

Experience



Business Development Plan • 2025



GRAND RAPIDS

Growing an exceptional community by sharing Grand Rapids with the world.

GRAND RAPIDS  ExperienceGR.com

RIDING A WAVE OF SUCCESS

As we look forward to 2025, we can report that Kent County's visitor economy grew again to record levels in 2023. (2024 figures won't be available until the new year.) Hotel room demand remained strong, with visitors staying for meetings and conventions, leisure visits and sports tournaments. Hotels also reported an increase in the number of corporate transient guests.

The visitor economy plays a vital role in bolstering the local economy. In 2023, 21.4 million visitors infused \$1.9 billion into our local economy. More than 9.1 million of these visitors stayed overnight and contributed the largest share to the economy. This record number of visitors was 1% higher than in 2022, and visitor spending increased by 5.4%.

New Three-Year Strategic Plan

In September 2024, the EXGR Board of Directors adopted a new strategic plan following extensive input from community stakeholders. A consultant team from travel and tourism specialists MMGY NextFactor conducted 20 in-depth interviews and four focus groups, and gathered over 125 responses through their DNEXT survey. During the Board's annual retreat, members reviewed MMGY's findings and analyzed national best practices to prioritize future goals and initiatives.

The strategic plan serves as a robust framework to guide the efforts of both staff and the board over the next three years. With anticipated growth in destination assets and development, EXGR is poised to leverage this momentum to enhance the visitor economy.

Business Development

Expand and diversify the visitor economy by attracting conventions and leisure travelers.

Destination Management

Continuously identify and advocate for destination assets that will position us as a leading Midwest destination.

Organizational Sustainability

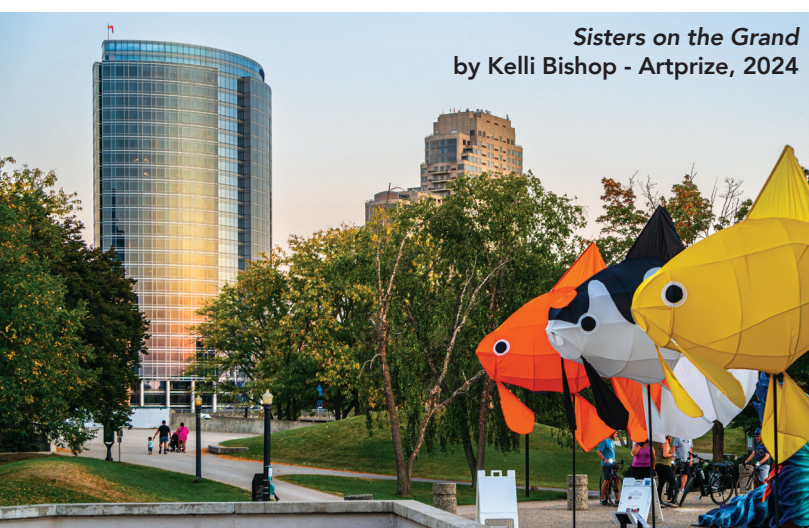
Ensure Experience Grand Rapids has the resources, talent, and community support to expand the tourism economy within Kent County.

Destination Alignment

Advocate and educate the community on the importance of the tourism economy and its impact on the community's success.



Sisters on the Grand
by Kelli Bishop - Artprize, 2024



DestinationNEXT (DNEXT) Survey Findings

An essential component of the strategic planning process was the DNEXT survey distributed to partners, community leaders and EXGR board members. The findings indicate that Grand Rapids/Kent County remains on a successful trajectory. MMGY developed a scenario model, based on community responses and comparing our destination to over 375 assessments worldwide, that confirmed we remain in the Trailblazer quadrant, with above-average scores for community alignment and asset strength. Respondents also noted that Experience Grand Rapids is highly regarded, with many stakeholders praising the organization's significant impact on the local economy.

The Halo Effect of Tourism

The positive influence of tourism marketing and visitation on a destination's image is well-documented. According to a 2023 Longwoods International report, 67% of travelers who relocated in the past three years had previously visited their new hometown as leisure visitors.

A 2024 analysis found that people exposed to EXGR's tourism advertising held significantly more positive impressions of Grand Rapids across a wide range of economic development objectives. There was an even more dramatic improvement in perception among consumers who visited the region in addition to seeing advertising – more than 60% of this group agreed that Grand Rapids is a good place to live, start a career, start a business and attend college. The impact of EXGR's destination marketing efforts extend well beyond the tourism economy.

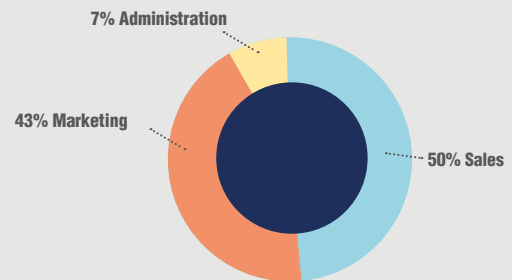
Success Relies on a Future Workforce

In response to ongoing workforce challenges, the EXGR Board of Directors established a task force in partnership with West Michigan Works! to create an industry council for the hospitality sector. This initiative aims to collaborate with industry employers to cultivate a future-ready hospitality workforce. In early 2024, a staff member was hired to coordinate the council's efforts within the West Michigan Works! council network.

The initial council members, representing a diverse range of industry sectors, have begun meeting to define their mission and strategic priorities. The council, dubbed Explore Hospitality, has formalized its mission: to elevate one of West Michigan's leading employment sectors by developing careers, cultivating talent and promoting a thriving hospitality industry.

In 2025, the Explore Hospitality council will expand to 15 members, increase sponsorship funds, and identify projects to support the industry.

Investing to Grow the Visitor Economy EXGR Resource Allocation in 2025:



Expenses based on a budget forecast of \$16,525,000.



Our Vision

To be the must-experience
Midwest destination.



DESTINATION MARKETING

Pure Michigan Partnership

We are excited to continue our long-standing partnership with Pure Michigan, made possible by the significant funding they've secured for 2025. This represents a major opportunity for us to maximize our marketing efforts, as many of the partnership programs offer dollar-for-dollar matching, allowing our investment to stretch further. With the national campaign now fully restored, our participation will enable us to drive greater awareness, increase bookings and expand our reach into multicultural markets. We are committed to participating as fully as possible in these offerings, leveraging this partnership to its fullest potential for maximum impact.

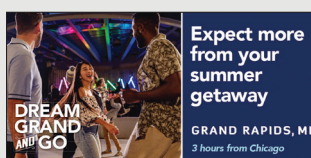
Digital Marketing/ Targeted Vignettes

Digital marketing constitutes a significant portion of our overall marketing strategy, allowing us to reach and engage various audiences with precision. We collaborate with a range of strategic vendors to implement our digital marketing efforts. In 2024, our team was particularly focused on producing high-quality photo and video content that will be used to enhance our 2025 campaign. Rather than concentrating on a single audience, this new content consists of shorter video vignettes, enabling us to create a larger volume of targeted material. These shorter pieces feature diverse groups of people and are specifically designed to resonate with different target markets, allowing for a more personalized and impactful outreach.

Accessible Tourism

Experience Grand Rapids received a Michigan Economic Development Corporation grant to be used towards accessible tourism in our destination, which allows us to continue and expand our work in this area. The goals are threefold, ultimately aiming to make Grand Rapids a top choice for inclusive travel. The grant dollars must be spent by November 2025, but our work and learning in the accessible tourism space is ongoing.

1. Education: We aim to train tourism stakeholders in best practices to improve accessibility and create a more welcoming environment.
2. Information: We've partnered with Disability Advocates of Kent County to evaluate around 350 local venues. This information will be featured on ExperienceGR.com, providing valuable information for travelers.
3. Marketing: We're working with Wheel the World (an international leader in accessible travel) to develop and promote a landing page showcasing 50 accessible Kent County venues. This page will serve as a marketing tool and a planning resource for accessible travel. Wheel the World will also produce a media package with high-quality photos and videos to boost our destination's visibility as an accessible travel spot.



Public Relations

Public Relations has proven to be an important part of our strategy of inspiring travel to Kent County. In 2025, we will focus on four areas of PR:

1. National: pitching and promoting Kent County as a top travel destination
2. Influencers and Travel Journalists: hosting influencers and journalists that align with our brand pillars and key DEI initiatives.
3. Regional PR: highlighting brand pillar promotions and area happenings through local media and through local micro-influencer social media campaigns
4. Organizational PR: establishing Experience Grand Rapids as a community thought leader

Building Momentum with New Developments

Our destination is experiencing remarkable growth with tourism-driven developments. We're excited about projects like the Acrisure Amphitheater, Soccer Stadium, Lyon Square and various Grand River enhancements. In 2025, we will begin to leverage these new assets in our marketing, building anticipation for future visits. At the same time, we're actively promoting our existing attractions, combining current offerings with the momentum of new developments to drive both immediate and long-term interest in the Grand Rapids area.

Meetings Marketing

Meetings and conventions are vital to Kent County's tourism economy, driving significant impact. To attract more meeting planners and group business, we are expanding our digital outreach and implementing a strategic email marketing campaign designed to deliver the right information to planners at the right time. This will help us connect with a broader audience while our content marketing ensures we address planners' key needs. We will also continue promoting our award-winning Convention Sales Video to highlight our national convention sales package, both in-person and online, while supporting Group Tour efforts and our Convention Services team with high-quality marketing materials.

Data-Driven Strategy and AI

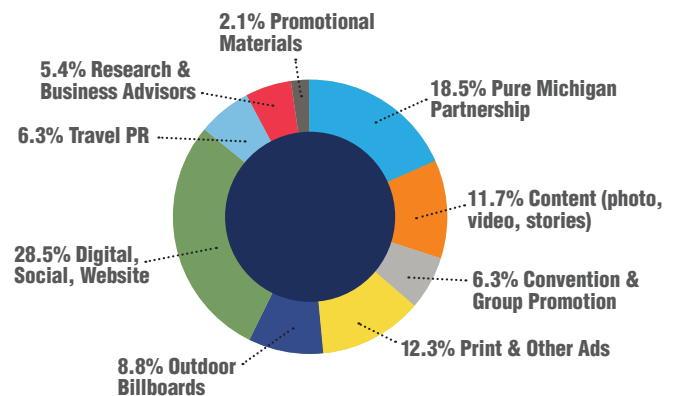
In 2025, we will further invest in marketing data to enable data-driven decisions. These visitor insights allow us to make marketing decisions rooted in data and adjust our marketing in real time, in addition to providing us the intel needed to be seen as the community thought leader on all things tourism-related.

Going hand in hand with data insights is Artificial Intelligence. Our team is continually looking into AI's role in enhancing our operations and its influence on travel planning. We will continue to educate ourselves on the uses of AI, ensuring its productive and ethical use.



MARKETING MIX

2025 Planned Marketing Investments*



We continue to evolve our marketing mix from year to year to align with the current marketing landscape.

*Proposed

CONVENTIONS & GROUP TOURS

The objective for the Experience Grand Rapids sales team is to develop new opportunities for our partners to book conventions and group tour business. It is extremely important to continue building destination brand awareness to produce new business and retain current business.

Throughout 2025, we will send personalized marketing messages and gifts to our top potential clients, encouraging them to submit a future RFP and keeping them informed about Grand Rapids.

The team consistently researches and seeks out potential new business opportunities, including connecting with local intellectual capital.

In 2025, Experience Grand Rapids will continue to highlight the destination brand with our tradeshow booth at Religious Conference Management Association (RCMA), American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), Connect Marketplace, IMEX America and US Travel's IPW.

A key business strategy to book new business is hosting qualified meeting planners to experience our destination

through individual site experiences or familiarization tours (fams). In 2025, the team will host a state and national client fam and one Grand Experience VIP fam.

In May we host our Customer Advisory Board meeting. The CAB offers feedback on our destination and helps us understand the pain points for meeting planners.

Michigan Convention Business

The Michigan association market is important for Grand Rapids. The team continues its outreach to meeting planners located throughout Michigan by participating in Destination Michigan events in Lansing, Grand Rapids and Detroit, and attending events of Michigan Society of Government Meeting Planners, Michigan Meeting Planners International and Michigan Society of Association Executives.

The team will meet one-on-one with meeting planners at hosted lunches in Lansing, Detroit and Ann Arbor.

Our annual Grand Summer Celebration Meeting will again be held for meeting planners located in the Lansing area.



CRAFTED FOR MEETINGS

GRAND RAPIDS  ExperienceGR.com



CRAFTED FOR MEETINGS

GRAND RAPIDS 

1 of America's 10 Best Towns to Visit

CNN, 2024



CRAFTED FOR MEETINGS

GRAND RAPIDS  ExperienceGR.com/Meetings



1 of America's 10 Best Towns to Visit

CNN, 2024



CRAFTED FOR MEETINGS

GRAND RAPIDS 



A Grand Place for a Meeting

A pioneering spirit of collaboration between public and private sectors has shaped a new approach to community innovation in Grand Rapids. Among the results:

- One of the nation's strongest economies
- Elite rankings from the travel & tourism industry
- First-class meeting infrastructure and unprecedented planning support

Let us collaborate with you to produce a one-of-a-kind event!

Flexibility & Convenience

- Over 10,000 hotel rooms throughout the area
- 130+ meeting venues
- Safe, compact, walkable downtown

Tools, Tips & Support

- Experienced convention services team
- Dedicated convention services manager
- Free online planning and marketing tools
- Supplier and speaker recommendations

Regional/National Convention Business

During 2025, the EXGR team will attend 18 tradeshows to spread the word about Grand Rapids as a meeting destination. These tradeshows provide an opportunity to talk with meeting planners about what Grand Rapids has to offer for meetings/conventions.

EXGR will continue to host several special events throughout the year in the Washington, DC area. We also meet individually with clients in the DC area and attend monthly industry meeting events to keep planners up to date on Grand Rapids.

The team will travel to Arizona, Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Denver and Chicago to have face-to-face meetings with clients.

West Michigan Sports Commission

EXGR continues to partner with the West Michigan Sports Commission on marketing the destination, contributing incentives to host events and IT services.

Group Tour Sales

Kent County continues to see growth in the number of group tours visiting our region.

EXGR offers customized itineraries highlighting small towns, Holidays with the Christkindl Markt and attractions located throughout Kent County. During 2025, the team will attend 10 tradeshows to promote the inclusion of our area in Michigan itineraries. The team will participate in Circle Michigan state events and organize sales missions to meet one-on-one with group tour planners.

The Grand Box program, which provides small thank you gifts for tour passengers staying in a Kent County lodging property will return in 2025.

Also in 2025, Experience Grand Rapids will join other Michigan and Great Lakes destinations with a booth at US Travel's IPW, an international meeting tradeshow, in Chicago. We will participate in a pre- or post-IPW familiarization tour (fam). With world-class attractions like

the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park here in Grand Rapids, we are excited to showcase our destination to global tour organizers.

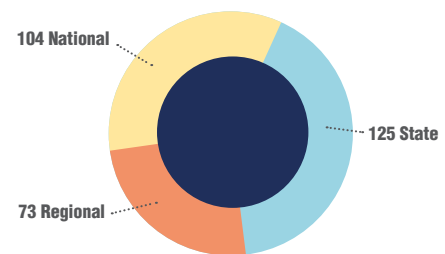
Convention Services

The EXGR Convention Services team offers planning assistance to conventions booked in the Kent County area. The team is the go-to contact for any information about our destination, including attendance promotion, off-site venue space and welcome signage.

Increasing attendance for 2026 conventions in Grand Rapids includes promoting the destination at organizations' prior-year conventions. This will have the Convention Services on the road throughout 2025.

Our Airport Ambassadors welcome travelers to West Michigan when arriving at the Gerald R Ford International Airport. The Airport Ambassadors do a terrific job providing information and assisting travelers when plans are disrupted.

Meetings Hosted in 2024 by Scope



302 Total Groups*
(Meetings and Conventions Only)

*Groups booked thru 10/25/2024



DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, BELONGING

The EXGR Engagement and Inclusion team is engaging in a comprehensive strategy rooted in sustainable growth, community engagement, and industry visibility and advancement. We are focused on Community Engagement initiatives that expand our reach and anchor our programming across the county, Supplier Diversity initiatives that support our expanding and diverse business community, Workforce Development initiatives that strengthen our impact in the Hospitality & Tourism industry, locally and at large, and Cultural Awareness initiatives centered around belonging, connecting the organization to the diverse groups that call this place home.

In essence, these initiatives are human-centered in design, a deliberate organizational strategy focused on designing with rather than for the community. This is a way of ensuring that these strategies are not only meaningful and effective but also adaptable, inclusive and sustainable – ultimately creating a stronger connection between the organization and the community it serves and seeks to attract. In harnessing these initiatives, EXGR is poised to fortify its brand, empower the community and ensure prolonged success for years to come.

Community Engagement

Continued engagement with our various stakeholders is essential in our work. Such engagement creates an environment of contagious belonging, felt by our visitors, from which our residents reap the benefit of their investments within this destination.

We are committed to continuing our efforts of being in the community through various events that align with the mission and vision of the organization. We executed a successful soft launch of the Discover Tourism Grant Program (DTGP) in 2024, an initiative that supports Kent County residents/organizations in organizing new or existing projects that focus on tourism and placemaking in ways that are inclusive and foster a profound sense of belonging for both residents and visitors. In 2025, we will expand our marketing efforts with the grant, reaching other communities within the county and sparking resident innovation around tourism and placemaking ideas and/or programming.

Human-Centered Design focuses on creating solutions that are both immediately impactful and sustainable in the long term.

In terms of community engagement, this means building relationships that are based on trust, respect and ongoing dialogue. To accomplish this, our team will establish and build deeper relationships with various groups in the county, utilizing the concept of Belonging Dinners. By bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds, these dinners create a welcoming space that fosters inclusion, understanding and community cohesion. These dinners will also provide great insight into the community's posturing towards the Hospitality and Tourism industry, while helping to identify future opportunities around organizational initiatives.

In addition, we will work directly with both the local community and travelers to co-create accessible and sustainable tourism experiences. We will also collaborate to offer training and resources to partners, local businesses and service providers on sustainability and accessibility. This collaboration ensures that the strategies developed are reflective of real needs and that they foster a sense of belonging among diverse travelers, while also raising the overall standard of inclusivity and environmental responsibility across the destination.

Supplier Diversity

In 2024, we added self-identifying markers to the organization's membership profiles. For 2025, we will expand our strategies surrounding Supplier Diversity by focusing on the needs, experiences and opportunities of diverse suppliers. We will use human-centered design principles to pilot smaller initiatives with diverse suppliers. This could include creating fellowship programs or offering targeted programming to underrepresented businesses.

These pilot programs will enable continuous refinement of the supplier diversity strategy, ensuring it is effective, scalable and responsive to their needs. This approach fosters long-term partnerships, helps drive economic growth in underserved communities and aligns with the organization's broader goals of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. By centering these initiatives, supplier diversity becomes more than a goal – it becomes an integral part of EXGR's identity and organizational culture.



Workforce Development

The Academies of Hospitality and Tourism, a High School Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program, has been positioned to grow significantly in 2025. We will expand beyond Grand Rapids Public Schools and form additional partnerships with Godfrey-Lee Public Schools, Kentwood Public Schools and Integrity Schools. As a result, we will pilot programs that create clear and accessible career pathways for high school students. This could involve designing internship or apprenticeship opportunities with local hospitality and tourism businesses, offering job shadowing or facilitating networking events where students can meet industry professionals. KPIs will be established, collecting data and feedback from students, educators and employers to improve the programs. This feedback loop ensures that the workforce development initiatives remain relevant and adaptive to changing industry needs.

Through Human-Centered Design, our team will create workforce development strategies that are responsive to the real needs of students, educators and employers. By focusing on innovation, collaboration and iteration, we can develop programs that bridge the gap between future talent and the hospitality and tourism industry, ensuring that students are well-prepared for their future careers. This approach fosters inclusivity, sustainability and long-term workforce growth, positioning the organization as a leader in both workforce development and community engagement.

Cultural Enrichment

Our destination's true essence lies in the diversity of its people, stories and traditions. Through a Human-Centered Design approach, we're not just creating tourism opportunities – we're crafting partnerships where culture is celebrated, voices are elevated and authentic experiences are co-created with the communities that call this place home.

By co-creating with the community, we aim to ensure that the experiences offered to visitors are authentic and meaningful. These initiatives aim to recognize and partner with the destination's diverse community, attract diverse travelers and form strategic partnerships with diverse professional groups. This approach ensures that the destination's offerings are inclusive, authentic and reflective of the community's rich cultural heritage.

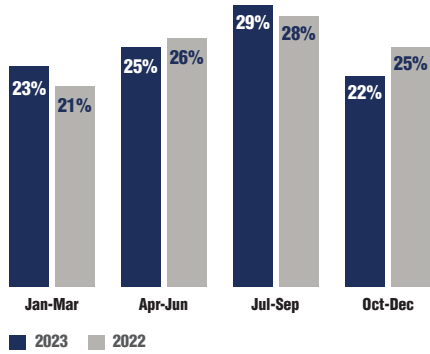
Additionally, through collaboration and feedback loops, we can continuously improve engagement with diverse audiences, fostering long-term relationships and positioning the destination as a leader in diversity and inclusion in the tourism industry.

DISCOVER
TOURISM 

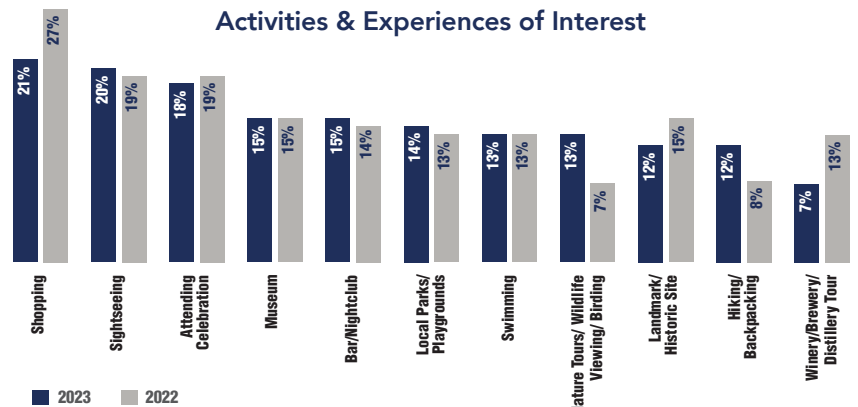
UNDERSTANDING OUR OVERNIGHT VISITORS

We align our destination marketing message with a research-driven understanding of who our customers are and where the industry is going.

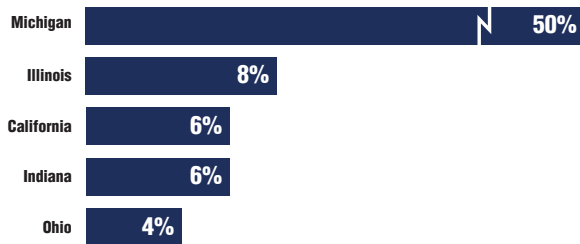
Season of Trip



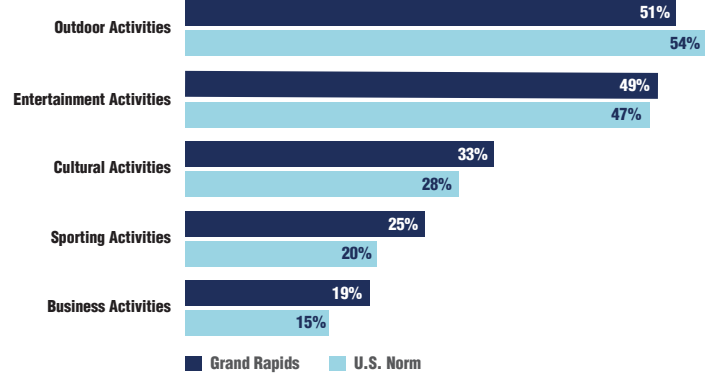
Activities & Experiences of Interest



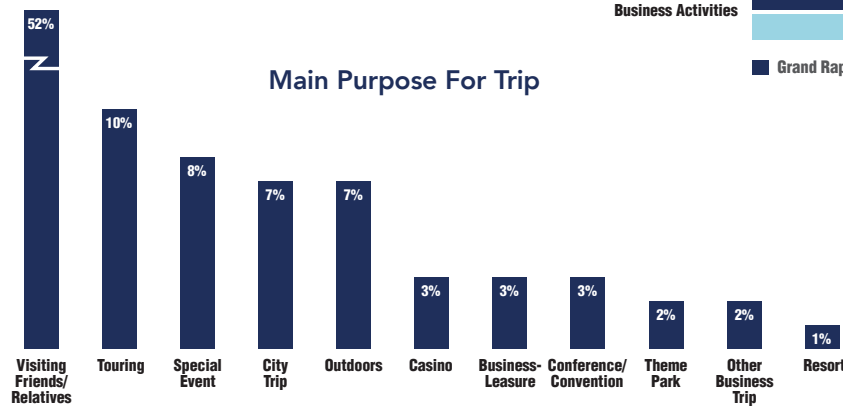
State Origin of Trip



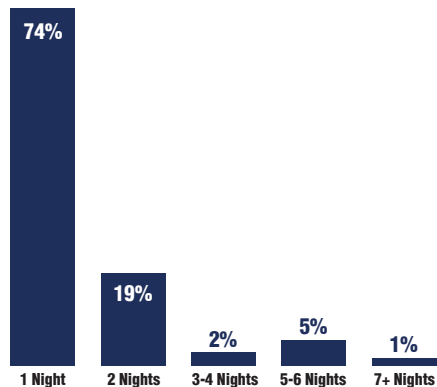
Activity Groupings



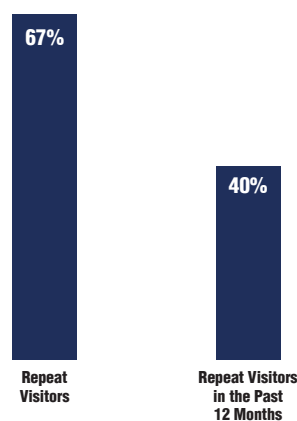
Main Purpose For Trip



Nights Spent in Grand Rapids



Past Visitation to Grand Rapids



DESTINATION RECOGNITIONS

Platinum Choice Award: Experience Grand Rapids

Smart Meetings, 2024

Top 10 Best American Town to Visit

CNN, 2024

Best Beer City

USA Today, 2021, 2022, 2023 & 2024

Best Michigan Beer City

MI Brew Trail, 2024

Top 5 Trending Business Travel Destination

American Express, 2024

America's Best Right-Size City

Forbes, 2024

1 of 16 Best Places to Travel in Sept.

Travel+Leisure, 2024

America's #1 Sculpture Park

USA Today, 2023 & 2024

1 of America's Best Cherry Blossom Displays

Travel+Leisure, 2024

America's #3 Most Outdoor-Friendly City

RVshare, 2024

Top 11 Best American Food & Drink Trail

TimeOut, 2024

Top 10 U.S. Housing Market

Realtor.com, 2024

#5 Best U.S. City to Buy a Home

MSN, 2024

#5 Best Place to Live in the U.S.

Architectural Digest, 2023

#26 Best Place to Retire in America

U.S. News & World Report, 2023

North America's Easiest, Cleanest & Most Enjoyable Airport

Airports Council International, 2023

Experience Grand Rapids Recognitions

Best Midwest CVB/DMO

Gold Northstar Stella Award, 2024

Best Partnership Campaign: ArtPrize 2023

Silver PRooF Award, 2024

Innovative Tourism Collaboration Award: Savor & Soar

*Education Category, Tourism Industry Coalition
of Michigan, 2023*

Legacy Award: Janet Korn

Pure Michigan, 2024

Communicator of the Year: Janet Korn

PRooF Awards, 2024



EXPERIENCE GRAND RAPIDS STAFF

Leadership Team

Doug Small *President*

Janet Korn *Senior Vice President*

Jordoun Eatman *Vice President of Engagement & Inclusion*

Dan Jonkman *Vice President of Finance & Administration*

Kate Lieto *Vice President of Marketing*

Mary Manier, CTP, CTIS *Vice President of Sales & Services*

Kim Young *Vice President of Information Systems*

Aranza Agoytia *Marketing Specialist*

Britny Avery *Specialty Sales Manager*

Lilly Baker *Sales Research Specialist*

Jessica Briggs, CMP *Events Manager*

Marlene Bushouse *Senior Sales Administrator*

Carol Campbell *Accounting Manager*

Savannah Christiansen *Convention Services Manager*

Carly Contreras *Marketing Manager*

Qi'Shaun Coyle *Program Engagement Coordinator*

Theresa Danneffel *Guest Experience Manager*

Patty Delaney, CMP *Events Manager*

Ronda Garmon *Visitor Concierge*

Laura Greiner *National Sales Manager*

Rachel Greiner *Marketing and Social Media Manager*

Leslie Hastings, CHSP, CASE *National Sales Manager*

Kelsey Helstowski *Director of Sales*

Abby Jefferson *Executive Coordinator*

Carlos Lemagne *Convention Marketing & Editorial Manager*

Jade Lowe *Convention Services Manager*

Brandy M. Martin *Director of Convention Services*

Jaylyn McCloy *Marketing Partnership Manager*

Michael McKersie, CompTIA A+ *Systems Administrator II*

Kahlisha Mosley *Convention Services Specialist*

Andie Newcomer, CMP, GMS *Director of Events*

Andrea Robyns *Marketing Technology Director*

Heidi Schmitt, GMS *Director of State Accounts*

Jessica Sobie Henderhan *National Sales Manager*

Jack Stanley *Video Media Manager*

