



More Players Are Chasing Tourism Dollars

BY DAN MCCUE

If a single phrase could be crafted to capture the multi-layered and robust effort that is tourism promotion here in the Palmetto State, an apt candidate might be: “No one wants to be anybody’s best-kept secret anymore.”

Between long-time promotional champs like Myrtle Beach, Charleston, and Hilton Head, and the cities of Columbia and Greenville (relative newcomers in the pursuit of leisure tourism dollars), millions are being spent to capture the potential tens of millions that even a seemingly modest 1 percent increase in “heads in beds,” as insiders like to call them, represents.

“There have always been the big, 500-pound gorillas when it comes to trade promotion in the state, but a real sea change has occurred in recent years,” says Marion Edmonds, spokesman for the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism.

“One thing that’s happened is the explosion of electronic and social media, which has both made it easier than ever to get the message out about our communities, and has created a half dozen or more kinds of outreach that we didn’t do 10 or 15 years ago,” Edmonds says.

“The other thing that’s happened is communities have realized the value of investing in tourism promotion, and the big five have the resources, with some financial assistance from the state, to carry out their own promotional efforts,” he continues.

L to R: Kelly Barbrey, Vice President of Sales and Marketing for Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports and Tourism, Bill Ellen, President and CEO of Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports and Tourism, Jason Outman, Director of Sales and Services for Columbia Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau and Kim Jamieson, Director of Communications for Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports and Tourism.

"In a sense, it's like it says in that old Blood, Sweat and Tears song, 'God bless the child ... that's got his own,' and that's even changing the way we pursue more statewide efforts at tourism promotion," he says.

According to the department's website, tourist spending in South Carolina totaled \$17.6 billion in 2012, a 6.8 percent increase over the previous year, and anecdotal information gathered during interviews with tourism professionals suggest those numbers increased even more significantly last year.

While a considerable chunk of that spending was done by South Carolina residents — 20 percent — the largest single source of gross tourism spending came from out-of-state and international visitors, who accounted for \$9.1 billion and \$664 million in spending, respectively.

All that money changing hands resulted in \$3.2 billion in sales of S.C.-manufactured goods, the department says.

The very latest monthly lodging report by Smith Travel Research, the consultancy that compiles hotel-related statistics to the agency — covering the period from April 6 to April 12, 2014 — shows the state's hoteliers enjoyed a 72.1 occupancy rate, substantially above the nationwide rate of 68.5 percent.

DAYTRIPPING TO COLUMBIA

Because tourism dollars come from diverse sources and later funnel in many different directions, laying out the dollars and cents of regional and statewide tourism efforts is difficult, or at least, difficult to do if one wants to avoid sounding like an actuarial table.

After all, expenditures can cover anything from travel to trade shows to billboards to traditional print ads to the cost to the state of maintaining nine visitor welcome centers. The numbers get muddier still when one tries to quantify the return on investment.

For instance, was a stay in Columbia a visit to the state Capital or a stop by a Midwesterner on the way to the beach?

While tourism professionals do go to great lengths to understand the difference, far more important to most of us is how these same specialists turn such instances to repeat visits or more extended stays.

"As an overall strategy for Columbia what we're looking at is families and individuals who are coming to the city for anything other than business, and trying to share with them all of the region's attributes," says Kelly Barbrey, vice president of sales and marketing for the Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports and Tourism.

"They might come to the city for a long weekend or perhaps the graduation of a soldier at Fort Jackson, but by the time they leave, we want them to have fallen in love with the area," she says.

At the same time, Barbrey says, she and her staff are trying to reach those who've never been to the Midlands, "and get them to consider us."

But neither of those groups — as substantial as they are — are the end-all when it comes to tourism marketing.

The authority also targets meeting planners — a substantial potential audience that can bring hundreds to thousands to Columbia for a single event — and the "sports traveler."

This later group is sometimes mistakenly considered synonymous with those who travel to the city to attend Carolina games, but it also, and more significantly includes rowing teams that come to train on the region's rivers, and participants in various USTA Championships, among others.

While some South Carolina communities are closely identified with a certain kind of leisure — who among us, for instance, thinks of Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head without thinking of golf, or Charleston without thinking of history — most of South Carolina isn't as sharply etched in the public mind.



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That gives tourism professionals like Barbrey greater freedom to shape how their community is perceived by the public.

“One audience you obviously want to embrace your region is families, and towards that end, we created the CoolPass Admission program,” Barbrey says. “It’s a combination ticket for the Riverbanks Zoo & Garden, the South Carolina State Museum, and the EdVenture Children’s Museum, and it’s designed to allow families to come and knock out a bunch of attractions in a short amount of time.

“Because we’re marketing to families, and because this offer makes for a perfect day trip, we’re trying to capture potential visitors who live within driving distance of the city, and that makes something like Charlotte Parents magazine the perfect vehicle for an advertising campaign” Barbrey says.

To reach both within and beyond that radius, into other southern states, the mid-Atlantic and Midwest requires a more multi-pronged approach — advertisements in Southern Living and Garden and Gun, for instance, and full and deliberate use of any number of digital outlets.

“It’s about building brand awareness, first and foremost, and then expanding your circle of influence,” says Jason Outman, Director of Sales and Services for the Columbia Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau.

NEW NAME AND DIRECTION IN GREENVILLE

In Greenville, tourism from a leisure perspective is still considered a relatively young industry. The community has long welcomed meetings and conventions, “but leisure is an emerging market,” says Jennifer Stilwell, Chief Marketing Officer for VisitGreenvilleSC (formerly the Greenville Convention and Visitor’s Bureau).

“We changed our name a little over a year ago after announcing to the community that we were going to undertake our first-ever leisure marketing campaign targeting out-of-market residents and trying to get them

to come to Greenville,” Stilwell says.

In doing so, the group was walking away from what it came to believe was a kind of “old school,” “bureaucratic” approach and embracing what Stilwell described as a “more telepathic” and “action-oriented” approach that more readily communicates what Greenville’s official sales and marketing organization does.

“There are basically two kinds of economic development organizations that exist in the state of South Carolina,” Stilwell explains. “One, of course, is the kind led by the Department of Commerce and includes entities that are looking to bring industry and big names — like BMW or Boeing — to the community and invest in capital infrastructure, create jobs, and so on. That’s one model of economic development

“The other model of economic development is travel and tourism, and that’s definitely been part of the outreach effort we’ve been engaged in since rebranding ourselves last year,” she continues. “This model takes another approach based on the goal of constantly bringing new visitors to a community as a destination, people who will spend their dollars in that community for the time that they are there.

“The interesting thing about travel and tourism as an element of economic development is that if you’re successful, it is an ongoing daily influx of new dollars into a community,” she adds.

The organization’s initial campaign “Yeah, That Greenville” is a slogan and brand inspired by the surprising realization that there are actually 36 Greenvilles across the United States, and even more if one includes alternative spellings, like “Greeneville” or “Greenville —hyphen — some other place”.

“Nearly every state in the nation has one, and that was a bit of a surprise,” Stilwell laughs. “Once we realized that, we knew we had to make sure we weren’t just any old Greenville, awash in a sea of sameness, and that’s how the slogan evolved.”

According to Stilwell, VisitGreenvilleSC’s inaugural efforts have proven incredibly successful.

“In Greenville for the first time,

we’ve surpassed \$1 billion in direct spending from visitors in our community, and we just ended the year with a 3.1 percent increase in hotel occupancy — driving the total percentage to 68 percent, which is a record for us,” she says.

Stillwell says given the number of hotel rooms in Greenville, each percentage point represents some \$29 million in new visitor spending.

“That’s over \$90 million in new money,” she says. “That’s huge.”

A cornerstone of the campaign has been making sure a consistent message about Greenville has been communicated “over all of the media and messaging touchpoints,” Stilwell says.

“As an organization we’ve worked very hard and very quickly to build brand equity by integrating it into everything we do — from high visual ad campaigns to the name tags worn at our events, to member window decals and branded merchandise,” she continues.

“The goal is to deliver impactful messaging that delivers the ‘wow’ of our destination. That’s something that’s really, really important to us,” she says. “Other communities have had years and years of building brand equity and those brands now have sustaining power.

“We never had that, but now, thanks to funding from the city and county of Greenville, a grant from the state Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, and buy-in from our hotels and other local partners, we have the resources to tell people about our Greenville and get people excited.”

Already, Stilwell says, VisitGreenvilleSC’s social media engagement is up 378 percent over last year, and over the organization’s twitter account now has in excess of 9,000 followers — 8,000 more than a year ago.

In fact, the effort is going so well — “everything is through the roof,” she says — that VisitGreenvilleSC is now grappling with a new challenge: success.

“We’ve quickly reached the point where you have to ask yourself how you’re going to handle the increased work load and increased postal costs and things like that ... but those are

challenges you want to have," she says.

CONVENTIONEERS ARE TOURISTS, TOO

"The meeting side is a little different because meeting planners can live anywhere in the country," Outman says, explaining one of the key activities in his world.

"Basically, you have to figure out who is planning meetings in the Southeast, and then you try to target these individuals through resources they turn to on a regular basis, like Meetings and Conventions Magazine, Conventions South Magazines and Smart Meetings Magazine," he says.

"We also have a staff of four sales people and a sales associate, who travel to trade shows throughout the country, and then we have an extensive database that we maintain with several partners," he continues. "Basically, it's an extranet that allows us to communicate, to respond to leads and even to extend promotions to them."

Outman says the database also

gives him the ability to produce genre-specific reports that can then be utilized, say, to target religious groups who may be looking for a new location for an annual meeting or convention.

As one might expect, having such information at hand can be very useful to the broader economic development community across the state, and both Barbrey and Outman say they definitely enjoy good and helpful relationships with their counterparts.

"Tourism and economic development definitely share close and important ties," Barbrey says. "We're often asked to provide visitor guides to prospects or accolade information when Columbia has been named to the top ten of this or that, or to give quality of life presentations — and then, of course, many of our staff members serve on their boards and commissions and committees."

"No one stands in a vacuum; it's all interrelated," she says.

For his part Outman says South

Carolina's strengths in certain industries definitely shapes efforts to snare specific conventions and the types of activities attendees are exposed to once they're here.

"For instance, South Carolina is a leader in nuclear technology, so we actually target nuclear conferences," he says. "Then, once we secure such a gathering, we work with entities like the Savannah River Site, to arrange for tours and the like."

"The same is true with pharmaceutical groups ... and now that Nephron Pharmaceuticals is coming, we hope to build a similar relationship with them," Outman says.

UNDISCOVERED SOUTH CAROLINA GETTING ATTENTION

In light of how well Columbia and Greenville are doing in joining the ranks of the state's tourism heavy hitters, the state is now focusing more of its efforts on what Marion Edmonds calls "undiscovered SC."

"There are great parts of the state

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that are special and should be experienced, but they don't have the fame and reputation of our larger communities," he says. "We feel focusing on those areas, in terms of marketing, is a great way to compliment and build in what others have been doing in these other places."

The most well-known example of these efforts to day is the South Carolina Barbecue Trail, an initiative started last year.

In a way, the story of the barbecue trail is the story of something good coming out of a little adversity. For some 30 years, the department had worked with the Leslie advertising agency in Greenville, an entity that began a major expansion just as the economy went belly up in 2008.

After the agency folded, the department solicited a bid, hired a new advertising firm, and then seized on the new relationship as the time for a new beginning in terms of marketing the state.

"We knew we wanted to add 'undiscovered South Carolina' to our marketing effort and in doing so, we wanted to use a vehicle that was fun, very South Carolina, and also linked throughout the state — and not just through the big boys," Edmonds says.

Barbecue came up a few times, and every time it did, Edmonds says, "everybody responded favorably."

In August 2013, the South Carolina Barbecue Trail emerged as a major social media presence, had its

own website — SCBBQTRAIL.COM — and was also featured on billboards and other advertisements.

Best of all, there was a map of 100 barbecue locations. While many were clustered around the state's major cities, nearly half are in out of the way communities like Cheraw, Bennettsville, Kingstree, Abbeville, and Walterboro.

"Essentially, we made it part of our traditional fall campaign," Edmonds says. "We tied it to some of the major colleges where football tailgating is big, and we also fostered a competition where the four major sauce variants in the state — mustard, vinegar, light tomato, and heavy tomato — were pitted against each other."

The results "exceeded out expectations," Edmonds says. "It really caught fire and garnered a lot of coverage, what we called earned media as opposed to paid media," he says.

His comment raises another question — just how do you quantify the success of such an effort, or any tourism promotion effort for that matter?

"It is part science and part art and part guts," Edmonds says. "It's experience and it's hard numbers."

"When it comes to advertising expenses, of course, you want to have hard numbers to confirm you're achieving the desired return on investment. But there's also a bit of the intangible to all this," he explains. "Remember, nobody works

in a vacuum. All of the big guys are working their destinations and to an extent we piggyback on their efforts, and to an extent they also piggyback on ours."

"What they do helps us sell our message, so how do you quantify that? In the broadest sense we are always checking the accommodation tax numbers generated by the Department of Revenue, and we also look at the detailed analysis provided by Smith Travel Research, but there's always something subjective to this."

"It would be misleading to say that 30 million visitors are coming to South Carolina each year as a result of our efforts. It's probably better to look at this — tourism promotion — as a big activity of which we are an important player."

But then, getting or taking credit isn't what this is about anyway, Greenville's Jennifer Stilwell says.

"What's important is that you keep investing in telling the story and growing the awareness," she says. "The worst mistake you can make is to back out of the marketplace and go dormant ... the other mistake you can make is simply maintaining the status quo. You have to continue to be aggressive. Here in Greenville, we are just an emerging, young destination, so it's really important for us to continue to look to grow the investment."