

Tourism initiatives continue digital trend

By Sherri Crawford, posted Jan 12, 2018 on WilmingtonBiz.com

With the New Year here, many businesses are busy planning and forecasting via a fresh start. For those operating by fiscal year, however, steps to obtain company objectives have been long underway. Among them are the tri-county tourism offices, including Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau, whose fiscal year runs July 1-June 30.

One of the bureau's top initiatives this year is showcasing Wilmington's evolving downtown riverfront district. Recent additions to the northern riverfront, including a marina and the Embassy Suites by Hilton Wilmington Riverfront (connected to the Wilmington Convention Center), have enhanced the area, with more development to come, officials said.

Now referred to as the Convention District, the multi-use area integrates the Wilmington Convention Center with the city and its businesses, experts and academic resources, CVB officials said.

Additional hotels, retail space, restaurants, a city park and more are under development in the district.

"With the transformation, the Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) will refresh our brand and creative strategy to seamlessly blend the historic charm with new modern attractions and facilities designed to challenge the visitors to not only enjoy the things they already love here, but to seek out new sights, sounds and tastes," said Shawn Braden, the CVB's executive vice president of marketing. "We will inspire visitors with strong visuals and to interact with 360 and drone video to create immersive brand experiences throughout Wilmington and our island beaches."

Last spring, the CVB became the country's first Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) to integrate SkyNav technology into its official tourism website. The DMO launched its second tour of that type, titled SkyNav Convention District Tour, late last year, taking viewers "inside" the Wilmington Convention Center through 360-degree panoramas.

"Consumer interest in virtual reality ranks very high in the categories of travel, tourism and adventures," Braden said. "Projected virtual reality active-user growth is expected to rise exponentially over the next three years. It is where the industry is headed. Future plans include 360-degree live videos that allow users to hear and see live movement and sounds, all through 360-degree movement.

"This will add a deeper, more immersive layer of experience into our SkyNav 3-D tour."

While promoting Wilmington's riverfront is one of many of the CVB's initiatives, a milestone event for Pender County is in the works, said Pender County Tourism Director Tammy Proctor.

Celebrating the 300th anniversary of the presence of legendary pirate Blackbeard along the North Carolina coast, Scallywags Weekend will showcase Pender County's cultural heritage and more May 4-6.

Like officials at the Wilmington and Beaches CVB, Proctor notes the ever-increasing use of digital components in marketing campaigns. Additionally, she said, all of her organization's tourism initiatives are three-pronged: targeting local, state and out-of-state visitors.

"What is different this year is our reach," Proctor said. "We are using various websites and editorials to reach an audience outside the state."

"The goal is to bring in visitors and grow our local economy via tourism," she said. "Events like [Scallywags Weekend] will bring people to our hotels, our restaurants, our shops, our gas stations, etc. – it has a ripple effect on the economy."

Meanwhile, the Brunswick County Tourism Development Authority (TDA) is also focusing on its digitally related reach. Creating content in the way of video and photography is at the forefront.

According to Mitzi York, the authority's executive director, a new video promoting golfing was recently created, with plans to shoot two more leisure-related videos in the spring.

"I think that there's a lot more focus on digital now than there used to be when I first got started working with TDA," York said. "So we're always trying to add to our library whether its photos or videos because people are spending a lot of time on social media. For example, YouTube, I think, is the second-biggest search engine now. Those things are becoming increasingly important."

To that end, the Brunswick County group has added a photo gallery to its website's weddings section. This lets website visitors see what a wedding on the Brunswick islands might look like, while gathering information about wedding locations, vendors and the like.

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