

2021

MARKETING PLAN





WHO WE ARE:

Visit Duluth is the official destination marketing organization for the city of Duluth, Minnesota. Chartered in 1935 as a non-profit corporation, we represent over 400 businesses that make up Duluth's tourism industry. We are dedicated to promoting the area as one of America's great vacation, meeting and event destinations while providing comprehensive, unbiased information to all travelers.

OUR MISSION:

Visit Duluth exists to attract the maximum number of visitor dollars into Duluth's economy. Visit Duluth establishes new initiatives to increase tourism, visitors and conventions, and further enhance the awareness of the industry.

EQUITY STATEMENT:

Visit Duluth recognizes the value and dignity of all people. We strive to cultivate an environment that supports diversity, equity and inclusion. We are committed to creating a destination where all are welcome.



FOREWORD

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of our daily lives. The Travel and Hospitality industry faces extreme challenges and business pressures like never before. We have all had to learn how to adapt quickly to meet these challenges with determination and creativity. As we look forward to 2021, we are confident Duluth will continue to experience signs of recovery while we remain acutely aware flexibility and active engagement are critical to our success.

Visit Duluth has taken a new strategic and tactical approach to describing our Marketing Plan. This document is designed to be a brief high-level view of our plans for the coming year. We began the planning process by developing our marketing strategy. This strategy is based on an in-depth analysis of our audience, along with travel trends and shifts in behavior that have resulted from changing conditions. Included is a description of the travel decision process, which is used to identify tactics that will reach consumers no matter what stage of planning they are in.

As a result of the pandemic, we have fewer staff members at Visit Duluth than in previous years. These changes have made it necessary for us to identify new ways to execute our marketing efforts. We plan to use a marketing technique called the Agile Marketing method. This method values collaboration across teams with very specific short-term goals and active evaluation of results to allow for quick responses to changing circumstances. Three strategic goals will be the focus of our marketing efforts: cultivate brand awareness, increase consumer engagement and provide partner support and collaboration. Our goals align with the three key pillars identified by Explore Minnesota, a leader in state destination branding and marketing. We will define each of these goals, describe the tactics we plan to use and provide key performance indicators (KPIs) that will be used to measure success and incrementally improve results.

As required in our contract, we have included a separate section to outline specific efforts that will be used to promote the unique activities, attractions and experiences available in the St. Louis River Corridor.

Thank you for supporting the efforts of Visit Duluth as we move toward a brighter future for the city of Duluth and the recovery of the tourism industry.



MARKETING STRATEGY

A successful marketing effort must be based on a clear strategy that is thoughtfully crafted. We developed our marketing strategy by first analyzing our audience. We studied the travel decision process to identify tactics that are effective at each stage of a traveler’s journey. To execute our strategy effectively, we have adopted the Agile Marketing methodology. This style of marketing allows our team to work together towards accomplishing distinct goals, continuously monitor results, and quickly adjust to changes in performance.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

We define and monitor our changing audience by continuously reviewing a broad selection of audience metrics.

We utilize the relationships we have fostered with national travel organizations including Destination Analysts, Destinations International and Trip Advisor to gain access to national statistics and research travel trends.

We review metrics made available to us from state resources like Explore Minnesota and Hospitality Minnesota.

We actively monitor local metrics collected on our website, from our social media platforms, in the reporting from our digital media campaigns, through surveys conducted to measure travel sentiment and direct feedback from our partners.



THE TRAVEL DECISION PROCESS & TACTICS FOR CONSUMERS AT EACH STAGE

Creating successful marketing for a destination begins with understanding the “Travel Decision Process” and which tactics have been proven successful at each stage of the traveler’s journey.

Many marketing professionals refer to this as the conversion funnel. The purpose of this funnel is to assist the consumer with making a decision to take action.



THE AGILE MARKETING METHOD

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the reduction of staff members at Visit Duluth. With this smaller team, we found that we needed to shift our methods and share responsibilities across teams in ways that we had not done before. In an effort to achieve the best possible results, we began searching for a method that would be a good fit for our remaining team members. We discovered the Agile Marketing Method.

Agile marketing is a tactical marketing approach in which teams identify and focus their collective efforts on high value projects, complete those projects cooperatively, measure their impact, and then continuously and incrementally improve the results over time.



This method allows us to maximize the strengths of each staff member as we work together in cross-functional teams so that everyone is working towards common short-term goals. The process of reviewing results for individual goals, instead of waiting until the end of a campaign, means that we can be responsive to rapidly changing conditions. This is especially helpful as we continue to adapt to the demands of the pandemic.



TOURISM IN DULUTH



\$957M

ECONOMIC IMPACT



2nd

LARGEST INDUSTRY*



6.7M

ANNUAL VISITORS



16K

TOURISM JOBS



STRATEGIC GOALS

We have identified three strategic goals as the top priorities for Visit Duluth in 2021. Each is defined along with the key tactics that will be used to achieve them. We plan to measure and report on progress throughout the year. To guide that process, we have outlined the key performance indicators (KPIs) to evaluate our results.

Establishing KPIs for 2021 was a difficult process because the statistics from 2020 reflect a very different world than previous years. Even when marketing efforts are generating high levels of interest in Duluth as a destination, travelers may be unable to take action due to restrictions.

Utilizing the Agile Marketing method allows us to respond to conditions, update our messaging and mediums if restrictions limit travel, and constantly monitor changes to the performance indicators we outline in our plan. The reporting created this year, as we continue adjusting to the new conditions created by the pandemic, can serve as a benchmark for the future.

GOAL 1: CULTIVATE BRAND AWARENESS

Building brand awareness is a critical component of any successful marketing plan. It is the foundation of the relationship between a destination and a traveler.

KEY TACTICS:

- **Create Clear, Consistent Marketing:**

Our campaign concept will be used across all marketing materials and mediums, so that it is instantly recognizable, even at a glance.

- **Increase Top of Mind Awareness**

Use an omnichannel approach, which includes coordinated marketing materials delivered across multiple platforms at the same time to reinforce awareness.

- **Create Targeted Content for Niche Markets**

Use media distribution services to directly target niche audiences to expand our reach into markets where we can entice new visitors to choose Duluth as their destination.

- **Provide Personal Outreach**

Our staff is committed to creating and maintaining relationships with leisure travelers as well as meeting, convention and sports planners. We regularly interact with these clients and provide personal assistance, site inspections and recommendations.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)

To measure our success at **cultivating brand awareness**, we have identified the following key performance indicators:

- **Incrementally increase visitors to the [visitduluth.com](https://www.visitduluth.com) website**

Analytics will be reviewed and progress reported monthly

- **Digital Campaigns must perform at or above the industry standard click-through rate**

If a campaign does not meet this standard, it will be restructured.

TripAdvisor's benchmark for click-through rate (CTR) is 0.08% and the industry benchmark is 0.06%.

 **.23%**

CLICK-THROUGH RATE

Visit Duluth's 2020-21 winter campaign with Trip Advisor, one of the leading travel websites, achieved a CTR of 0.23% which is **3x higher than the Trip Advisor benchmark.**

OUTREACH IN ACTION

Here's what a February 2021 visitor had to say about the assistance provided by Visit Duluth staff member Maarja Hewitt:



“ I wish I knew where to begin to express the gratitude Kristy and I have for everything that you guys did to make our stay one that will always be remembered.

Overall, Duluth was everything I expected. It's so wild to feel a connection to a place for so long and to finally be able to walk into that reality... it was the best feeling and so meaningful. I could never thank you enough for making this trip "home" so perfect for me.

- Jon C. Graham, Vicksburg, MS ”

GOAL 2: INCREASE CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

We are committed to developing opportunities to engage with consumers by creating compelling content that inspires interest and reaches visitors throughout their travel decision process.

KEY TACTICS:

- **Launch new VisitDuluth.com website**

We are currently building a new website with the team at Swim Creative, and focusing our efforts on creating consumable, targeted content designed to engage and intrigue potential visitors.

- **Employ Targeted SEO & SEM**

Carefully map the transition to our new website to ensure we retain our excellent organic search engine optimization (SEO) and while exploring options for increased search engine marketing (SEM).

- **Maintain & Expand Social Media Presence**

We plan to strengthen our social media presence to increase engagements. We will significantly increase paid placements and use coordinated campaigns to increase interactions through social channels.

- **Provide Personal Support**

We provide personal assistance directly to travelers at our Visitor Center. Visit Duluth staff regularly answer phone and email inquiries personally. We respond to PR and Media requests, host content writers/influencers and create and customized itineraries highlighting our partners.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)

To measure our success at **increasing customer engagement**, we have identified the following key performance indicators:

- **Incrementally increase time on page and pages viewed metrics for visitduluth.com**

Starting goals are +:20 seconds Time on Page; increase to an average of 2 Pages Per Session. Analytics will be reviewed and progress reported monthly.

- **Incrementally increase number of engagements on social media platforms.**

Starting goal is 10K engagements per week. Analytics will be reviewed and progress reported monthly.

- **Track personal engagements in our Customer Relationship Management tool (iDSS) to create benchmarks.**

Track conversions for Visitor Guide Requests and Email List subscriptions.

 **+14.9%**

2020 YEAR-END RevPAR

Duluth finished 2020 as the strongest performing market in the state.

The Duluth market's year-end RevPAR in 2020 was 32.6% below the level of 2019. The national decline in RevPAR for 2020, by comparison, was 47.5%.

- Source: Hospitality Minnesota / STR

OUTREACH IN ACTION

Here's what a convention planner had to say about the assistance provided by Visit Duluth staff member Julie Johnson.



“ I wanted to let you know that I retired from MN CLE on 12/31/2020.

This is likely the last email I'll be able to send from this account, so going forward you may reach me at hanna.xxxxx@xxxxx.com

I have enjoyed working with you, the VisitDuluth team and all of my other hospitality contacts in Duluth immensely and have always considered your team to be among the most innovative in promoting your destination. You have partnered with MN CLE in countless ways through the years, most notably with our annual Strategic Solutions conference – and really, you have set the bar high with your unparalleled attention to the particulars of our customers. You all are simply the best!

- Hanna Werner, Minnesota CLE



GOAL 3: PROVIDE PARTNER SUPPORT & COLLABORATION

We will support our partners by providing marketing services and opportunities that maximize exposure and contribute to their success.

KEY TACTICS:

- **Provide Opportunities for Integrated Partner Presence**
Print and digital media will continue to provide listings and event promotions plus new content placement options.
- **Partner Participation in Special Programs**
Provide options to participate in programs promoting current specials, holiday offers, coupons, giveaways and contests to increase exposure for partner businesses through all our channels.
- **Provide Recommendations & Referrals**
Regularly communicate with our partners to keep them informed about our ongoing efforts and share statistics on referrals provided to support their businesses.
- **Co-Op & Grant Opportunities**
Strong relationships with tourism partners like Explore Minnesota, we are able to offer advertising opportunities at deep discounts to our partners
- **Create Educational Offerings and Resources**
We will offer educational opportunities to assist our partners with developing their marketing strategies and provide ways to network and share resources.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)

To measure our success at providing partner support and collaboration, we have identified the following key performance indicators:

- **Implement outbound link tracking for all partner promotions on visitduluth.com**
Make reporting available to partners every quarter.
- **Conduct quarterly partner surveys**
Actively measure approval and value of services provided.
- **Record participation levels in co-op and educational opportunities**
Report quarterly to partners.



+251.5%

CLICK-THROUGH RATE

OUR PARTNERS ARE ENGAGED

Visit Duluth's weekly "Partner Update" email has an open rate of 35%, nearly double the average open rate.

The click-through rate is 12.2%, which is around two and half times more than the average click-through rate.

*Averages for Travel & Tourism email campaigns:
14.67% Open Rate / 4.85% click-through rate
Reported by Constant Contact
(A leading email marketing provider)*

CREATING OPPORTUNITY

We reached out to our partners with an offer to participate in our 2021 Valentine's Day Promotion Program.



Valentines Day Promotion

We created a landing page to highlight Valentine's Day offers available in Duluth.

- 22 Partners participated in the promo
- Promo was live for 5 weeks (Jan 10 - Feb 14)
- Generated 5K impressions
- Generated 2K click-throughs

MARKETING THE ST. LOUIS RIVER CORRIDOR

Our contract includes a direct allocation of funds for marketing the St. Louis River Corridor and requires a specific marketing plan for those efforts. We have included the region in our strategic planning and will use the tactics outlined in this marketing plan to promote the unique activities, attractions, and experiences available there.

KEY TACTICS TO PROMOTE THE ST. LOUIS RIVER CORRIDOR (SLRC):

- Create marketing that coordinates with our overall campaign concepts, and features locations in the SLRC
- Use media distribution services to directly target niche markets looking for outdoor activities, parks and trails, or brewery/cidery experiences with SLRC options
- Highlight the St. Louis River and Estuary in digital, social and print campaigns
- Create landing pages on the new website featuring the SLRC and key locations:
 - Spirit Mountain
 - Lake Superior Zoo
 - Essentia Duluth Heritage Sports Center
 - Lincoln Park Craft District

PARTNER OUTREACH

Visit Duluth has been reaching out to businesses throughout the St. Louis River Corridor to inform them of the many opportunities we offer to promote the region and encourage visitors to explore the area.

In February 2021, we welcomed three businesses from the St. Louis River Corridor as new Visit Duluth partners!



Our marketing plan for 2021 was created using a new strategic and tactical approach.

We thoughtfully crafted our marketing strategy by examining the characteristics and dynamics of our audience and current travel trends. We outlined proven methods of using the travel decision process funnel to identify tactics that reach consumers at every stage in their journey. We have adopted a new agile method for executing our marketing plan so that we can work across teams towards a common goal within a cycle of review and adjustment to ensure success. We have identified three key goals, the tactics we plan to use, and how we will measure success, adjust to changes and report our progress. We are committed to achieving these goals by measuring results and responding to performance and situational changes with creativity and agility.

**Thank you,
The Visit Duluth Team**

