

Bourbon Is Just The Beginning

Louisville Tourism
2025-2026
Destination Sales & Marketing Plan



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BOURBON IS ONLY THE BEGINNING:

Navigating Louisville's Next Chapter

While economic headwinds are reshaping the tourism landscape nationwide, Louisville remains a destination of choice—thanks to our authenticity, hospitality, and the unforgettable experiences we offer. The past fiscal year brought remarkable moments, from hosting the NCAA Division I Women's Volleyball Championship to welcoming global leaders at PCMA edUcon and Travel South's Global Media Marketplace.

Our brand pillars—Bourbon, Culinary, Southernness, and Authenticity—continue to anchor our identity. But with our new campaign, “Bourbon is Just the Beginning,” we're inviting visitors to look beyond the barrel and discover the music, art, food, and culture that make Louisville truly one-of-a-kind.

Even in a shifting economic climate, the latest Visitor Profile Study confirms Louisville's enduring appeal. With 91% repeat visitation and a 62% increase in average daily spend since 2020, our city continues to deliver memorable experiences and economic value that keep travelers coming back.

In the year ahead, Louisville Tourism will continue to expand our reach through targeted advertising, strategic partnerships, and immersive content marketing—ensuring we maintain and strengthen the business we've earned. We'll prioritize our core feeder and emerging seed markets, leveraging new airlift and regional drive opportunities to keep Louisville top of mind. We will also launch a comprehensive strategy across markets for New York City.

Looking ahead, we remain committed to delivering authentic, high-quality experiences—whether for first-time visitors or returning guests. In times of uncertainty, Louisville's story stands strong: rooted in tradition, enriched by diversity, and ready to welcome the world.

Cheers to resilience, creativity, and the spirit of Bourbon City.



Cleo Battle, Louisville Tourism President & CEO



LEISURE MARKETS

Market Overview

Louisville's brand momentum is strong and measurable. The latest Visitor Profile Study confirms that our visitors are staying longer (3.1 days vs. 2.6 in 2020), spending significantly more (\$476 average daily spend per party, +62% since 2020), and returning often (91% repeat visitation). The city draws a slightly older (average 47 years), majority-female audience (56%), with above-average household income (\$85,880; bourbon-focused visitors average \$100,304).

Our competitive advantage continues to center on our **Bourbon City** identity, paired with Louisville's authenticity, culinary depth, and southern hospitality. The data also reinforces the value of protecting strong regional markets while growing share in high-potential, lower-awareness seed markets—especially those supported by new or expanded airlift.

General Consumer Marketing Strategy

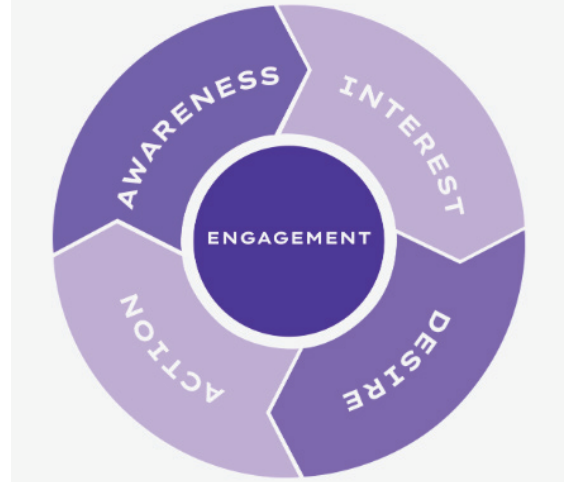
Louisville's marketing approach is designed to drive both new visitor acquisition and repeat visitation, leveraging the city's advantage: 91% repeat visitation. To capitalize on this, we are evolving beyond the traditional sales and marketing funnel model to adopt more of a cycle approach that reflects the continuous nature of the visitor journey.

Sales & Marketing Cycle



Rather than focusing solely on moving travelers from awareness to booking, our strategy creates a repeatable engagement loop:

This cycle ensures that every marketing effort not only attracts new travelers but also nurtures



long-term loyalty, turning first-time visitors into passionate advocates and repeat guests.

Acquisition + Retention = Sustainable Growth

Retention is central to this strategy. Repeat visitors stay longer, spend more, and amplify our message through word-of-mouth.

While retention drives loyalty, new audience acquisition remains critical. We will continue to invest in high-impact awareness campaigns in seed markets and maintain always-on presence in growth markets. Every campaign will be designed with the cycle in mind—ensuring that first-time visitors are seamlessly transitioned into repeat travelers through personalized follow-up and engaging content.

Our mix will include:

- Paid advertising (digital, connected TV, print, out of home)
- Public relations and earned media
- Influencer partnerships
- Content & email marketing
- Social media engagement
- Online travel agency co-op programs and conversion-driving partnerships

The overarching brand narrative will be **Bourbon City**, with layered storytelling that reflects what the study shows visitors value most—welcoming hospitality, affordable experiences, and plenty of new things to do on repeat visits. Our campaign messaging will focus on “**Bourbon is only the Beginning**” as the unifying theme, while highlighting Louisville’s diverse culinary scene, special events, cultural assets, and ease of access. The Visitor Profile study’s findings on high repeat visitation emphasize the importance of both attracting new audiences and delivering fresh experiences to encourage return trips.

Target Audience

Primary: Adults 25–54 (sweet spot 25–45), including older Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X.

- Majority female (56%)
- Above-average household income (\$85,880 overall; \$100K+ for bourbon-focused visitors)
- Average travel party size: 3 people, most often spouse/partner + children under 18
- High repeat visitation potential — 91% have been here before

Motivations: Visiting friends/family, vacation/weekend getaway, special events, bourbon experiences.

Target Markets

Growth Markets

High awareness, high repeat visitation.

Atlanta, Chicago, Cincinnati, Columbus, Indianapolis, Nashville

Tactics: Maintain “always-on” paid digital campaigns with seasonal creative refreshes; integrate OOH in high-traffic areas; leverage bourbon and culinary PR pitches to reinforce Louisville as a must-return destination.

Seed Markets

Limited brand exposure but strong potential.

Austin, Boston, Charleston (WV), Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, Minneapolis, New York.

Tactics: Heavy awareness campaigns; OTA partnerships to target inbound air travelers; event activations to introduce the Bourbon City brand to new audiences.

Messaging Strategy

- **Core Theme:** Bourbon City — bourbon as the cultural and experiential thread connecting Louisville’s food, music, arts, and hospitality.
- **Value Proposition:** Easy to reach, affordable, and offers diverse experiences for couples, families, and friend groups.
- **Behavioral Angle:** Position Louisville as a “repeatable” getaway — there’s always something new for returning visitors.



Tactics

Paid Advertising

Always-On Digital: Year-round in growth markets targeting travelers searching for inspiration, actively planning, or engaging with bourbon, culinary, and cultural content.

Seasonal Flights: Fall and spring bursts with “Bourbon City” creative layered with seasonal event content (Derby lead-up, Bourbon Heritage Month).

Out of Home: Billboards and transit in Indianapolis, Chicago, Nashville to capture drive market; airport digital placements in seed markets with direct flights.

Connected TV/Video: YouTube, streaming TV, programmatic video targeting high-income households and bourbon enthusiasts.

Online Travel Agency Partnerships: Maintain Expedia/Booking Holdings partnerships to convert high-intent travelers, and leverage TripAdvisor itineraries to influence travelers in the research phase.

Regional Drive Campaigns: Promote road-trip themed itineraries in spring/summer for travelers within 5 hours, and showcase seasonal events, bourbon trails, and culinary weekends

Content Marketing

Blog & Itineraries: Create “What’s New Since Your Last Trip” content to appeal to the 91% repeat visitor rate.

Local Voices: Feature chefs, distillers, artists to add authenticity.

Bourbon + Family: Develop content that bridges bourbon experiences with family-friendly activities to reach the large spouse/partner + kids segment.

Email Marketing

Segmentation: Tailor campaigns for bourbon lovers, family travelers, and event-goers.

Triggers: Send follow-up “plan your next trip” emails to past visitors within 3–6 months.

Social Media

Daily inspiration posts across Facebook, Instagram, and X, with an emphasis on visitor-generated content.

Introduce new platforms to our social media mix such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts

Real-time event coverage to create urgency for travel.

Leisure Development Strategies

- Grow leisure consumer email database in both growth and seed markets.
- Maintain in-market activations in seed markets to complement advertising.
- Leverage visitor interest in value, events and something new by continued expansion of LouGrass free music series to drive visitation.



NICHE / AFFINITY MARKETS - BLACK TRAVEL & LGBTQ+

Tactics

Market Overview

Louisville's high repeat visitation rate (91%) and reputation for being welcoming, affordable, and full of experiences make it especially appealing for affinity travel markets. These segments seek destinations where they feel represented, safe, and able to connect authentically with local culture. The Visitor Profile Study shows that bourbon and culinary experiences are shared interests across demographics, offering a strong entry point for inclusive marketing.

Key Marketing Strategies

Integrate Bourbon City storytelling with representation that reflects Black and LGBTQ+ travelers in visuals, influencers, and event partnerships.

Leverage the city's position as the first in Kentucky to host an LGBTQ+ inclusive bourbon festival (Bourbon & Belonging) and as home to events like the Black Chef Showcase.

Build on Louisville's top activities—dining, shopping, museums, parks, and distilleries—to create curated itineraries for affinity audiences.

Paid Media: Partner with Ebony Media Group, Pride Media, and targeted digital channels to run inclusive Bourbon City campaigns in both growth and seed markets with proven cultural event attendance.

Content Marketing: Create "See Yourself Here" itineraries, pairing bourbon and cultural experiences with local community connections.

Industry Education: Continue to offer complimentary DEI training for hospitality partners to ensure every touchpoint is welcoming and inclusive.

Event Activation:

- Seed leisure database in New York City by partnering with Nomadness Travel Tribe for consumer event activation.
- Expand Bourbon & Belonging statewide promo during Bourbon Heritage Month to grow national attention.
- Presence at events in key feeder markets (e.g., Indianapolis Pride, ATL Beer, Bourbon & BBQ Fest).
- Launch outreach to Divine Nine Alumni Associations promoting individual and group travel to Louisville.



TRAVEL TRADE

Domestic

Market Overview

The Visitor Profile Study confirms Louisville's strength as a regional drive destination (61% arrive by personal vehicle) with a strong appeal to groups traveling for events, bourbon experiences, and cultural attractions. Average party size (3 people) and increased length of stay (3.1 days) create opportunities for tour operators to sell multi-day packages.

Marketing Strategies

Position Louisville as a customizable group experience hub — iconic visitor experiences and attractions, bourbon trails, culinary tours, seasonal festivals, and sporting events can be tailored to specific group interests.

Strengthen relationships with high-producing domestic operators while introducing Louisville to new buyers in untapped regional markets.

Tactics

Paid Trade Media: Advertise in key travel trade publications like the Group Travel Leader and Travel South Group Tour Planner.

Events & Shows: Continue strong presence at American Bus Association, National Tour Association and Ontario Motor Coach Association with a focus on pre-scheduled appointments with operators who serve both growth and seed markets.

Fam Tours: Host familiarization tours that combine iconic attractions, bourbon, culinary, and theme-based itineraries, showcasing Louisville's repeat-visit potential.

Booking Incentives: Offer seasonal group incentives during need periods (August, December, January).

International

Market Overview

Louisville's international growth opportunity aligns with the Visitor Profile Study finding that 20% of visitors arrive by air, and length of stay is increasing. UK and Germany remain priority markets, supported by ongoing sales representation and PR efforts. Despite the headwinds of tariffs and political narratives, Canada also remains key due to proximity and potential for expanded direct air service.

Marketing Strategies

Use bourbon's global appeal to introduce Louisville as the gateway to Kentucky Bourbon Country in targeted international consumer and trade campaigns.

Pair bourbon with authentic cultural experiences (music, culinary, Derby, history) to extend stays beyond Louisville.

Tactics

Trade Events: Continue leveraging the recent hosting of Travel South International Global Summit & Media Marketplace (April 2025), and the direct exposure to 50 international journalists.

Sales Missions: Continue UK and Germany rep programs with quarterly reporting, agent training, and sales outreach.

Partnerships: Strengthen Brand USA, US Travel, and Travel South collaborations for co-op marketing and trade show visibility (IPW, Brand USA Week).

International Event Activation: Continue Epsom Derby and London Cocktail Week sponsorship with bourbon brand partners to position Louisville as the premier US bourbon destination.

CONVENTION MARKETS (MEETINGS AND EVENTS)

Market Overview

Louisville's convention profile has never been stronger. Building on the global visibility of 2024's 150th Kentucky Derby and PGA Championship, we further leveraged the city's reputation as a premier meeting and event destination in 2025 with the hosting of industry shows PCMA Educon and Maritz Activate. The Visitor Profile Study reinforces that Louisville delivers a welcoming, affordable, experience-rich environment—a perception that influences meeting planners as much as leisure travelers.

High repeat visitation (91%) and the tendency for visitors to stay longer (3.1 days) translate to opportunities for meetings that inspire pre- and post-event extensions.

Target Audience

Primary: National and regional meeting planners, sports event rights holders, and corporate decision-makers.

Secondary: Association executives, CEOs, and organizational leaders.

Opportunity Link to Leisure Insights:

- 61% of visitors arrive by car, supporting the case for regional drive-in meetings.
- Top feeder states (IN, OH, IL, TN) are also key convention markets.
- Bourbon and culinary experiences rank among visitors' top activities—making them prime assets for client entertainment and attendee engagement.

Messaging Strategy

We will continue to leverage:

- Bourbon City identity as a distinctive differentiator in the meetings marketplace.
- Walkable downtown with concentrated dining, entertainment, and attractions.
- Unique venues that connect to Louisville's culture (distilleries, museums, waterfront etc).
- Expansion at the Kentucky Exposition Center and new attraction openings.

Tactical Approach

Industry Partnerships: Maintain strong partnerships with ASAE, MPI, PCMA, CVENT, IAEE, and third-party intermediaries like Maritz, HelmsBriscoe, and ConferenceDirect. These will remain the foundation for lead generation and relationship-building.



In-Market Activations:

- Continue annual Bourbon City social events in Chicago, Atlanta, DC, and NYC—leveraging bourbon’s universal appeal to strengthen connections with planners.
- Integrate leisure messaging into pre-promotes, showcasing itineraries that include top-ranked visitor activities from the study (dining, distilleries, shopping, museums).

Seasonal Event Tie-Ins

- Pair convention sales missions with major Louisville events (Bourbon Heritage Month, Derby) to position us as an event-rich city.
- Use festivals and concerts as “soft site visits” to immerse planners in the authentic Louisville experience.

Content & PR for Conventions

- Develop convention-focused versions of leisure content (“What’s New Since Your Last Meeting Here”) to appeal to re-booking clients.

Key Development Strategies

Drive Meetings in Growth Markets: Leverage proximity to top feeder states for quick-turn bookings, especially for regional associations and corporate retreats.

Promote Bourbon + Business Packages: Offer distillery experiences, cocktail receptions, and bourbon education as built-in convention enhancements.

Engage Local Corporations: Work with Louisville-based Fortune 500 companies and major employers to attract internal and partner meetings that keep dollars in-market.

Activate Need Periods: Target citywide clients for Aug, Dec, and Jan with incentive offers, pairing with slow-season leisure messaging to boost attendance.

Regional Directors’ Key Role

Regional directors, in addition to focusing on citywide parameter bookings, work to generate sales leads, securing tentative room nights and representing Louisville in their respective markets. The key states identified in each region are crucial for our selling activities. We are introducing some new events in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and have expanded to include an aggressive new strategy for New York.

Mid-Atlantic Regional Office

DC/VA/MD Washington, D.C., Virginia, Maryland and West Virginia are key association markets. We will continue an activation in DC for Derby Day in April, as we partner with MPI’s largest chapter the Potomac Chapter.

Midwest Regional Office

Chicago and Midwest market states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and Northern California. This year, we will re-activate the Bourbon Heritage Month event and add an event to celebrate Valentine’s Day in February.

Northeast Regional Office

Delaware, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Maine. We are doubling the amount of activity we will have in the NYC market specifically tied to an overarching leisure strategy that will reinforce Louisville’s brand for the first ever paid campaign in this market.

Southeast Regional Office

Atlanta and Southeast market states of Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Key markets in the Southeast include Corporate, Scientific & Engineering and Technology. We will take advantage of bourbon heritage month in September and produce the popular The Art of Bourbon event.

SERVICES SUPPORT FOR CONVENTIONS & EVENTS

Overview

The Destination Services team provides industry-leading customer service to meeting planners and event organizers of all group gatherings through strategic services, community connections and creative attendance building.

The positive economic and cultural impact of events and group travel will remain a defining strength for Louisville in the coming year. More than 550 events are expected to bring over 3.5 million attendees to the city, generating significant compression points with hotel occupancies surpassing 90% during peak dates.

Our roster of legacy events remains a cornerstone of Louisville's meetings economy, from TFN's Run 4 Roses, The Utility Expo, Equip Exposition to Danny Wimmer Presents' Louder Than Life and Bourbon & Beyond. Other high-impact events include the National Farm Machinery Show, Junior Volleyball Association, Mid-America Trucking Show, and the Kentucky Derby Festival.

Louisville will also continue to host industry shows in the coming fiscal year, building upon the success of PCMA's edUcon this past summer—a showcase of Louisville's meeting infrastructure and hospitality to a national audience. These events are not just transactions; they are platforms to demonstrate that Bourbon is Only the Beginning, offering planners and attendees a authentic Louisville experiences beyond the boardroom.

Key Strategies

Social and Environmental Impact: The Leave a Legacy corporate social responsibility program will continue to connect incoming groups to Louisville's locally grown charities and nonprofits. We will focus on initiatives that align with our authentic brand pillars—this year emphasizing hunger relief and projects supporting natural resources that mitigate the urban heat island effect.

Our Destination Services team will continue to focus on not only environmental but also social and economic sustainability. Working with local stakeholders to create meaningful engagement opportunities for meeting and event planners. The goal: integrate social, economic and environmental impact into the fabric of every event we host.

Building Attendance and Value of Services: Our role in attendance building goes beyond logistics—we help planners create events that attendees can't wait to return to. Using the latest visitor insights, we'll connect event themes to Louisville's top-rated experiences—bourbon, culinary, one-of-a-kind attraction experiences, arts, and live music—to inspire pre- and post-event stays.

We will refresh post-convention evaluations to be more user-friendly and gather richer data on client satisfaction, giving us sharper tools to continually improve service delivery.



Strengthening Industry & Community

Connections: Louisville Tourism serves as the bridge between our hospitality industry and the local business community. In 2025–26, the Strategic Alliances team will launch a refined Destination Engagement Program tailored to provide more relevant and strategic opportunities for local businesses to engage with each other, and incoming visitors. The program includes sponsorship opportunities, targeted advertising to visitors and planners, event access, and professional development resources.

Key networking and recognition platforms like the Annual Gala and ROSE Awards and the Destination Marketing Forum will continue to spotlight hospitality excellence, while 78 Social Diplomats will enjoy exclusive networking, endorsed learning, and ambassadorship opportunities. New touchpoints will also be created for direct interaction between incoming attendees and local businesses.

Enhancing the Visitor Experience: From housing services to beautification initiatives, our focus remains on adding tangible value to both attendees and the local community. With housing reservations growing 20% year-over-year, we'll expand this service to qualifying groups and explore its use for leisure and spectator-focused festivals and events.

We will continue to champion visitor enhancements—wayfinding, placemaking, and safety improvements—that make Louisville more navigable and inviting for both first-time and repeat attendees.

Legacy Organizations & Notable Events

Legacy status is reserved for organizations with a proven record of impact, reach, and commitment to Louisville. In FY 2025–26, we will host this distinguished group along with other notable events including:

Conventions & Tradeshows:

- Association of Equipment Manufacturers – The Utility Expo (Oct 2025)
- Connect Spring Marketplace – (Apr 2026)
- Kentucky State Fair and World's Championship Horse Show (Aug 2025)
- Maritz Activate (Aug 2025)
- Mid-America Trucking Show (Mar 2026)
- National Farm Machinery Show & Championship Tractor Pull (Feb 2026)
- National Street Rod Association – 56th Annual Street Rod Nationals (Aug 2025)
- North American International Livestock Expo & Championship Rodeo (Nov 2025)
- Outdoor Power Equipment Institute – Equip Exposition (Oct 2025)

Sporting Events & Festivals:

- Adidas Bluegrass Volleyball Tournament (Mar 2026)
- CROSS (Jan 2026)
- Danny Wimmer Presents
 - Bourbon & Beyond (Sept 2025)
 - Louder Than Life (Sept 2025)
- Junior Volleyball Association - World Challenge (Apr 2026)
- Kentucky Derby Festival (Apr 2026)
- National Archery in the Schools Program – Eastern National Tournament (May 2026)
- St. James Court Art Show (Oct 2025)
- TFN Camps & Clinics
 - Run 4 Roses (July 2025)
 - The Splash/National Championship (July 2025)
 - The Classic (May 2026)
 - Grassroots Showcase (April 2026)
- USA BMX Derby City Nationals (Sept 2025)
- Varsity Brands – WSF Louisville Grand Nationals (Dec 2025)

VISITOR EXPERIENCES

Overview

Visitor experiences are often the first—and lasting—point of connection between travelers and Louisville. The latest Visitor Profile Study reinforces that visitors see Louisville as welcoming, affordable, and packed with experiences worth returning for. With a 91% repeat visitation rate and longer stays (3.1 days), our services strategy will focus on delivering exceptional, personalized, and repeat-worthy interactions that deepen connections and inspire return trips.

Airport Welcome Center

- Serves as the “first handshake” for the 20% of visitors arriving by air.
- Staffed with trained ambassadors who can tailor recommendations based on traveler type—whether bourbon enthusiast, family visitor, or first-time attendee of a convention.
- Feature dynamic displays highlighting top visitor activities (dining, bourbon, museums, shopping) and seasonal events to encourage deeper exploration and extended stays.

Downtown Visitor Center

- Reimagined to be more than an information hub—an authentic, must-see Louisville stop.
- Seasonal activations aligned with the top trip motivations from the study—vacations/weekend getaways, special events, and bourbon experiences.
- Curated merchandise reflecting the city’s brand identity.

Mobile Visitor Center

- Extends reach into community events, neighborhoods, and regional events—bridging resident engagement with visitor outreach.
- Highlights Louisville Tourism’s impact on the community and reinforces tourism as a shared value.

Key Strategies

Meet Visitors Where They Are: Tailor services based on traveler profile data—families, couples, bourbon-focused, or event-driven visitors.

Inspire Repeat Visits: Showcase “What’s New Since Your Last Trip” content on-site and through printed and digital handouts.

Drive Spend in Market: Promote partner attractions, restaurants, and shopping directly tied to high-spend categories from the study.

Activate Seasonal Pillars: Continue quarterly in-center events around Mint Julep Month (April), Old Fashioned Fortnight (June), Bourbon Heritage Month (September), and Light Up Louisville (December).

Direct Visitor Engagement Opportunities: To connect local hospitality businesses directly with visitors to the downtown Louisville Visitor Center, the Airport Welcome Center and the Mobile Visitor Center.

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Overview

Strategic Alliances is the connective tissue linking Louisville's tourism industry to incoming visitors, and to one another. The team equips businesses in the hospitality and adjacent industries with the tools and connections they need to thrive while facilitating valuable connections, fostering collaboration within the tourism industry. Together, we build a stronger, more connected community that elevates the entire destination.

Key Strategies

Deepen Local Engagement and Community

Awareness: Continue to grow 78 Social as a hub for professional-to-professional networking, endorsed learning, and destination ambassadorship, ensuring participants can speak confidently to the city's tourism assets and visitor profile trends.

Destination Engagement: Reimagine how local hospitality and tourism businesses connect with one another and incoming visitors. This new dynamic business engagement model will allow individual businesses to pick and choose the most relevant opportunities to engage with visitors and meeting/event planners based on their individual goals and strategies.

Community Investment: Seed opportunities and support non-profit entities building new events and tourism-related projects with a focus on increasing out-of-market visitation to the city.



