

HOW TO GUIDE:

01. TELL AND SELL YOUR STORY

VIRGINIA IS FOR LO♥ERS®

**VIRGINIA
IS FOR
LOVERS®**

TELL AND SELL YOUR STORY

INTRODUCTION

This How to Guide will assist your locality in identifying your unique story and explore ways to share it with the world! As you embark on this exciting journey it might seem overwhelming, but VTC can assist by providing resources, answering questions, promoting your assets and sharing your story.

The Big Easy. Music City. What happens here stays here.

You know the cities these tags represent. Even if you've never visited them.

While cities like Nashville and New Orleans may have their own famous monikers, the state of Virginia is fortunate to have a 50-year-old brand that is globally recognizable and iconic. Virginia is for Lovers was created in 1969, and while it's meant a lot of things to a lot of different people over the years, one thing remains the same: LOVE. Today, a new generation is discovering love for Virginia's mountains, beaches, history, theme parks, vibrant cities and towns, outdoor activities, and culinary delights.

While Virginia is for Lovers is the official brand slogan for Virginia Tourism Corporation, it truly belongs to all of us. Virginia is for Lovers is an instant identifier of a Virginia vacation, from the beach to the mountains. That's why VTC encourages all of our tourism partners to lean into Virginia is for Lovers and take advantage of its powerful brand equity. By leveraging the state's signature logo, you can help the brand – and tourism in Virginia – gain even more awareness and recognition. When travelers see the Virginia is for Lovers brand used consistently, it further solidifies Virginia's reputation as a premier travel destination and provides a strong foundation for telling your destination's unique and compelling story.

Crafting that story starts by determining what truly sets you apart. Potential visitors want to know: Who are you? What do you offer? Who should come? What can we do there? Why come there over somewhere else?

Marketers call this "positioning." But for our purposes, we want to encourage anyone responsible for travel and tourism in Virginia to think first and foremost in terms of storytelling. After all, every place has a story.

**All DRIVE 2.0 research was conducted in 2019 and compiled pre COVID-19 Crisis.
Please see vatc.org/coronavirus for COVID-19: Industry Response Toolkit.**

WHY YOUR STORY MATTERS

In modern tourism promotion efforts, you'll often hear two terms: placemaking and place marketing. While similar sounding, they have very different meanings.

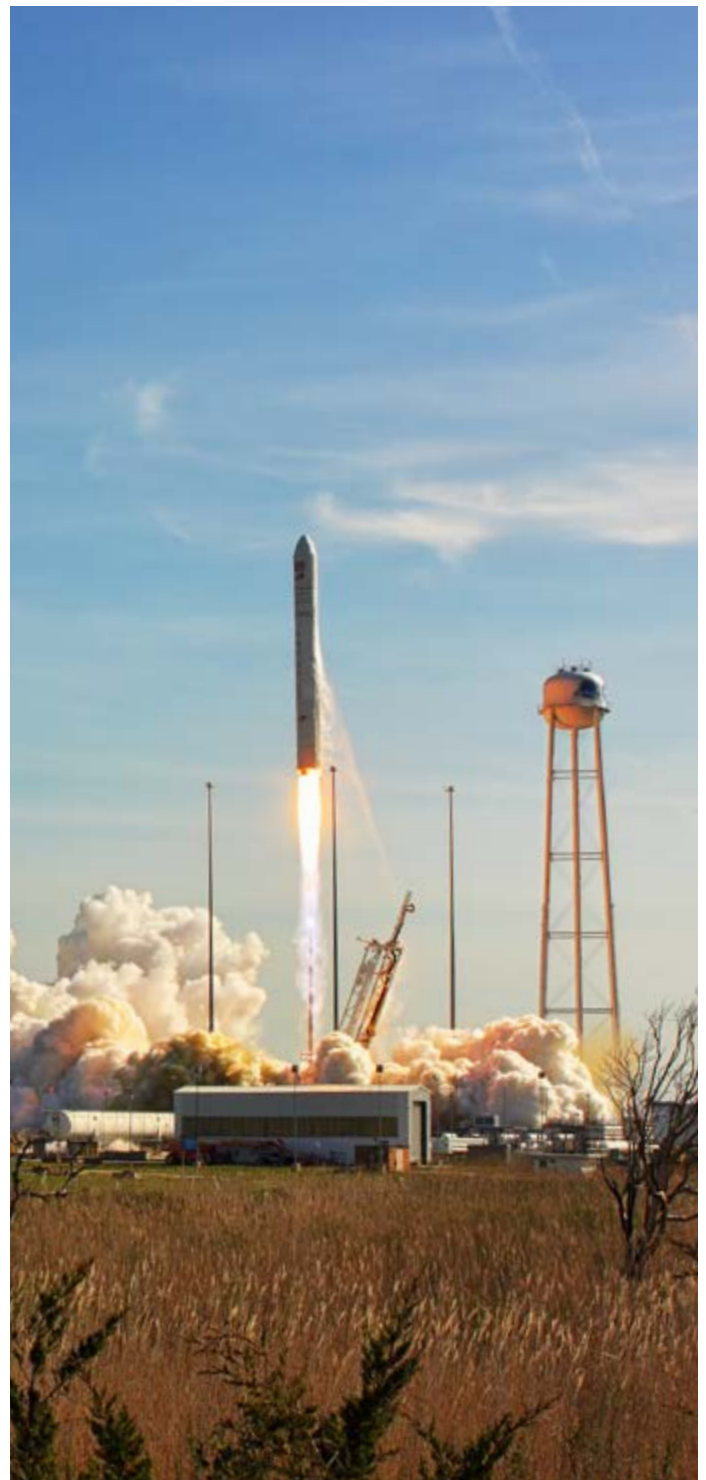
Placemaking is tied to product, whether it be adding more places to go (e.g., attractions, restaurants, breweries, and bike trails), or more things to do (e.g., festivals, concerts, boats tours and pub crawls). We'll cover this concept in more detail in How to Guide #2: Enhance Experiences, but for now, know that the best travel marketers do both — add more places to go and more things to do — as part of their placemaking strategies.

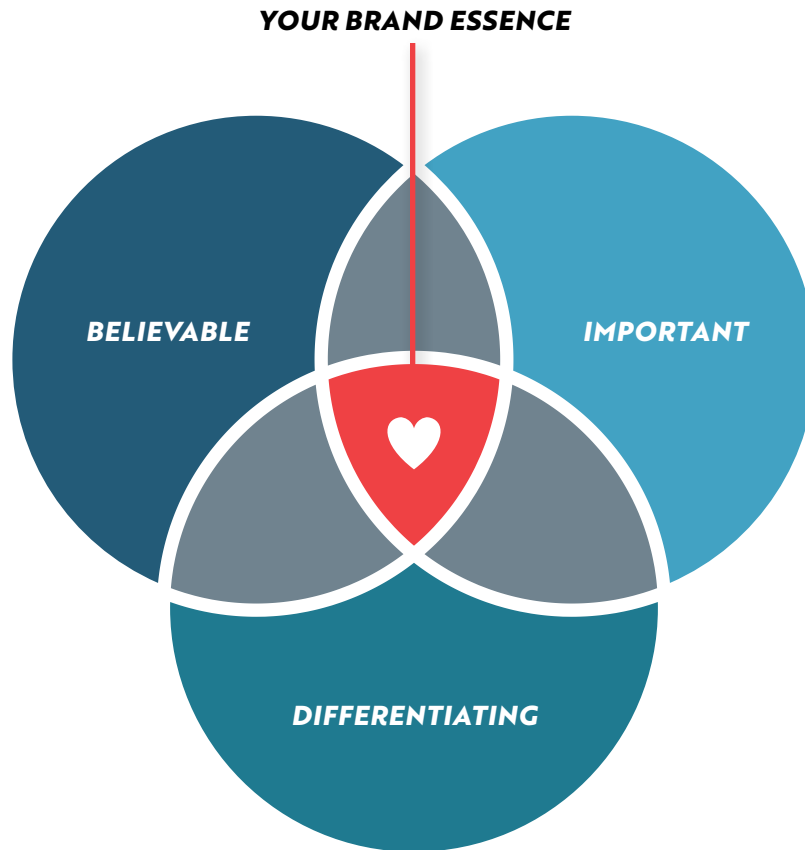
Place marketing is tied to promotion and how you package yourself — how you share who you are and what you offer with the world — and this is what we'll be diving into throughout this guide. Every intentional action taken to promote your location as a great place to live, visit, learn, play, and work falls under this umbrella. And the more people across a community you have invested and trained in this effort, the better.

Having a strong story enhances not just place marketing, but placemaking as well. Think about Nashville as the Music City. Those looking to add places to go or things to do in the greater Nashville region often find ways to tie their offering back to music, either explicitly (a new venue or event) or implicitly (through logos, signage, and proximity to the music scene). The reason is simple. Any new, stand-alone attraction in Nashville that reinforces the Music City position helps it gain recognition while also amplifying the region's music-centric story and message. In essence, you see music everywhere because people intentionally put music everywhere.

Music City: It's believable, important, and differentiating.

So, what's your story?





BELIEVABLE, IMPORTANT, AND DIFFERENTIATING

First, your story must be believable. Whatever you claim, you need to be able to back it up.

Second, your story must resonate with travelers. That is, it has to offer something relevant and meaningful to visitors. Does your destination offer travelers an opportunity to disconnect in order to connect with loved ones? Is it a place so deeply steeped in history that your competition doesn't come close to offering what you do? Or perhaps your destination offers experience so unique and unforgettable that travelers consider you a 'Bucket List' destination.

The two questions you should ask yourself are: **why should travelers come to your destination, and why now?**

And lastly, your story must differentiate you from your competitive set. Every travel destination in Virginia is unique and special. Your story has to reflect what sets you apart.

The best way to start is to know thyself. And nobody knows you better than your stakeholders: residents, past and current visitors, community leaders, travel and tourism professionals and even the travelers themselves. What words and images do these stakeholders use to describe your locality? By looking and listening closely to these things, the major components of your story can begin to take shape.

FAQS ABOUT TELLING YOUR STORY

Do we need to engage an ad agency or marketing communications firm?

Not necessarily. However, you do need someone who can lead and shepherd this process. Ultimately, though, the goal is to capture your overarching story in a way that is believable, important, and differentiating to residents and potential visitors. The more authentic it can sound, like something someone would actually say about your community, the better.

Can we just develop the story and then engage stakeholders to fine tune it?

That approach can lead to folks thinking the story was imposed upon them, rather than something they helped create. It's better to tap into the wisdom of the crowd, so when the story is fully developed, everyone owns it and wants to use it.

Why can't we use the story we've always been using to promote our community and attractions?

Perhaps you can. This exercise is primarily for those who have not yet landed on a believable, important, and differentiating story to promote their community. That said, even those with a well-established story can benefit from a fresh look from all stakeholders. It wasn't a group of tourism professionals who came up with "Music City" for Nashville, it was a radio disc jockey.



CRAFTING YOUR UNIQUE STORY



Great stories don't come from one mind alone. To make your locality's story believable, important, and differentiating, you'll need to rely on key partners and follow a step-by-step process in much the same way.

STEP 1: FIND YOUR CHAMPION

Someone, or a select team of people, must own this process and see it through from start to finish, or it simply won't happen. They have to be the champions of this effort. To find them, think about your community "spark plugs" — your tourism professionals, nonprofit community organizers and advocates, municipal leaders, and local business owners. Basically, you want people who will be positive and excited about moving this effort forward and can keep the ball rolling.

STEP 2: CREATE A PROJECT TEAM

Your champions can't do it all alone, so you'll need to identify and create a project team with representatives from key organizations (chamber of commerce, economic development agencies, nonprofit organizations, municipal departments, young professional groups, etc.) who can help manage the process on a daily basis. This group will ultimately determine the project goals, timeline, strategies, and tactics.

STEP 3: IDENTIFY KEY STAKEHOLDERS.

While the size and makeup of your stakeholder group is largely dependent on the characteristics of your community itself, think through everyone in your community who may be impacted by tourism and invite them to have a seat at the table. **For more details and inspiration on how to come up with a comprehensive list of stakeholders, see How to Guide #3: How to Recruit Partners.**

STEP 4: HOST A KICKOFF WORKSHOP

This is where you outline the process, what you hope to accomplish, and how you plan to get there. At this session, have the group begin to brainstorm and identify themes that point to the core DNA of the community from their point of view.

STEP 5: CONDUCT ONLINE SURVEY.

Based on input from the stakeholder group, prepare and conduct an online survey and actively encourage all residents to participate. These are the people who live your locality's story every day. What do they love about living there? What words do they use to describe where they live? Their answers will strike at the heart of what will ultimately make your story believable, and it can even provide some insights into the things your locality can do to enhance the experience of being there (which we'll cover in greater depth in [How to Guide #2: How to Enhance Experiences](#)).

STEP 6: HOST A SECOND WORKSHOP TO REVIEW SURVEY RESULTS.

This is where your story really begins to take shape. Assemble your stakeholder group so you can share insights from the survey and brainstorm together what the emerging and compelling story themes may be. What are the locality's defining attributes according to feedback from the survey? What is differentiating, believable, and important? The Hub & Spoke exercise at the end of this How to Guide is a good exercise to get the group started.

STEP 7: DEVELOP INITIAL STORYLINE.

With your champion at the helm, recruit a smaller action team from your group of stakeholders whose talents lend themselves to creative execution — and develop an initial storyline. This storyline will put into words the input from all and establish the foundation for what your story will become. Provide supporting reasons, rationale, and emotional proof points from the research you've conducted.

STEP 8: EMPOWER AND EQUIP.

Invite all stakeholders to a third workshop to review and discuss the storyline and supporting rationale with everyone in order to streamline and improve it. Once everyone's on the same page, use this workshop as a springboard toward developing the final draft of your story, which we'll cover below.



UNIFIED IMAGERY

The best and most effective story about a place isn't just built from what you say about it, but also what you show.

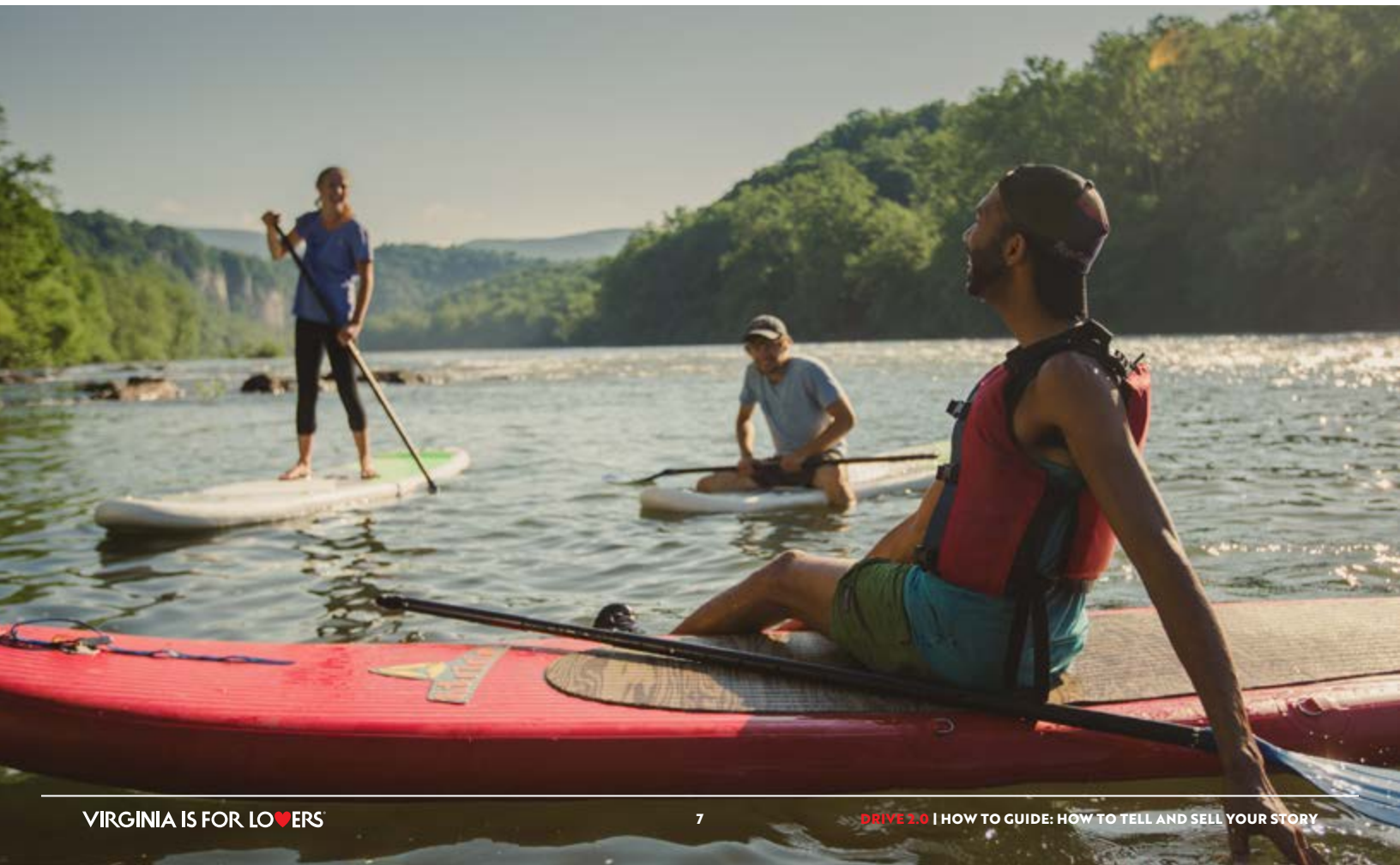
These days, the public "owns" the brand, and their power to hashtag you in social media posts is the best example of that ownership. They're already in the process of curating images about your place to their followers.

Your role is to be the brand steward — to identify the images that best represent your brand and encourage stakeholders to share and use like images.

Determining your locality's unified imagery doesn't mean you find one or two single images that capture your place. Rather, it means fully understanding those attributes that make you unique and compelling and then using a curated bank of images, and even symbols, to reinforce those attributes. It means you populate and organize your image library in a way that provides a visual storytelling framework that communicates your brand essence.

Assignment: Track, view, and inventory how residents and visitors share images about you. Then, create a high-quality resource bank of your own images that any travel and tourism organization in your region can access and use to promote your place and story.

VTC shares all of its photography assets with industry partners. For more information contact **Sarah Hauser, shauser@virginia.org**



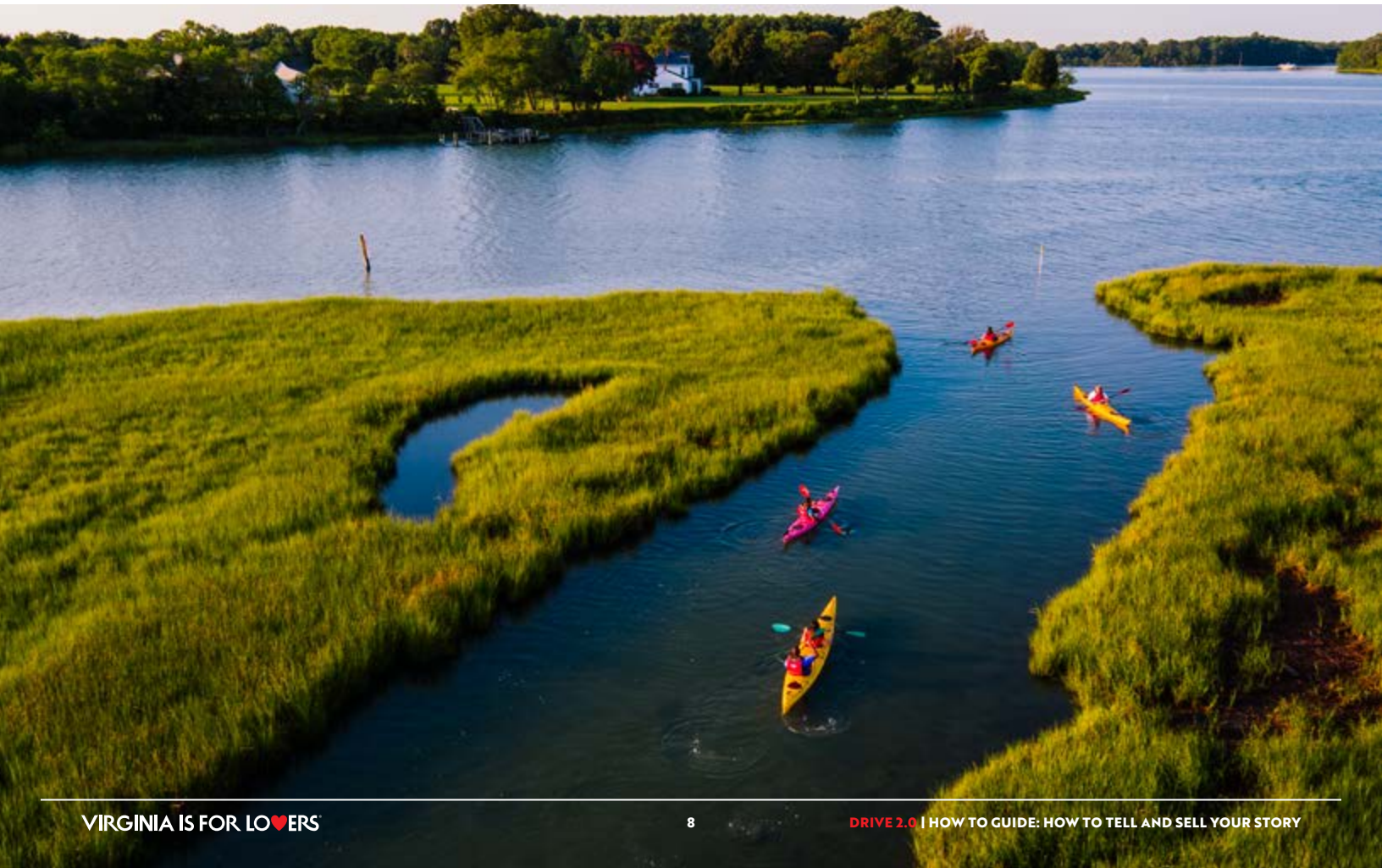
SEVEN KEY QUESTIONS TO TELL YOUR STORY

Once you have crafted your story and shared it with the stakeholders, it's time to develop a written plan to guide communications and leverage scarce resources — whether you call it a marketing plan, promotional plan, implementation plan, communications plan, or something else entirely these questions will help you get there.

While the guidelines contained in this section were written primarily from a DMO or tourism organization perspective, any tourism-related business can use these tips to help share their stories and encourage visitation.

Though planning sounds like a scary term, it doesn't have to be. Approach the development of your plan by simply answering the following basic questions:

1. **Who are you?**
2. **What are you trying to accomplish?**
3. **Who can make that happen?**
4. **What message will move people to action?**
5. **Which vehicles best deliver that message?**
6. **What resources do you have?**
7. **How will you know if you are successful?**



1. WHO ARE YOU?

Great news: Since you've already reviewed the previous sections in this guide, you already know how to do this. But to re-emphasize: It all boils down to identifying what is believable, important, and differentiating about your place.

A mission or purpose statement is also a great element to include, as it helps define the "why" that pays off your positioning.

2. WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH?

We equate this to establishing your goals. Do you want to increase overall destination awareness? Do you want to increase the number of visitors to your destination? Do you want to drive conversion rates for inquiries on your website?

Your goals should be SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound.

Perhaps your goals include tracking key measures like the number of social media followers you have. Simply choose a starting date and identify how many followers you have, and then in a set period of time later (six months, a year, three years) identify the latest number of followers. It's best to try and establish a realistic and achievable goal so you can know if your changes are strong or if more efforts are needed to achieve success.



3. WHO CAN MAKE THAT HAPPEN?

With no shortage of prospective visitors to reach, the key becomes knowing which ones will help you meet your specific goals. Understanding who to reach with your plan starts with defining your target audience — making sure you understand who your ideal visitors are and how you can best reach more people like them.

When identifying this target audience, consider:

- **Demographics of current visitors:** age, gender, ethnicity, income, occupation, home market, etc.
- **Trip characteristics and interests:** when do they come, how long do they stay, what do they do when they visit, what do they buy when they visit, etc.
- **Media Habits:** preferred media platforms to engage (outdoor, social media, traditional, etc.)

Google Analytics and other social media analytic tools can help you identify this information about your ideal visitors, and for any informational gaps, you can turn to primary surveys among past visitors or potential future visitors and ask them directly. (See sidebar on more ways to use data to help you identify your ideal visitors.)

If you don't have the manpower or budget to do this right away, a great place to start is with VTC's traveler profiles. They are broken down by interest, region, season and trip type vatc.org/research/travel-data-and-profiles.

Once you have identified an ideal visitor for a promotional campaign, you can build an accurate audience with the people like them in the right markets who would then be most likely to respond to your efforts.

USING BIG DATA

A common approach to identifying who comes to your destination is to tap into “big data” and buy information about visitors from various resources. Virginia Tourism Corporation utilizes public data and works with other partner agencies and organizations. Many of the more popular data sources are listed via the link below. In addition, at the bottom of this linked page, there is a list of research firms VTC has worked with in the past or is familiar with through previous projects.

If you have any questions on these sources or partner organizations, please visit vatc.org/research for contact info. For a sample of research vendors VTC has contracted or worked alongside visit: vatc.org/research/researchlinks



4. WHAT MESSAGE WILL MOVE PEOPLE TO ACTION?

The key word here is move. What will get your targeted visitor to decide on a trip and choose your destination over your competitors? In any decision-making environment, rational and emotional attributes influence people's perspectives and, ultimately, decisions. The key rests in identifying those rational attributes (the tangible assets of your destination) and emotional appeal (the way a vacation to your destination will make them feel) that will most influence their likeliness to visit.

Having a true understanding of your destination is the best place to start. What are the activities that are most popular — is it the outdoors, arts, food, history?

One way to assess your particular mix is through research — asking past and potential visitors to rate how important these various rational and emotional attributes are to them in a vacation experience. Then, take it a step further and ask them to rate how your destination delivers on those attributes. That way, you can identify gaps in expectations and better determine the believable experiences your destination can promote.

An ideal destination will meet both the rational and emotion needs of visitors.



5. WHICH VEHICLES BEST DELIVER THAT MESSAGE?

To know this will require some tracking regarding how your target audience consumes information. Is it media-driven or search-driven? For most destinations, **over half of visitors are coming to see friends and family.** So, what role do residents play in delivering your message? And, how far out are they planning their trip? It's these kinds of the questions and respective answers that will help you identify the best vehicles to deliver your message.

An easy place to turn is to your own resources. Start with Google Analytics and social media analytic tools. These can help you get started in assessing where your target audience consumes information.

Next, turn to VTC. The trip profile resources provide excellent information. For example, when we look at the full visitor profile for Virginia, we see that 49% of travelers are coming to visit friends and family and on average spend 2.3 nights away on their trip. When it comes to information sources, 28% use friends and family followed by a search engine (18%). You can find additional data like month of travel and other demographics. With these insights you can begin to identify elements to feed into your plan. For example, if people mostly visit your destination in the fall and you know 52% decide their trip less than a month in advance, you should start pushing your message out in August and early September. vatc.org/research/travel-data-and-profiles

For those localities engaging with any primary research efforts, consider including questions asking any additional information that you might be missing related to demographics, travel party make-up, and decision-making. For those with more robust marketing campaigns and budgets, "big data" resources can actually provide attribution data, identifying if someone comes after seeing an ad for your destination.

6. WHAT RESOURCES DO YOU HAVE?

Resources encompass more than just money, and the best way to start thinking beyond your budget is to leverage all the partnerships you have. If you've developed your story using the multi-step process detailed earlier, then you should have some great partners already in place who know the destination's story. For more inspiration, **check out How to Guide #3: Recruit Partners for ways to identify even more partners and build stronger partnerships.**

VTC is Here to Help

VTC Research assists with a wide range of tourism-related data analysis and gathering, including the economic impact of tourism on the state and localities, visitor profiles, market share, consumer trends, and VTC's advertising and marketing campaigns. The goal of the Research team is to provide detailed and timely information for those in the Commonwealth who are interested in the travel and tourism industry. vatc.org/research

The Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) Marketing Leverage Program is designed to stimulate new tourism marketing programs through the creation of partnerships, to leverage limited marketing dollars, and to extend the "Virginia is for Lovers" brand. Below is a link to access more information on the program. vatc.org/grants/leverageprogram

VTC's Communications team wants to help our partners make the most of their public relations strategies. On vatc.org, you'll find helpful links and tips created specifically for Virginia tourism industry partners. To request a password to access protected documents, contact the VTC Communications team at vatc.org/marketing/communications. Public relations is a low-to-no-cost strategy that can be hugely impactful for your destination. Virginia Tourism offers many best practices on media relations that can be found at: vatc.org/marketing/communications/prbestpractices.

In addition, VTC oversees a co-op program to help support your promotional efforts. The current co-op program includes supporting localities with:

- **Social:** Build social engagement and increase website visits by promoting your content on Facebook and Instagram.
- **Search:** Reach consumers who are actively looking for content related to your destination, product, or services.
- **Print and Digital Content:** Leverage a trusted voice to reach travelers through print, digital, and social opportunities.
- **Digital Banners and Video:** Place banner and video ads in front of targeted audiences who are interested in travel.
- **Travel Site:** Engage with travel enthusiasts actively looking for travel inspiration and resources.
- **Cable TV:** Reach large audiences in key geographic markets and pre-negotiated cable packages.
- **Research:** Use the latest research technology to measure who arrives in your destination after seeing your advertising or visiting your website (Arrivalist).
- **Streaming Audio:** Reach key audiences using streaming audio to create awareness and consideration of your destination, product, or services.

To learn more about VTC's co-op program, visit:

vatc.org/marketing/advertising/partneradvertising/

6. WHAT RESOURCES DO YOU HAVE? (cont'd)

Don't Forget Owned Media

Telling your story to residents and visitors requires the use of every public-facing tool available, and “owned media” is an often-overlooked channel in most travel marketing for a community or region. Is your story shared via your current website? How about on the websites of your stakeholders?

Your Best “Owned Media” Assets Are Your Residents

Every market is loaded with advocates and— people in love with where they live and love to share — but they too often remain an untapped resource.

The best way to start identifying them is by culling social media to find your community’s primary brand-lovers. Start by looking through your location’s commonly used hashtags along with those who may have a large number of followers.

The next step is to review their online presence to make sure their values align with the values of your locality and your brand. If they do, then begin to think through ways they can use their platform to help promote your community. This may not always be self-evident, but through a little creative execution, you can usually find authentic ways to leverage their platform. For example, say the resident is all about yoga. All of their posts are yoga related. There could be opportunities for them to begin showcasing their latest yoga poses in picturesque settings around your locality — all while using the hashtag for your destination.

Once the residents have been identified, reach out to them and invite them in for a meeting with other brand-lovers. Share with them the brand, the vision, the values of the destination, and the impact tourism has on communities. From there, brainstorm with them ways they could help promote the locality. Hopefully, they will be excited to participate in this way and be willing to do this because they understand the value (see **How to Guide #5: Make the Case**). More often than not, free swag may be enough, especially if their hobby matches well with your brand.



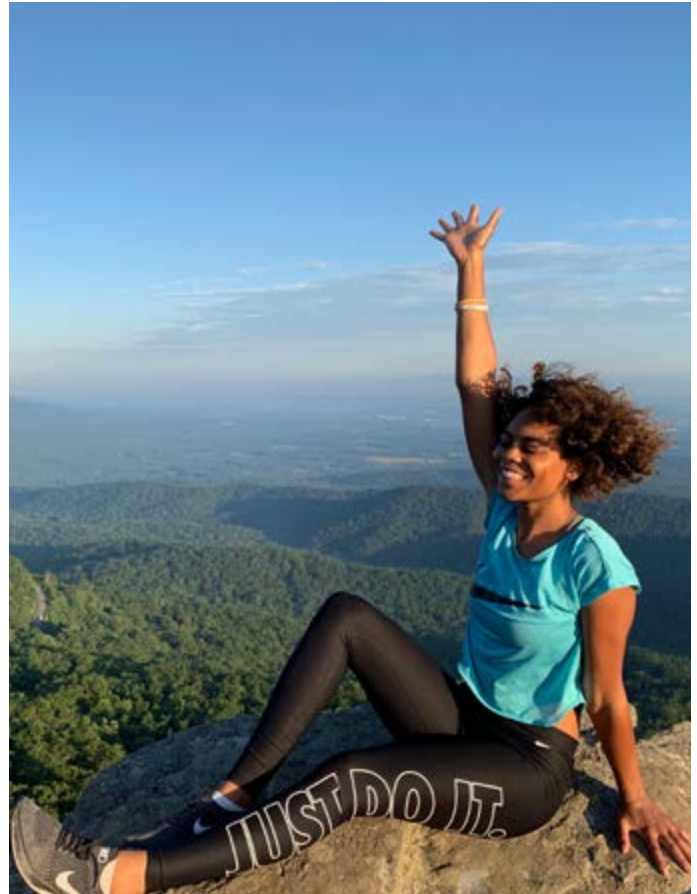
7. HOW WILL YOU KNOW IF YOU'RE SUCCESSFUL?

Let's look back at the goals established in question two — what are you trying to accomplish? Because these are SMART goals, they should be measurable. Therefore, each goal should have at least one corresponding key performance indicator (KPI) or number you can track to assess how well you move the needle.

How to specifically measure success will vary depending on the goal itself. If you're tracking marketing goals like awareness-building, then additional primary research may need to be conducted to capture the percentage of people who are now aware after all the hard work you've done. If it's a goal like increasing the number of visitors to your website, then this is much easier to track — you can look to Google Analytics to find those numbers.

Whatever your goals, be sure at the outset of your plan to identify the key performance indicators that will help you track and measure your success. For example, below you'll find a sample media-driven spreadsheet. Determine these metrics at the outset of your marketing effort and then measure them at the end to see how you have been able to move the needle.

Note, for easy-to-track numbers, like those that can be accessed through Google Analytics, you can monitor progress throughout the entire effort, which will allow you to course-correct if things do not appear to be working.



	SOCIAL POSTS	SEARCH	VIDEO	BANNERS	WEBSITE
SOME INSIGHT	Impressions Likes	Impressions Clicks	Views	Impressions Clicks	Visits
MORE INSIGHT	Total Engagements including Comments & Shares	Click Through Rate Cost per Conversion	Completed Views Cost per Completed View	Conversion Rate Cost per Conversion	Time on Site

SHARING YOUR STORY WITH THE INDUSTRY

Your locality's unique story will work only if it's embraced and shared by the entire travel and tourism industry. To ensure this happens, you should:

1. CREATE A SONG SHEET

Capture your positioning statement and narrative, along with the reasoning behind it and emotional proof points, in a single document that can be distributed broadly.

2. CREATE A SIMPLE OUTLINE SHARED RESOURCE FOR THE INDUSTRY TO USE

The song sheet should live digitally as well. Create a simple online shared resource that chronicles the process and houses all of the information and insights the effort has uncovered. This could be as basic as a Dropbox folder. This resource center can be used by anyone who has a stake in advancing your locality's story, ensuring they'll have the information and resources they'll need to do so.

3. HOLD AN INDUSTRY-WIDE TRAINING EVENT

Hold an event to share the story document and digital resource. Provide training on how everyone can and should use the messages and imagery in their own communications and promotional efforts to help advance a seamless story about the destination.

Make it clear in the song sheet, on the digital resource center, and at the industry training event that the song sheet is not meant to replace any attraction's messaging, but rather complement it.

For example, when a local museum describes its new art exhibition to a national reporter, part of that conversation will naturally center on the museum's location and what that town or city is all about — this is precisely where the song sheet comes into play to be sure the locality's story is being told wherever and whenever possible.

4. SHARE YOUR SONG SHEET WITH VTC

As a final step, share your story and song sheet with VTC. VTC works every day to tell your story to travelers, stakeholders, and the media. The better their understanding of how you're positioning yourself and the story you're telling, the more equipped they will be to tell that story.

For social media, it's easy to share your story with VTC by making sure you include our tags and handles in your own daily social media activity. If you're posting something on Instagram, include **#LoveVA** in your caption. You can join our private industry Facebook page at: [shorturlat/lsLMV](https://www.facebook.com/shorturlat/lsLMV). And, be sure you tag us **@VisitVirginia** on Twitter so we see your most interesting news and inspirational photos.

Join in our social media conversations by visiting us on:

- **Facebook:** [facebook.com/virginiaisforlovers](https://www.facebook.com/virginiaisforlovers)
- **Instagram:** [instagram.com/visitvirginia](https://www.instagram.com/visitvirginia)
- **Twitter:** twitter.com/visitvirginia
- **Pinterest:** [pinterest.com/visitvirginia](https://www.pinterest.com/visitvirginia)

Finally, be sure to download our social media fact sheet at: vatc.org/marketing/communications/social-media/tips-and-tricks-from-the-social-content-team/

DID YOU KNOW?

VTC's Communications Team provides numerous resources on [VATC.org](https://vatc.org), sharing best practices and tips related to:

- Public relations
- Content marketing
- Social media

And, VTC provides opportunities to use its blog as a way for localities to share their story!

vatc.org/marketing/communications/



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NORFOLK: ENGAGING AN ENTIRE CITY IN SHARING ITS STORY

Home to a quarter-million residents, thousands of thriving businesses, hundreds of nonprofit organizations, and world-class cultural attractions, colleges and universities — not to mention the largest Naval base the world — Norfolk truly is a remarkable city.

Yet, being so diverse and remarkable presents the challenge of how to best share the Norfolk story simply. Is it a Navy town? An arts town? The business center of Hampton Roads?

To address this messaging challenge, Norfolk embarked on a comprehensive research-based brand refresh initiative, which included gathering input from over 1,500 residents, businesses, and community leaders on what defines the true essence of the City of Norfolk.

This research identified the defining attributes of Norfolk as a place to live, work, and play, including what makes it stand apart from other cities and the why behind that. Stakeholders were also asked to describe positive images and symbols they most identify with the city. In the end, this work inspired a tight, compelling narrative statement that captures Norfolk’s core DNA:

Everyone is welcome and belongs in Norfolk, a remarkably surprising and creative place where residents, businesses, and the military are all working together to build the most dynamic and authentic urban waterfront community in America.

Tested through subsequent resident surveys, the vast majority believed this sentiment eloquently captured Norfolk’s true personality and point of difference.

As Norfolk is one of only a few true urban waterfront communities, water took center stage not only in the narrative but in the visual aspects of place marketing the city explored. In this vein, the images most associated with Norfolk were those of the mermaid — Norfolk’s most notable icon.

Since being introduced in 1999, Norfolk mermaid statues have become a highly noticed and photographed asset. Research revealed that nine in 10 residents felt the mermaid as a mascot represented their city. Moreover, residents said the mermaid was highly recognizable and evoked positive emotions about the City of Norfolk. In the end, the mermaid imagery helps tell the story of abundant access to water and natural beauty, creativity and artistic expression, diversity and inclusion, and a fun-loving personality.

The outcome of the brand refresh project was a communications compass printed on an 11”x17” laminated handout. The compass presents the central message of what Norfolk is all about and includes supporting message points, as well as instructions on how everyone can incorporate this message into their communications outreach.

Also included was stated permission from the city government encouraging everyone to embrace and use the mermaid image with various designs and visual executions. City officials even set the tone, incorporating a fresh, more modern-looking mermaid image into the City’s official name — see the “O” in the city’s official logo.



Today, Norfolk uses this communications compass when training marketing partners, businesses, and even residents on how to talk about the city they all call home.



VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS

RICHMOND: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

What happens when people’s perceptions of your place don’t match the reality you see every day? When the story outsiders ascribe to you paints a picture at odds with who you really are or aspire to be?

Like many other Southern cities, Richmond has had its story told for it to a large degree — often by people who have never stepped foot in it — and that story hasn’t always been flattering when it comes to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

So, Richmond Region Tourism (RRT) decided to do something about it, with a particular focus on the LGBTQ community.

The organization knew that LGBTQ and other under-represented travelers do more than research package deals and best prices. They study the attractions and communities they’d like to visit to gauge how receptive and welcoming those places will be to them. Since Richmond was already home to a vibrant LGBTQ community and a much more diverse, welcoming, and inclusive vibe than the outside world gave it credit for, RRT, in partnership with Virginia Commonwealth University’s Brandcenter, began developing a campaign — OutRVA — to increase awareness of the city and spur visitation.

The campaign, which launched in 2014, first featured a grassroots approach, whereby RRT distributed “OutRVA” stickers to supporting local businesses and recruited OutRVA Insiders to produce content about the best things to do and best places to go and see, as well as what they love about Richmond. Their posts lived, along with other travel information for potential visitors, on a dedicated website, richmondout.com, which now redirects simply to outrva.com.

In the lead up to Richmond’s Pridefest on Brown’s Island that fall, RRT also launched an advertising campaign, featuring print and banner ads, which it supported with Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube content, that directed viewers to the website.

The campaign’s creative execution mirrored the style, tone, and voice of a “coming out letter,” whereby Richmond, in a slightly tongue-and-cheek way, proceeded to tell people in other cities that it was coming out of the closet.

The approach was met with immediate success, gaining positive press not just in LGBTQ-leaning publications, but national outlets like the New York Times, with one headline reading: “Out of the Cradle of the Confederacy, Richmond Shines Anew.”

Since the launch, Richmond’s reputation as a diverse and welcoming city has continued to grow, and its emphasis on the LGBTQ community has led to upticks not only in broad visitation, but also in sports tourism through Compete Magazine’s first-ever Sports Diversity Jubilee, held in May 2019, and conventions, as Prides of the Southeast is set to hold its annual meeting here in 2021.

And, of course, Pridefest continues to grow each year, which not only attracts visitors but builds grassroots community pride in Richmond, which can shine through in all tourism efforts, not just those directed toward the LGBTQ community — all because tourism leaders had the courage to take charge of their story and share that story with the world.



VIRGINIA'S RIVER REALM: HONING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

In an area as sprawled as Lancaster and Middlesex counties, with its 465 miles of shoreline and quaint towns dotting the landscape, tourism success often hinges on unification.

After all, though charming in their own right, towns like Kilmarnock, White Stone, Topping, or Deltaville don't necessarily have enough brand recognition by themselves to move the needle for potential visitors. However, in 2014, leaders across both Middlesex and Lancaster counties and towns began exploring the benefits of promoting themselves as a whole, whereby each town's offering could become an essential part of an entire experience.

But what should that experience be? And how should it be packaged and promoted?

To find the answers to those questions, the area's municipalities invested in a research effort to help tease out its most authentic attributes and get at the heart of what experiences drive visitation, what types of emotional responses flood residents and visitors while they're there, and what it truly feels like to be "at the river."

The physical assets are one thing, but the emotional connection people feel with you as a region was something we felt we really had to nail.

- Kilmarnock Town Manager, Susan Cockrell

Through individual interviews with residents, visitors, and business leaders, it became clear that the region offered people a chance to escape the pressures of their daily lives and the bustle and congestion of nearby urban centers — almost as if they were entering a new state of mind, or a new realm, as it were.

From there, Virginia's River Realm was born, and by 2016, thanks in part to a \$10,000 VTC Marketing Leverage Program grant, a website and related marketing materials were developed to advance the feeling of being at the river and all of the experiences contained therein — from simply relaxing by the shoreline, boating, and natural history and outdoor recreation, to spending a day with a working waterman and dining on oysters shucked that day at waterfront restaurants, while sipping wine produced just down the road.

According to Cockrell, a year after Virginia's River Realm website launched, it amassed 42,000 unique page visits. One year later, by the end of 2018, that number nearly doubled, and by the end of 2019, Virginia's River Realm's unique page visits topped 100,000. A second \$50,000 VTC Marketing Leverage Program grant is allowing the partnership to create and enhance new tourism product like Shuckapalooza and the VIP experience at the Urbanna Oyster Festival.

For Cockrell and her partners throughout the region, that number is not only a testament to the power of the messaging, but also the adaptability of the region to deliver on what the message sells. After all, unwinding can mean many things to many different people, and because the region offers so many different experiences, towns and waterways to explore, Virginia's River Realm truly does offer something for everyone — a claim more and more visitors seem to be buying.



BRISTOL: FINDING THE RIGHT NICHE IN COUNTRY MUSIC

People in Bristol have long known their city's rightful place in country music. The problem? Not many others did.

As home to the genre's "Big Bang" — the place Ralph Peer came in 1927 to record what would become some of the most influential songs and artists in the history of the genre, including the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers — Bristol indeed earned its 1998 Congressional resolution recognizing it as the "Birthplace of Country Music." However, say the words "country music" and the mind immediately conjures Nashville, that slightly more famous music city 300 miles to the west.

Carving out space for itself in the minds of music lovers, then, has hinged on the Birthplace of Country Music's (BCM) ability to promote its offerings — the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, The Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion music festival, and its Radio Bristol FM station — as essential, intimate, and more authentic music experiences.

As a nonprofit organization built mostly through volunteers, donations, and museum and festival attendance, BCM found that finding money to market itself isn't always easy. Grants through the Virginia Tourism Corporation's Marketing Leverage Program have been essential in this regard, but BCM has also found success tapping into avenues of cross-promotion and leveraging its earned media.

In some respects, cross promotion comes naturally when you have a museum, a festival, and a radio station — they all feed into each other. However, tapping into other assets found on the Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail, for example, or having a presence at Bristol Motor Speedway events and offering special packages during those events, not only helps bring visitors to the museum, it also entices people to return for the festival.

But with little money for media buys, BCM has consistently taken advantage of earned media. For example, the museum's opening in 2014 presented a prime opportunity to leverage coverage in newspapers throughout Virginia, Tennessee and beyond, as well as travel publications and country and bluegrass-focused sites. Similarly, the music festival continues to garner yearly fresh media coverage and has served to generate and perpetuate word of mouth buzz about the area, particularly as it snags bigger acts, attracts more than 45,000 attendees, and generates an estimated \$16.1 million in economic impact. It doesn't hurt that it also earned a spot in Rolling Stone magazine's list of the top 20 tours and festivals.

But earned media success depends on more than simply inviting the right media.

For example, before the museum even opened in 2014, according to Executive Director Leah Ross, one of BCM's board of directors heard of Ken Burns' new documentary project about the history of country music and began reaching out to Burns and his research team about any needs they might have.

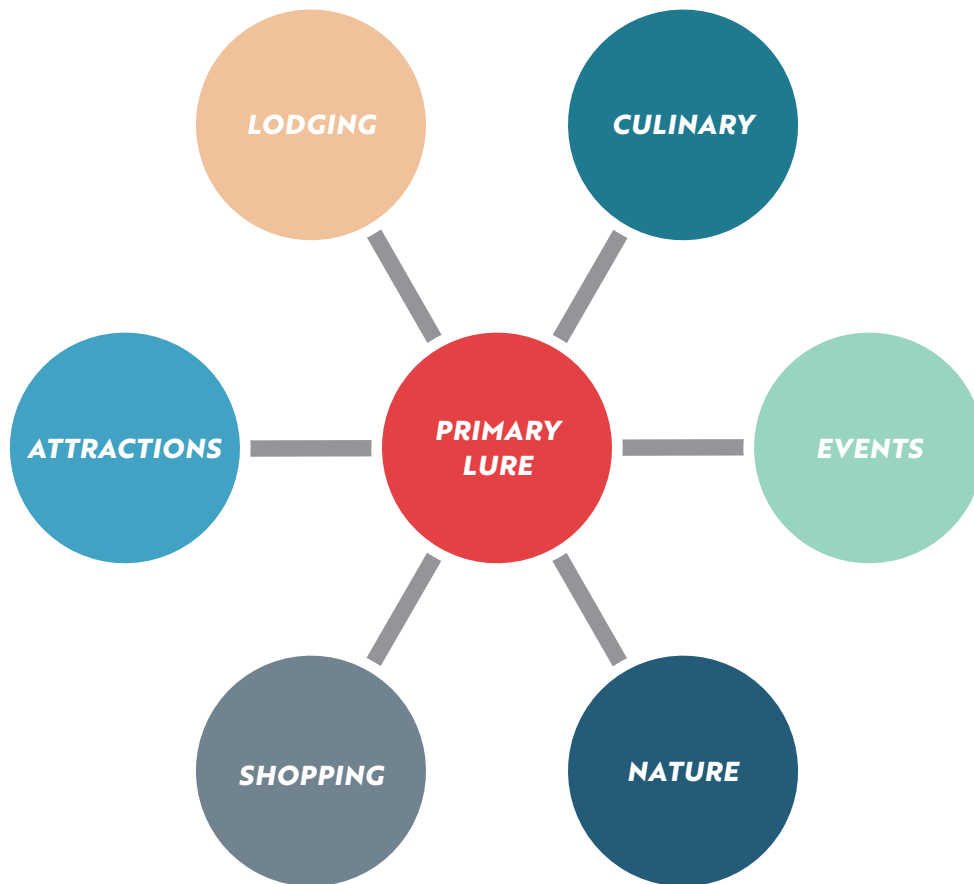
This led to a fruitful relationship with Burns in the making of "Country Music," prominent placement in episodes one, two, and three, and Burns himself kicking off his promotional tour for the PBS series in Bristol, because, as he told reporters, "Bristol has to be the beginning of [the tour], because this is where [the bang] happened...it's from here that our series really gets going."

When the series aired in mid-September, BCM placed public media buys in its prime feeder markets (Washington, D.C., Virginia, North Carolina, and East Tennessee) to capitalize on its increased visibility to spur museum attendance. And the timing couldn't have been more serendipitous, as the Rhythm and Roots Reunion festival kicked off the weekend after Burns' documentary aired.

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