Write one paste-ready paragraph covering who you are, who you serve, three voice descriptors, three things your voice is *not*, your mechanical rules, and your banned phrases. That block is the difference between on-brand drafts and generic ones.

PART 2

The depth

The full method.

A style guide is not a design document. It is an operations document that removes decisions from people who should not be making them. Every question a new hire or a contractor has to ask you is a cost, and this eliminates most of them.

Build it in the order below. Sections 1 through 3 are foundations — get those wrong and the rest inherits the error.

1. Foundations

Your mission, vision and values, stated once so everything else can refer to them. If you have not written these, use the **Vision & Mission** bonus first — the rest of this guide is downstream of them.

2. Visual Identity

Logo. Primary version, secondary version (a mark or monogram for small spaces), and the minimum size each can be used at. Then, more importantly, the misuse rules: do not stretch, do not recolor, do not add effects, do not place on a busy photograph without a scrim, and maintain clear space of at least the height of one letterform on all sides. Misuse rules are what actually protect a logo, and almost nobody writes them.

Color. Every color, with hex, RGB and CMYK. Hex for web, RGB for screen, CMYK for anything printed — and if you skip CMYK, your printed signage will not match your website.

State how they are used, not just what they are. Which color is the primary action color? Which is only for accents? What is the text color on your primary background? A palette with no usage rules produces five different-looking pages.

One requirement that gets skipped: **check your text against your background for contrast.** If your body copy is light gray on white it is elegant and some of your guests cannot read it comfortably. This is an accessibility issue, and for a business selling to families and to older travelers it is also a commercial one.

Typography. Headline, subhead, body and caption fonts with sizes. Include the **fallback stack** — what renders when your brand font is not available, which is the normal case in email clients. Specify line height and paragraph spacing for body copy; readability comes from spacing more than from typeface.

Photography. This is the most commercially important section in the guide for a vacation rental company, and most templates give it three blank lines.

Specify: time of day you shoot, whether interiors are lit naturally or artificially, whether people appear in frames, how you handle a small room, and what you will not do — no HDR that makes a room look like a different room, no wide-angle distortion that implies square footage the property does not have, no stock imagery of a place that is not your market.

The reason to write this down as a rule rather than a preference: honest photography is a positioning choice. A guest who arrives at a property that looks smaller than the photos leaves a review that costs you more than the booking was worth.

Also specify a minimum shot list per property, so no listing goes live short. Google's vacation rental structured data expects coverage of bedroom, bathroom and common areas at minimum, so a shot list is doing double duty.

3. Voice and Tone

Voice is constant. Tone changes with the situation. That distinction is the whole section.

Pick three voice descriptors, then — and this is the part that matters — write three things your voice is **not**. "Warm but not saccharine. Direct but not curt. Knowledgeable but not lecturing." The negative definition is what stops a new hire from over-correcting.

Stuck for a starting point? Common descriptors in this industry: friendly and welcoming, professional and authoritative, passionate and energetic, reliable and trustworthy, inspiring and aspirational, educational and informative, quirky and humorous, luxurious and refined. Pick the three closest to how your best staff member already talks, then write the "not" for each.

Then write tone examples for the situations your team actually faces. Not abstract guidance — actual sentences they can pattern-match against:

- A positive review response
- A complaint, during the stay
- A complaint, in a public review
- An inquiry you have to decline
- A homeowner asking why their revenue is down
- A cancellation

The complaint scenarios are where brands break character, and the public ones stay up for every future guest to read.

Also specify the mechanics, because inconsistency here reads as sloppiness: Oxford comma or not. Numerals or words. How you write times and dates. Whether you use contractions (you should). Whether you use exclamation marks (sparingly). Em dashes or parentheses. Title case or sentence case for headings. These sound trivial and they are the difference between a site that reads as one company and one that reads as six freelancers.

4. Messaging

Tagline. Three to five brand pillars — the themes you return to constantly. Your USP, stated as something a competitor would not claim.

Then: **the boilerplate.** One paragraph about your company, written once, used everywhere — press, directories, partner sites, OTA "about the host" fields. The value is that it is identical everywhere, which builds a consistent entity for both people and machines. Freezing this saves your team from rewriting it badly under deadline pressure.

5. Property Descriptions

Vacation-rental-specific, and missing from most style guides.

Decide the structure every property description follows: opening hook, layout and sleeping arrangements, standout amenities, location and what is walkable, then house rules summary. Same order every time.

Decide your rules on the specifics: how you state bedroom and bath counts, how you describe sleeping arrangements (be exact — "sleeps 8" with two people on a pull-out is how you earn a bad review), how you handle stairs, how you describe distance to the beach or the slopes. "Steps from the beach" is a reliable way to generate disappointed arrivals.

And set the canonical-source rule: one description per property is the source of truth, and platform versions are trims of it, never independent rewrites.

6. Digital and Print

Email signatures — one format, everyone. Letterhead, business cards, and any physical collateral. The in-property items guests actually touch: welcome cards, guidebook covers, door hangers, checkout notes. These are brand surfaces and they are usually the ones nobody designed.

7. Channel Standards

Social. Profile and cover images, post templates, caption structure, hashtag set, and how you handle user-generated content — including whether you ask permission before reposting a guest photo. You should, and it should be written down.

Web. Alt text standard: describe the actual image, specifically. "Paddleboarders on the river below the old mill" rather than your keyword repeated. Then heading structure — one H1 per page — and where the logo, phone number and booking call-to-action sit.

OTA listings. The section most companies have no rules for at all. Which photos, in what order, which description, how the host bio reads, and how your company name appears. Your OTA presence is often a guest's first contact with your brand and it frequently looks like a different company.

8. The AI Voice Prompt

Your team is already pasting your content into AI tools. Give them a block that produces on-brand output instead of generic output.

Write a paste-ready paragraph that states: who you are, who you serve, your three voice descriptors, your three “not” descriptors, your mechanical rules, and a short list of banned phrases. Keep it in the guide where people can copy it.

One rule to state explicitly in your guide, because it protects you: **these tools are for working faster on material you already have, not for inventing material you do not.** Use them to tighten a description you wrote, restructure a guidebook you built, or draft a homeowner update you will edit. Do not use them for review responses or mid-stay guest messages, where generic language does the most damage. Do not use them to generate property descriptions for a property nobody has visited, or to invent local recommendations. Guests find out, and in a market full of machine-written content, the human-written version is the one that stands out — to readers and to Google, whose content guidance asks whether a page shows first-hand experience, such as having actually visited the place.

9. Review and Update

A date, and a name. A guide with no owner is out of date within a year. Twice a year is enough.

PART 3

Worked example

One example, all the way through.

Ridgeline Cabin Co. — fictional company, 40 mountain cabins, the running example across these bonuses. An abbreviated guide (sections 4, 6 and 7 are left to you), to show what "finished" looks like.

1. Foundations

Vision: To be the company out-of-state cabin owners in this region recommend to each other.
Mission: We inspect and photograph every cabin ourselves, tell owners the truth about what their property will earn, and answer the phone.
Values: Verified before listed · Honest over flattering · Reachable by a human

2. Visual Identity

Logo: Primary is the wordmark with the contour-line mark to its left. Secondary is the contour mark alone, for favicons and social avatars, minimum 32px. Wordmark minimum width 120px.

Misuse: Do not stretch or rotate. Do not recolor outside the palette. Do not place over a photograph without a 40% dark scrim. Clear space equal to the cap height of the "R" on all sides.

Color:

ROLE	NAME	HEX	RGB	CMYK (STARTING POINT)	USED FOR
Primary	Ridge Green	`#2F4A3C`	47, 74, 60	36/0/19/71	Headers, footer, primary buttons
Secondary	Bark	`#6B4F3A`	107, 79, 58	0/26/46/58	Accents, icons, rules
Light	Morning Fog	`#F4F2ED`	244, 242, 237	0/1/3/4	Page backgrounds
Text	Slate	`#2B2B2B`	43, 43, 43	0/0/0/83	All body copy
Action	Ember	`#C4551F`	196, 85, 31	0/57/84/23	Booking CTAs only — never decorative

A note on the CMYK column: these are direct conversions and they are a *starting point only*. CMYK is device- and paper-dependent, so a dark green especially will shift on press. Have your printer confirm each value against the actual profile and stock before anything goes to production, then replace these numbers with theirs. Do not let a designer guess them, and do not let anyone print from the hex.

Contrast, measured rather than eyeballed (WCAG 2.2 AA: 4.5:1 for normal text; 3:1 for large text and for buttons and other interface parts):

COMBINATION	RATIO	VERDICT
Slate on Morning Fog	12.7:1	Passes comfortably — the default text pairing
White on Ridge Green	9.7:1	Passes — safe for headers and footer
Bark on Morning Fog	6.7:1	Passes — usable for body copy, not only accents
White on Ember	4.5:1	Passes, by a hair. Never lighten Ember (no tints, opacity or lighter hover state) without re-testing.
Slate on Ember	3.1:1	**Fails.** Button text is white, never Slate.
Ember text on Morning Fog	4.0:1	**Fails** as body text. Fine as a button fill.

One color they rejected on exactly this basis: a lighter tan, `#B39B7D`, which everyone liked and which comes out at 2.4:1 on Morning Fog. That is unreadable as body copy. It was cut rather than "used carefully," because a color in the palette will eventually get used for text by someone who was not in the meeting.

Note that Ember at 4.5:1 is sitting exactly on the line. That is a deliberate, documented decision rather than an accident, which is the difference between a palette and a set of colors somebody liked.

Typography:

LEVEL	FONT	FALLBACK	SIZE / LINE HEIGHT
H1	Söhne Halbfett	Helvetica, Arial, sans-serif	40 / 1.15
H2	Söhne Halbfett	Helvetica, Arial, sans-serif	28 / 1.2
Body	Söhne Buch	-apple-system, Helvetica, sans-serif	17 / 1.6
Caption	Söhne Buch	Helvetica, sans-serif	14 / 1.4

Söhne is a paid font from Klim Type Foundry, licensed separately for desktop and web use. Budget for the license, or pick a free Google Fonts family and skip the question.

Photography: Interiors shot in daylight with curtains open, no flash, no HDR. Wide shots from a corner at standing eye height — **no ultra-wide lenses**, because they imply square footage the cabin does not have. Exteriors in the hour before sunset. No people in frame. No stock imagery, ever.

Minimum shot list per cabin (9 fixed shots, plus one per bedroom and bathroom): exterior front · exterior rear/deck · hot tub · living area from two angles · kitchen · dining · each bedroom · each bathroom · fire pit · view from the deck.

3. Voice and Tone

We are: Warm · Direct · Knowledgeable about this specific valley
We are not: Saccharine · Curt · Lecturing

Mechanics: Oxford comma yes. Contractions yes. Numerals for 10 and above, except times, nights, guest counts and room counts, which are always numerals. Exclamation marks sparingly — never more than one in a message. Sentence case for headings. Em dashes over parentheses. Never “guests” when talking to a guest — say “you.”

Banned phrases: “nestled” · “home away from home” · “steps from the beach” · “luxury” as a self-description · “unforgettable” · “premier” · “hidden gem”

Tone examples:

Positive review: “Thanks Dana — glad the hot tub delivered. The ridge trail behind the cabin is worth doing early if you’re back in October, before the leaf traffic starts. Come see us.”

Complaint during the stay: “That shouldn’t have happened and I’m sorry. I’m sending someone now — should be there within the hour. I’ll call you myself at 4 to confirm it’s sorted.”

Complaint in a public review: “You’re right that the wifi was unreliable that week, and we’ve since replaced the router and added a mesh extender in the loft. I’m sorry it affected your stay — if you’re back, call me directly and I’ll make it right.”

Declining an inquiry: “Honestly, we’re not the right fit for a bachelor party — our cabins are in residential areas with noise agreements, and I’d rather tell you now than have it go badly. Try [alternative]; they’re set up for groups.”

Owner asking why revenue is down: “Two things: October was softer market-wide, and your 5-night minimum filtered out most of the demand we saw. The first one I can’t fix. The second one we should talk about.”

5. Property Descriptions

Structure, every time: hook · layout and sleeping · standout amenities · location and what is walkable · house rules summary.

Rules: State exact sleeping arrangements including pull-outs — “sleeps 8 — 6 in beds, 2 on a queen sleeper.” Always disclose stairs. Distances in drive time, never in “steps.” Bedroom count means actual bedrooms with doors.

Canonical source: the description on `ridgelinecabins.com` is the source of truth. OTA versions are trimmed from it and never rewritten independently.

8. The AI Voice Prompt

You are writing as Ridgeline Cabin Co., a 40-cabin vacation rental manager in a mountain valley. Our guests are families with children and couples; our owners are mostly out of state. Voice: warm, direct, knowledgeable about this specific valley. Not saccharine, not curt, not lecturing. Use Oxford commas and contractions. Numerals for 10 and up, except times, nights, guest counts and room counts. Sentence case headings. Address the reader as “you.”
Never use: nestled, home away from home, steps from the slopes, luxury, unforgettable, premier, hidden gem. Never invent a local recommendation, a distance, or an amenity — if you do not have the fact, leave a bracketed placeholder. Do not write a property description for a property whose details are not supplied.

9. Review

Owner: Operations lead. **Next review:** January and July. **Last updated:** [date]

PART 4

Your turn

Your worksheet. Print it and fill it in.

1. Foundations

Mission: _____

Vision: _____

Values: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

2. Visual Identity

Logo: primary _____ secondary _____

Minimum sizes: _____ **Clear space:** _____

Misuse rules: _____

ROLE	NAME	HEX	RGB	CMYK	USED FOR
Primary					
Secondary					
Light					
Text					
Action					

☐ Body text contrast checked against background

LEVEL	FONT	FALLBACK	SIZE / LINE HEIGHT
H1			
H2			
Body			
Caption			

Photography rules: _____

We never: _____

Minimum shot list per property: _____

3. Voice and Tone

We are: _____ · _____ · _____

We are not: _____ · _____ · _____

Mechanics: _____

Banned phrases: _____

SITUATION	YOUR EXAMPLE
Positive review	
Complaint during stay	
Complaint in public review	
Declining an inquiry	
Owner asking why revenue is down	
Cancellation	

4. Messaging

Tagline: _____

Pillars: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

USP (a competitor would not claim this): _____

Boilerplate paragraph: _____

5. Property Descriptions

Structure: _____

Sleeping arrangement rule: _____

Distance rule: _____

Canonical source: _____

6. Digital and Print

☐ Email signature ☐ Letterhead ☐ Business cards ☐ Welcome card ☐ Guidebook cover
☐ Checkout note

7. Channel Standards

Alt text standard: _____

Hashtag set: _____

UGC permission rule: _____

OTA photo order: _____

Company name on OTAs appears exactly as: _____

8. AI Voice Prompt

_____

_____

9. Review

Owner: _____ **Review dates:** _____

PART 5

How you'll know it worked

What to check, and when.

Within a week — re-run the audit from step one of Do This Now. Website, Google Business Profile, one OTA listing, one guest email, side by side. The gaps you can close in a week are the palette, the email signature and the OTA name.

Within a month — the real test is whether people stop asking you. Count the questions a designer, a VA or a new hire has to bring to you about color, font, tone or phrasing. If the guide is working that number drops toward zero. If they are still asking, the guide has a gap exactly where the question is.

Within a quarter — hand the guide to someone who has never worked for you and have them write one property description and one review response. If the output is recognizably yours, the guide is finished. If it is generic, your voice section is decoration and needs the "we are not" list and more tone examples.

The failure to watch for: a guide that exists and is not used. It happens when it lives somewhere nobody goes. Put it where the work happens, and give it an owner and a review date, or it will be inaccurate within a year and people will learn to ignore it.

PART 6

Where this lives in the book

Where to read more in the book.

Chapters: *Define your signature moves with a solid style guide* (Middleweight) — the section that sends readers here. *Building Block 1 - Your Branding* (Featherweight) — the name, colors and logo this guide formalizes. *Pack a branding punch with Middleweight marketing tactics* — where brand consistency starts paying off across channels. *Brand Brilliance at the Heavyweight Level* — partnerships, commercials and personalization, all of which require this guide to already exist.

Also see *USP Templates* in the Featherweight chapter for the messaging section, and the **Vision & Mission** bonus for section 1, which everything else here depends on.

If you are working through the **AI Search & GEO** bonus, note the overlap: the alt text standard, the one-H1 rule and the first-hand experience standard live in both documents. That is not duplication — brand consistency and machine readability turn out to want most of the same things.

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Want help putting this to work?

We've worked with more than 300 vacation rental companies on direct bookings, homeowner acquisition, SEO, paid media and AI search. If you'd rather not do this alone, book a free call at **buildupbookings.com**.

All eleven book bonuses: **buildupbookings.com/book-bonuses**

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