



BCTDA 2020-2021 SALES & MARKETING PLAN

Explore Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau
27 College Place | Asheville, NC | ExploreAsheville.com

Explore **ASHEVILLE**
Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority

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ABOUT THE BCTDA

The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) is a public authority with the purpose of attracting overnight visitors to the community to expand the customer base for local businesses, provide jobs, and generate tax revenue.

The BCTDA oversees the Asheville area destination marketing and sales efforts, which in 2019 helped to attract more than 4.2 million overnight visitors. In total, people who visit Buncombe County spend \$2.2 billion and create a total of \$3.3 billion in total economic impact.

The Explore Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau implements the sales and marketing plan in partnership with 1,300 local tourism-related businesses for the benefit of the community.

BCTDA MISSION

To be a leader in the economic development of Buncombe County by attracting and servicing visitors, generating income, jobs and tax revenues which make the community a better place to live and visit.

BCTDA VISION

Asheville/Buncombe County will retain its unique, authentic, and environmental charm while welcoming global visitors searching for personal enrichment and memorable experiences.

ASHEVILLE'S BRAND PROMISE

We guarantee you a life-enriching experience each and every time you visit Asheville. It's personal, personal to you. And it is also personal to us. We live that same genuine experience and want to share it with you. We empower you to discover a collection of experiences that is as unique and varied as each individual who visits us, and allow you to do so in a warm, embracing and creative environment.

BRAND POSITION

The unique and eclectic array of experiences in Asheville opens wide your sense of discovery and enriches your life.

CORE VALUES

Welcoming. Natural. Vibrant.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS

Marketing Recovery Framework

GOALS:

- Inspire interest in visiting the destination and fill the pipeline for future visitation while creating reasons and desire to visit now for responsible travelers who are ready
- Build brand equity
- Support community partners on the road to recovery
- Generate broader travel throughout the entire County to relieve congested areas

OBJECTIVE:

Generate visitation that achieves or exceeds cash flow projections by promoting responsible travel, sustaining our small tourism businesses and partners, and encouraging adherence to CDC guidelines, while balancing the safety of the community.

CREATIVE POSITIONING:

Safety & Serenity – Safely rejuvenate your spirit and stir your soul in awe-inspiring mountain landscapes paired with vibrant cultural experiences while sharing a commitment to keep each other healthy.

Themes:

- Safety is in our nature
- Wanderlust and yearning to return to travel
- Soul-stirring and wide-open spaces
- Pack your bags and masks

KEY PAID MEDIA MESSAGES

- Reconnect with nature through our wide-open spaces, expansive mountain landscapes and serene deep forests
- Come to a place you've been wanting to see or return to a favorite getaway
- Let our rich cultural roots and off the beaten path experiences enrich your soul
- Welcome visitors in a safe and responsible way

TARGET AUDIENCE

Paid Media

- Travel intenders between the ages of 25 and 65
- Household Income = \$75,000+
- Targeting counties within a 6.5 hour radius that have not been excluded due to COVID case counts
- Audience is filtered against a set of attributes designed to tease out those most likely to be responsible visitors

Other

- Repeat visitors
- Brand fans/enthusiasts

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

CORE TRAVEL MARKETING – Use tested marketing strategies in owned, paid, and earned channels to inspire visitation, influence planning and create conversions.

Advertising:

- Root media decisions in analytics with an adherence to identifying and excluding COVID hot spots from the media mix.
- Use flexible media channels to allow for swift changes in strategy, and easy off/on switch.
- Launch a more sophisticated retargeting strategy utilizing Dynamic Creative Optimization (DCO), a display ad technology that creates personalized ads based on user site behavior.
- Utilize paid social for cost efficient, scalable reach and the opportunity to engage consumers with relevant/timely messaging.
- Activate rich media units to break through the clutter and capture user's attention with large, standout creative that encourages engagement.
- Leverage online video to reach TV viewers and cord cutters efficiently without buying traditional television to seize storytelling moments when consumers are in a “watching” mindset.
- Drive awareness with programmatic display advertising for efficient access to a variety of publishers and expansive reach to our target audience.
- Use paid search to capture hand raisers searching for Asheville or similar vacations and conquest similar competitors.
- Leverage travel authorities (i.e. Trip Advisor) to find users truly interested in travel during the consideration stage of the consumer journey.
- Participate in industry partnerships and co-ops specifically centered on recovery.

Content/Web:

- Shift content to align with the needs, sentiment, and travel patterns throughout the pandemic.
- Draw on data from Google Analytics and the expertise of analysts and local partners to determine editorial coverage based on consumer interest, news value, and search trends.
- Continue to work with local freelance contributors to develop strategic written and visual content with destination authority.
- Implement a strategy to procure, create, and integrate more high-quality visual content (video, live broadcast, Instagram Stories, infographics, quizzes, 360-degree photo and video tours, user-generated content) that has high potential for shareability and engagement across CVB web and social media.
- Source, curate, and display user-generated content in the form of photographs or videos to provide visitors with an authentic view inside the destination.
- Audit and evaluate existing content for upcycling and new storytelling efforts.
- Expand targeted, non-paid, robust promotions using earned and owned assets, including new marketing tools to assist in more optimized performance.
- Employ search optimization best practices and findings from Google Analytics, Search Console, Site Improve, and AdWords into development of new content pages and in updates to existing and seasonal content.
- Create new content and modify existing articles to follow the principles of natural language processing that will assist in Google search and voice-enabled devices.
- Implement strategic changes as part of a site refresh of ExploreAsheville.com that is informed by conversion rate optimization (CRO) research and the web usability study and leads to improvements in web KPIs and conversion.
- Utilize Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to keep Asheville top-of-mind for online fans; extending reach with buzzworthy aspirational content, shareable multimedia assets, timely news items, strategic post promotion/advertising, and special giveaways to engage fans and drive traffic to ExploreAsheville.com.

Public Relations:

- Continue a proactive media relations program, poised to shift with the evolving editorial landscape and engage a diverse range of media with meaningful stories, supportive content, tech-savvy assists and news-ready outreach in all forms aimed to amplify the destination brand and place key messages and partner coverage in strategically targeted outlets.
- Strategically engage influencers and rich media partners to activate new audiences and support a destination travel rebound through engaging and inspirational online and social content.
- Continue to develop and deploy strategies to leverage PR analytics tools and media coverage insights that provide pathways to high-impact outlet targeting, promotion of trending or high-SEO stories, media influencer outreach, keyword- or trend-based pitching, competitor coverage analysis and optimization of backlinked content.

- Maintain cultural and editorial relevance on the national stage by connecting media to fresh and timely perspectives on Asheville area stories, histories, people, and authentic, news-worthy angles from the arts, culinary, music, outdoor, and group travel sectors, while maintaining emphasis on primary travel motivators and road trips, in keeping with pandemic travel trends.
- Use analytics and refined vetting/intake procedures to better evaluate and prioritize site visit and partnership opportunities, while remaining open to new-to-Asheville voices with small-yet-engaged followings.
- Increase awareness of the Asheville area as a top destination for meetings, conventions, weddings, group tour and sports-related business through earned placements in relevant national outlets.

Research:

- Monitor the state of travel and consumer sentiment through available weekly research throughout the pandemic.
- Use insights from partner research to understand how Explore Asheville can provide additional marketing support.
- Use destination-specific research as a guidepost for need periods, trends, lodging behavior and as performance benchmarks.
- Deploy Arrivalist to determine impact and effectiveness of marketing strategies and determine which markets are moving and have the most impact.
- Use existing media modeling data to help inform paid media decisions
- Glean insights from quarterly advertising report.

AUDIENCE EXPANSION –Build and connect to more diverse audiences and, secondly, develop brand affinity with audiences who are more likely to align with specific travel interests during the pandemic, such as outdoor travelers.

- Use paid focus groups, secondary insights, facilitated discussions or other research to understand and respond to the expectations and desires of diverse travel audiences.
- Work with authentic content developers and local voices to identify content needs, share experiences, itineraries and points of interest that resonate with Black, Latino and LGBTQ audiences as part of content development efforts.
- Continue to use insights from Destination Analysts, Longwoods and other sources for Covid-19 impacts on leisure audiences now and in the future.
- Connect media and influencers to stories that illuminate and celebrate the range of cultures and identities present in our community, including destination news, history, and the important contributions of BIPOC, LGBTQ people and women.
- Work with influencers who can bring a unique perspective, have established followers, and will share final assets.
- Use paid media to amplify content, messaging and stories and invite a more diverse visitor to our community.

SAFETY – Incorporate safety throughout the spectrum of marketing channels to reach more responsible travelers and model expected behavior in our community.

- Infuse safety messaging into paid, earned and owned media throughout the pandemic.
- Incorporate “mask messaging” and Asheville Cares Pledge into creative as well as landing page.
- Identify opportunities to connect “safety messaging” in marketing efforts to on-the-ground visitors, including location-based delivery.
- Continue social promotions that promote mask-wearing (i.e. Who Wore It Best Facebook contest).
- Monitor trendlines on Covid-19 both in selected geo-targets and in Buncombe County.
- Target visitors more likely to adhere to safety guidelines by adding a layer of behavioral filters to audience parameters.

PERSONALIZATION – Deploy customization and personalization strategies that deliver on a high level of customer service, match customer interests and expectations, create more engagement and lead to brand affinity.

- Use proprietary database to tease out attributes that allow for pinpoint targeting of a more likely traveler who will adhere to safety guidelines.
- Use Dynamic Content Optimization to deliver more personalized retargeting messaging based on algorithmic learning.
- Implement a re-engagement campaign of our subscriber list and append data that will allow for further segmentation of lists.
- Develop robust email marketing campaigns that dovetail with paid media using new marketing automation platform that can optimize and provide more custom content to segmented audiences.
- Tailor custom messages and images on ExploreAsheville.com that are served to site visitors based on specific known characteristics or actions.
- Use pop-ups and modals on ExploreAsheville.com based on specific site actions to help move visitors further down the planning funnel.
- Market new Asheville Hike Finder and Alexa-enabled version to deliver expansive hiking choices based on range of filters that can be combined.
- Evaluate chat-bot options to provide automated Facebook and Web site responses to routine questions with a personal twist.

SEASONALITY – Use seasonal differences and experiences to generate travel throughout the year and encourage repeat visitation:

- Send out comprehensive fall news release that incorporates fall highlights with destination news
- Pitch fall color prognostication that sets the stage for fall travel and keeps the Asheville area and Blue Ridge Parkway top of mind as a premiere fall color destination.
- Continue weekly fall color reports but add virtual elements that appeal to prospective visitors as well as travel dreamers.
- Complement marketing efforts around significant holiday events and attractions through paid media.
- Curate and develop a digital gift guide for consumers that promote partner products and highlights makers.
- Promote small, safe experiences that are available and uniquely suited for the winter months that can inspire visitation between January through March.
- Use learnings from SMARI findings on fall and holiday travel and motivations.

VISITATION DISPERSAL – Encourage dispersal of people throughout the County to relieve congestion and spread economic impact.

- Integrate mapping functionality into themed itineraries to encourage more exploration around the County and region.
- Continue expansion of neighborhood sections to provide a broader viewpoint of destinations throughout the County.
- Develop new video content that further brands destinations within Buncombe County.
- Use POI within Arrivalist platform to understand movement and measure the effectiveness of strategies.

PARTNER SUPPORT – Use marketing strategies to support tourism partners as they recover and help sustain business during the pandemic.

- Develop and maintain Virtual Asheville portal to help visitors experience a bit of Asheville from home and help in the planning process.
- Identify additional new Web pathways that better lead site visitors to partner content and listing details pages and identify opportunities to generate more downstream traffic to partners.
- Further build out the online shopping section with better branding and incorporation of storytelling around makers.
- Incorporate partner support content into social media calendar.
- Share marketing expertise and secure outside speakers for partner forums, seminars and workshops in tandem with Community Engagement department.
- Work with the Community Engagement department to use surveys and other means to best understand partner recovery needs.

GROUP SALES & SERVICES

2020-2021 OBJECTIVES

- Room night sales goal July 1- December: 12,715
- Introduce/execute the Economic Impact Calculation as an enhanced indicator able to assess the true impact of meetings and events to the local economy
- Expand the group website to facilitate more partner engagement with event planners

GROUP SALES OUTLOOK

The Group Sales & Services team develops and manages a comprehensive sales plan aimed at attracting group events that generate room demand, translating into a significant economic impact for local businesses. The original sales plan was comprised of a mix of strategies including direct sales, hosting client events, attending trade shows, etc., blended with new sales initiatives. The plan was upended with the on-set of COVID-19. What follows is a reconfiguration of the plan based on what is possible in today's environment. We understand we may need to adjust planned strategies and tactics even further depending on changes in the market.

COVID-19 has moved sales from in-person to virtual. Our team had a head start on what has become a "virtual tour" trend in having more than five years of experience hosting on-demand webinars for AAA, which continues today. The initial on-demand video/webinar generated specifically for the meetings market was launched in July 2019, nine months prior to the arrival of COVID-19. These digital products were curated and produced inhouse and highlighted content appropriate for a pre-pandemic period. Since the pandemic hit, we have continued to build on this strong foundation by adding new virtual assets to the sales inventory, critical elements in today's sales efforts.

Sporting events have been a bright spot during the pandemic. While most previously scheduled events were postponed, a new opportunity for the area emerged in the form of a "controlled basketball environment". The high-profile Maui Invitational committed to hosting the 2020 event in Asheville. We are ready to capitalize on any similar opportunity that comes our way in the future. It has also been a key strategy of ours to maintain a strong connection with sports organizers, local and national, who continue to support our community with events that return every year.

Weddings are another market where bookings have remained consistent. As the Governor lifts gathering limits, we are seeing more weddings actualize, bringing needed room nights into the community.

A refresh of the Explore Asheville meetings brand which began late in FY '19 with Miles Partnership, will be completed and help set the stage for the future. The brand refresh process included a comprehensive review of group sales' collateral and marketing efforts which were

originally developed in 2013. The timing of this project during a significant shift in meeting planners needs, allowed for the agency team to stop and ensure the positioning statement and the approach would include a strategy that the sales team can rely on while navigating the disruption in the meetings industry. Looking at the Asheville meetings brand through this lens proved to be advantageous. We know that some elements are here to stay – whether it is the hybrid meeting or the virtual familiarization trip. The timing of this project put Asheville ahead by enabling us to create timely message points and strategies. Among the new assets are new tradeshow themes, email strategy and templates.

Complementing the roll-out of the meetings brand is the addition of new tool, Act-On, an email marketing platform. In essence, Act On is marketing automation software that has full integration with our Customer Record Management system. This integration will allow us to quickly identify the most engaged clients, leading to enhanced prospecting and lead scoring. Sales managers will be able to access this information in real-time.

In conclusion, the 2020-2021 fiscal year will continue to be a challenge. However, we will continue to adjust, pivoting to what is possible and do everything within our control to finish the fiscal year strong.

KEY STRATEGIES

- Grow local/regional meeting and events sales by focusing on the states with major metropolitan centers within a six-hour drive distance of Asheville
- Develop digital assets critical to successful selling during the pandemic
- Identify/pursue short- and long-term sports opportunities in partnership with Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission
- Build the meetings brand using the newly minted brand assets
- Stay informed of booking trends across all key market segments (corporate, incentive) enabling the team to ramp up efforts as warranted

Digital Assets – Moving to the Virtual Space

- Participate in virtual trade show/events hosted by major meeting and motorcoach trade industry groups
- Develop portfolio of 3D Matterport virtual site tours with aerial footage of larger meeting hotels and event centers, complemented with corresponding web page
- Launch a meeting focused destination virtual tour to replace the 48-Hour FAM previously scheduled in November
- Host a series of “Mug Moments”, an abbreviated virtual conversation involving a hotel partner, the CVB and registered planners to discuss meeting safe practices and highlighting groups who have met successfully in Asheville
- Host viewing parties with targeted third-party planning companies upon release of the destination virtual FAM tour
- Launch a motorcoach destination virtual tour highlighting local partner organizations
- Participate with the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina in virtual trade show opportunities
- Continuously add to virtual sales assets

Back to In Person – When Deemed Safe to Do So

- Attend in-person tradeshows, sales calls, and host in-market client events when it is deemed safe to do so
- Hold an in-person Asheville 48 Hour Experience in March 2021 targeting 12 buyers
- Promote individual site visits underpinned with stay safe measures
- Identify/create community connections with organizations and individuals able to assist in bringing professional associations to Asheville

Support the Sales Process

- Pursue well placed sponsorships and opportunities for public relations coverage
- Fully integrate Act On marketing distribution program into the sales process with the end goal of quickly identifying high value prospects
- Maintain an expanded destination presence on Cvent and respond aggressively to leads received
- Extensively promote the newly expanded *Have More Fun On Us* meetings incentive program
- Introduce Economic Impact Calculations as a metric to fully assess the value of booked and actualized meeting and group events
- Update the Meeting Planner Guide to reflect new branding and updated content

Collaborate with Industry Partners to Secure Group Events

- Share 3D Matterport virtual site tours with aerial footage links with partners to assist when site visits are not practical
- Execute special value-added promotional opportunities targeting short term business
- Support site visits hosted by industry partners
- Invite industry partners to join the CVB at trade and client events when the time to do so returns
- Include partnership opportunities on AshevilleCVB.com and in Partner Connect e-newsletter
- Host quarterly directors of sales meetings and optional online forums to keep partners informed about current/future sales initiatives
- Schedule regular updates with individual hotel sales teams to keep them apprised of new initiatives

Increase AAA Destination Knowledge

- Host two web-based destination orientation/training programs focusing on current COVID-19 guidelines and the effect on local business operations
- Participate in the annual Blue Ridge Parkway AAA FAM

COMMUNICATIONS AND CONVENTIONS SERVICING OUTLOOK

Having quickly adapted to the “new normal” by producing a series of successful virtual tools to help support both meeting planners and local industry partners, the team will continue to follow industry trends to meet the new needs of planners.

The communications plan for FY 20-21 will focus on demonstrating the Group Sales team’s insights on how Asheville can exceed meeting planners’ top-level needs with its range of meeting space options, and more importantly, how meetings can occur safely. The Group Sales team is an important resource during an unprecedented period for the meetings industry and will continue to develop creative tools, outreach and marketing plans to keep Asheville top-of-mind, while supporting local businesses that provide services to conferences, meetings and other events. Also, with the finalization of the meeting’s brand refresh project, which includes all new collateral and email templates, a number of new strategies will be incorporated this year.

MEET SAFE PLEDGE

As the industry begins experiencing an uptick in meeting activity, a big concern on the minds of planners and organizers is the safety of their attendees. Explore Asheville, in collaboration with hotel partners, has developed the **Asheville Cares Meet Safe Pledge**. The pledge meets two goals by, first, creating a cohesive set of business protocols to communicate the safe standards put in place as related to meetings and, secondly, recognizing safety is a shared commitment – and everyone has a role to play. The practices noted for planners are quickly becoming “standard” in the meetings industry. In the spirit of that shared responsibility, outlined in the pledge are guidelines for event spaces, event staff and meeting planners, alike, as well as those being followed by specific sectors of the industry (including hotels, attractions, retail businesses and restaurants).

KEY STRATEGIES

- Continue to build LinkedIn presence and followers creating more virtual networking opportunities and touchpoints
- Continued promotion of the highest-quality virtual tours of Asheville’s primary meeting hotels as an alternative for in-person site visits and the Meet Safe Pledge
- Execute a new, more robust 12-month Communication Strategy for continued education and awareness for current client database, including placement of print and digital advertisements
- Execute an audience-specific email strategy for corporate meeting and sports event planners
- Make web content updates on meetings pages of ExploreAsheville.com with new brand elements and messaging, and use as a vehicle to promote new virtual tools
- Incorporate the insights of Act-On marketing automation software for enhanced prospecting and lead scoring

CONVENTIONS SERVICING STRATEGIES & TACTICS

It's more important than ever to be an on-the-ground, trusted source for clients to stay up to date on community regulations, protocols and the status of area venues and suppliers that may affect prospective events, while also offering solutions.

Local Expertise

- Provide exceptional service and local knowledge to inbound groups, thereby enhancing planners' experiences in our destination
- Work closely with Explore Asheville Community Engagement department to build awareness of local resources available for safe events and activities suitable for meeting planners and attendees
- Interview group planners who have executed successful safe events to develop informative case studies
- Develop new pre-meeting messaging informing planners of the availability of an Economic Impact Calculation specific for their event and information needed to construct it