



How Visit Raleigh reinforced its culture of service during the pandemic

BY TYLER DAVIDSON

While it may be tempting for DMOs to hide their figurative heads in the sand because of the severe impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their destinations and revenue streams, North Carolina’s Visit Raleigh has used this tumultuous time to reinforce its primary mission—to serve its clients in their time of need.

The Research Triangle destination has suffered like all of its DMO counterparts across the country and throughout the world, with Wake County registering an anemic 40% hotel occupancy rate and losses pegged at more than \$135 million in terms of economic impact from cancelled meetings, conventions and sporting events, according to Visit Raleigh statistics



MALINDA HARRELL

through mid-October.

But hard times can also create an opportunity to build brand loyalty and relationships with meeting and event planners and within the community as a whole.

Leveraging the \$1.25 million Visit Raleigh obtained through the CARES Act designated to Wake County, the DMO launched a number of initiatives through its Wish You Were Here campaign to help both its hospitality industry workers and stakeholders, and also reach out to the leisure segment and

current and prospective meetings clients.

“From the meetings and conventions side, it was very important to us to have an open line of communication from the planners we’re working with currently, and connecting with prospects as well,” said Malinda Harrell, director of sales for Visit Raleigh.

Visit Raleigh Meeting Professionals Summit Virtual Series

To accomplish this, Visit Raleigh participated in more than 20 virtual tradeshows, and also launched a three-part Visit Raleigh Meeting Professionals Summit Virtual Series that shared best practices with meeting planners in the areas of AV needs for virtual meetings and planning hybrid meetings, virtual fundraising, GBAC certification, inclusion and other concerns.

“The summit was originally going to be an in-person event,” Harrell said. “We shifted to create three series—a day-long event approved [for continuing education credits] by the Events Industry Council—to show the transition meeting planners need to do to weather the pandemic.”

The first episode of the virtual series dealt with shifting in-person events to virtual and hybrid events, and how the strong

partnerships the bureau has with local vendors and other resources could be beneficial to a digital program. Episode 2 used the previous episode to explore some of the technical difficulties that were experienced in Episode 1—a real-world scenario to use as a teaching platform—and the final episode focused on how to better serve attendees with disabilities, such as hearing impairments, on digital meeting platforms.

“One thing that we continued to appreciate is that we can’t be an expert in everything, but we can be experts in finding the person that knows the thing, and that was really well received,” Harrell said.

The bureau also launched a continually updated COVID-19 Response and Helpful Resources web page, www.visitraleigh.com/covid-19, with a wide-ranging list of resources, for hospitality business owners and employees, ways to help the Wake County hospitality industry and status reports about the pandemic response phases the county is operating in.

Video and Drone Tours of Raleigh

While in-person site tours have largely been scuttled everywhere during the pandemic, Raleigh took the initiative to produce 360-degree tours and utilize drone technology to give planners the next best thing to being onsite.

Partnering with Threshold 360 and Destination Virtual Tours, the result is more than 90 virtual tours of venues throughout the destination, along with more than 70 aerial drone footage videos. Earlier in the pandemic, Visit Raleigh used GoToMeeting video conferencing software to conduct walkthroughs of the GBAC STAR-certified Raleigh Convention Center.

Undaunted by the pandemic, the DMO also hosted 10 in-person meeting planners and 100 virtual attendees for a two-day event in June at the Raleigh Marriott Crabtree Valley hotel.



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Latest + Greatest

→ The **Umstead Hotel & Spa**, a 150-room five-star, five-diamond property that offers 10,000 square feet of meeting space, completed a \$14 million renovation of its guest rooms.

→ The **Longleaf Hotel** opened in January 2020 at the northern gateway to downtown Raleigh, with 56 guest rooms and a retro style modeled on a vintage motor lodge. Highlights include its Longleaf Lounge and patio, which can be used for special events.



THE LONGLEAF HOTEL

→ The 126-room **Origin Raleigh** opened between the Glenwood South and Warehouse districts downtown. The



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seven-story boutique hotel offers 800 square feet of meeting space, a meeting room that can accommodate up to 36 attendees and features the plant-forward Good Day Good Night restaurant.

→ **Heights House Hotel** is currently undergoing a renovation to bring it back to its 1858 Italianate-style historic mansion glory. The nine-room boutique property is located in the Boylan Heights neighborhood downtown and is both a National and Raleigh Historic Landmark, and one of the few remaining pre-Civil War houses in the area. It is targeting a spring 2021 opening. Event space highlights include an outdoor space that can be tented.


Virtual and Hybrid Meetings Options in Raleigh

Because the Research Triangle is a center of technology, virtual and hybrid meetings capabilities come with the territory, and in the spirit of helping its customers, Visit Raleigh has taken a leading role in connecting planners with vendors and other resources to hold engaging digital events or hybrid programs.

“We’re partners in being a resource to create those activities, so someone is not just on a screen hearing someone talk, but is engaging—our role has really shifted,” Harrell said. “With the impact of COVID, so many of our hotels are on a skeleton crew now, so our role has really become more important to be a liaison between the clients and partners when they don’t have the time and resources. We can step in and help them in that aspect.”

Harrell said Visit Raleigh

can leverage its staff to bridge the gap between planners and digital meeting vendors, with its convention services team maintaining updated services and supplier listings and sending out bids so planners “don’t have to find that needle in a haystack.”

“We’ve been very proactive in sharing that information, and I believe that that was the most important aspect of the campaign—keeping that communication going,” she said. “Being able to communicate those guidelines—and also with the partners—increases their willingness to work with us, because they know what they can and can’t do, and that helps with groups that were considering rescheduling or postponing to other years.” 



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