

MID-ATLANTIC EVENTS

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Serving a Taste of Americana with the Spice of Social Media

Delaware's 2010 Dover Days boosts attendance by 50 percent with New Media strategy

An annual spring festival steeped in tradition and history, Kent County's Dover Days celebration utilized "new media" to successful results as part of its promotion of the event.

Celebrated over the April 30 - May 2, 2010 weekend, the 78-year-old Dover Days festival attracted approximately 22,000 visitors, nearly 50 percent above previous record attendance figures. Vendor space fully sold out several weeks prior to the festival, realizing a 30 to 40 percent boost over previous years.

According to Cindy Small, executive director for the Kent County, Delaware Convention and Visitors Bureau, the new approach to marketing the event, which harnessed the power of the Internet, helped attract more than 190 vendors, who fully lined both sides of the streets surrounding Dover's central Legislative Mall. For the time in the event's history, vendor booths were sold out.

Nearly all vendors voiced that traffic and sales exceeded expectations. Some completely exhausted their supplies of literature and materials, reported Robin Coventry, chairwoman of the event.

The community's Century Club registered a noteworthy success, when the organization discontinued a previous ice cream social in favor of a tea on Dover's Historic Green, and a display featuring gowns of the State of Delaware's First Ladies.

"The tea sold out the first day and the display attracted a record number of visitors throughout the weekend. In fact, the Century Club enjoyed a monumental 350 percentage increase in number of visitors of over last year," Coventry reported.

Another attendance record was set at the Biggs Museum, which hosted 2,644 visitors over Dover Days weekend.

Largely credited for the dramatic increases, according to Small, was the adoption of new marketing strategies for the 2010 festival and the heavy reliance on new media tools.

"We achieved these results without an increase in the Dover Days marketing budget or without losing any of the appeal and charm of one of the nation's annual historical celebrations. Dover Days is all about First State traditions. We're proud of our heritage and make it the centerpiece of this annual event, complete with maypole dances, house tours and colonial artisans. With this year's new communications approach, we preserved these sentiments, conveyed these messages and made them accessible to a wider audience than ever before," Small said.

To apply the new media strategy, the bureau collaborated with Stevens & Tate Marketing in the development and execution of an Internet marketing campaign to reach new audiences. The Lombard, Illinois-based firm, along with its subsidiary - Endora Digital Solutions, has provided marketing services for nearly two-dozen clients in the travel, tourism and special events fields.

"An event with a strong, established following like Dover Days will grow significantly with selection of the right media - one that will appeal to and reach wider audiences. The new media was a perfect fit for this event," said Dan Gartlan, president of Stevens & Tate.

"Credit goes to the Kent County and Greater Dover, Delaware Convention and Visitors Bureau for rethinking their approach to event marketing and pursuing new strategies. By doing so, they were able to increase attendance in a year when they saw their marketing budget cut," Gartlan added.

As a step, Stevens & Tate Marketing representatives worked closely with the convention and visitors bureau team in creating a bolder and more modern identity along with a new logo for Dover Days. Following that, the agency developed a website with a festive look, event highlights, dramatic photos from previous years, lodging package information, a schedule of events, and vendor opportunities.

"For the first time in the festival's history a website visitor could get the feeling for the personality and character of the event through the storytelling and photography, not just the information," Gartlan explained.

Accessibility to the site was enhanced through search engine optimization, enabling the microsite to be easily found online. To achieve this, agency representatives optimized the site by analyzing key search terms and phrases and incorporating them into microsite's text.

"It's not just about being found by persons looking for Dover Days. It's about being found by larger new audience looking for spring festivals and other family activities," Gartlan explained.

A presence on Facebook and Twitter also spread the word, both in terms of geography and demographics. A Facebook fan page was launched and according to Gartlan, attracted hundreds of visitors right out of the blocks. Further, Facebook pages were created and utilized by four of the bureau's staffers, and their messages and photos during the course of the weekend maintained interest and attracted visitors.

While the communications mediums and messages were entirely new, the flavor of the event and its firm roots and tradition were carefully preserved. For example, the new Dover Days logo, which was effectively utilized throughout the new media campaign, captured the Americana feeling and added the notation "Established 1933."

The record turnout and vendor participation gives Dover Days organizers a tough act to follow, but they will do so with its foundation in tradition and its future in successful social media strategies and tactics.

"This is a social event that steps visitors back to colonial America, attracting audiences from throughout Delaware and the mid-Atlantic states. By using a new media strategy, we modernized the communications tools to grow the event in 2010 and in years to come," Gartlan said.