

Project Category

NSBF Byway Community Award: Partnership

Project Name

Natchez Trace Recovery Strategic Plan

Byway Name

Natchez Trace Parkway

Designation: 2002

Distance: 444 mi

Overview

After what has been perhaps the most fluctuating time in our nation's recent history, the Natchez Trace Compact partners knew it was time to "re-strategize" their efforts to continue fulfilling their 20+ year mission — To attract more visitors to travel the 444-mile Natchez Trace Parkway and to visit member cities and states experiencing their offerings along the route, creating economic impact through travel and tourism. The success this three-state, 18-community group has seen in promoting one of America's most prized tourism destinations makes them a perfect recipient for the NSBF Partnership Award. They have worked together as a public-private organization for over two decades, contributing money, time and resources to better our byway. Since the pandemic began, the need to "socially distance" became a way of life. Knowing the desire to explore has not left our adventurous spirits, the Compact sought to consider a new vision for their promotional role. In order to brainstorm together, they changed in-person meetings to virtual, established new organizational goals and created a five-year strategic plan. The new partnership goals included:

1. Develop programs and initiatives that create long-term organizational sustainability.
2. Hire an official employee of the association.
3. Strengthen and expand marketing and public relations efforts to promote the communities along the Natchez Trace Parkway, bringing positive economic impact to member communities.

While some goals were long-term, the group immediately started the portion they called the Natchez Trace Recovery Action Plan (running January 2020 - June 2021) and SUCCEEDED in implementing the following components:

- Hired an Association Manager effective October 2021
- Enhanced website, digital & social advertising and social management
- Placed ads in state tourism directories & American Road Magazine
- Executed a public relations and media outreach plan and
- Strengthen cross promotional efforts with individual partners.

Intrinsic Qualities

The Natchez Trace Parkway is blessed to have all identified intrinsic qualities; however, the partners found it important to focus on those most accessible during the pandemic time. The purpose of the The Natchez Trace Recovery Action Plan was to promote safe experiences visitors could have through recreational, historical and scenic opportunities. Industry data showed us in the tourism world that just because people had to quarantine for various lengths of time, the need for connection to nature was certainly not gone, it was more needed than ever before.

Many of our partners are individual DMOs who had to shut down and stop most programming and marketing; however, having the Natchez Trace run through their town was a blessing to both residents and guests. The partners dedicated themselves to telling visitors all there still was to do along the Byway WHILE remaining safe. The Compact utilized social media and the website to reinforce the following messages and identified intrinsic qualities:

- The regions temperate climate (almost year-round)
- The continuous recognition as a top roadway for cycling, motorcycling and exploration
- Wildlife viewing and quiet enjoyment of the corridor's natural beauty
- Miles of hiking trails
- Natural beauty and seasonal landscape
- Adjacent to rivers, streams and historic mounds and
- Outdoor Interpretive exhibits depicting history from the Civil War to Native Americans

Our advertising, social media posts and editorial features offered a look into what intrinsic qualities could be experienced (without having to go inside).

Byway Best Practice

The visitors experience is often determined by the ease in which they can obtain information, especially during a pandemic when staffing is limited. Compact members adopted best practices for serving our audience. Our message was clear, "Explore the Trace, Discover America." Our accompanying tag showcased our geographic location , "A Unique Journey from Natchez to Nashville." Partners combined money from their individual DMOs and the state tourism offices to share information regarding COVID protocols, closures and openings of attractions, hotels and restaurants and activities that met socially distanced recommendations. One of our most impactful tactics was a public relations campaign designed to reach a larger audience without paying for costly advertising. We developed a socially-distanced itinerary for travel writers Kristin Luna of Camels & Chocolate and Wall Street Journal travel writer Andrew Nelson. Once it was responsibly safe, both writers came to the Natchez Trace and visited EACH of our communities. They shared how to safely experience the areas and captured stunning images to accompany the writings. Their results were phenomenal (shared in the final research section). Our complimenting advertising and social posts communicated how safety protocols were being followed and how to vacation. The projects implemented in the Recovery Action Plan benefit the Byway traveler as they navigate trip planning during this new "normal" and create awareness. Our Recovery Plan also outlined the need to hire an official Compact employee to guide us forward in our visitor outreach as well as the goal to become self-sustaining. Over the past 20 years, the Compact has been the definitive Parkway resource for travel information, attracting visitors from across the nation. We know by growing together, the Byway traveler's experience will be enhanced not only along the Parkway but in the cities along the way.

Keys to Success

Partnerships are the cornerstone of successful ventures; they are certainly the key to ours. Through our Recovery Action Plan, we:

- Updated bylaws - allow for more partners to become self-sustaining.
- Hired Association Manager (first Compact employee).
- Strengthened marketing/pr activities earning:
 - Mississippi Governor's Conference Travel Media Award - 2020 AND 2021
 - Social media increases: Facebook - 4.2%, Instagram - 9.5%, Pinterest - 43%, You Tube - 23%
 - Newsletter - 20% open rate

- Enhanced www.scenictrace.org
- Advertising campaign reaching 1.6 million+
- “A Deliciously Diverting Road Trip Through the Deep South,” appeared in The Wall Street Journal, 11,433,315 impressions
- Camels & Chocolate - 130,000,000 earned media circulation, 700,000+ social posts and features in AAA Living, Marriot Bonvoy Traveler and an appearance on TODAY in Nashville.

The Parkway was the 7th most visited park in the nation per NPS with 6.4 million guests - the most since 1989! While we know there're numerous reasons for increases, we believe our collaborative initiatives helped to attract visitors from across the U.S. The true key to success in a project of this size is partnership. Without our partnering towns and state tourism offices having the foresight to work together ignoring county lines, we would never be able to have the success we do.

Additional Information

Contact Information

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Project Year(s):

1/1/2020 - 6/30/2021

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Photographs

