

Strategies in Tourism

Column for 9/2/15

By Kelly Shoemaker, Deputy County Administrator

Charlotte County is blessed with stunning natural beaches, beautiful blueways and some of the nation's best fishing. We are home to Charlotte Harbor, Florida's second largest estuary and one of the nation's top ten sailing destinations. Punta Gorda emerged from the aftermath of Hurricane Charley as one of the most charming and beautiful small cities in Florida. Yet still, many people within and outside the state are unaware of where we're located or what we have to offer.

The mission of our Visitor and Convention Bureau (VCB) is to change that by telling our story to potential visitors, journalists and those who select sites for meetings and events. Their efforts have been remarkably successful.

Several years ago, Lorah Steiner, our tourism director, made three strategic decisions. The first was to focus more time and resources on "earned media." That's tourism-speak for the equivalent advertising value of articles written by journalists who have visited Charlotte County. The VCB brings journalists to our destination for "familiarization tours," or FAMS for short. The focus of each FAM depends upon the interest of the journalist. The FAM might focus exclusively on fishing if the journalist contributes to publications focused on the outdoors or could include time at a beach resort if the journalist writes about vacations for couples or families.

After a FAM, the journalist returns home and writes articles about their experience. The space dedicated to each article has an equivalent ad value. Ads equal to the size of recent articles written about our county since October, 2014 would have cost more than \$800,000 dollars. Coverage of Charlotte County by visiting journalists, as of June 2015, has also generated more than 250 million impressions. That is a lot of eyes on our destination.

The second decision was to focus on securing more sports events for Charlotte County. Sports events are recession resistant. Most families, during an economic downturn, will still make every effort to support their children's participation in sports related activities. Collegiate sports also continue during a recession. Every year, the Snowbird Baseball Classic contributes more than \$10 million dollars to Charlotte County's economy. They have held their tournament during both downturns and upswings in the economy. The tournament brought much needed business to our community during the great recession. In 2014 and 2015 the VCB secured, or was instrumental in securing, more than 20 events including the USA BMX National, Sunshine State Games Track & Field Championships, Youth Basketball of America tournament, six Prostyle baseball tournaments, two Florida Half Century softball tournaments and two FYSA soccer tournaments. Community partnerships play an important role in bringing sports events to Charlotte County. Recently, the VCB partnered with the Charlotte Harbor Regatta to bid for and win the right to host the 2015 Zhik F-18 Championship, a prestigious sailing competition.

The VCB is working on booking a sports event for June, 2016 which will bring more than 600 athletes, coaches and family members to Charlotte County with 75 percent coming from out-of-state.

The third decision has probably been the most impactful. The VCB began, in 2012, to concentrate their advertising and marketing on driving visitors to Charlotte County during low and shoulder seasons. This is when many businesses are struggling to survive until season begins again. The summer of 2014 clearly showed the results of that effort with tourism revenues soaring to 19 percent above the previous year. This was the largest percentage increase of any destination on the Southwest Gulf Coast.

The VCB continues to innovate with programs such as "Show Us Your Charlotte," a quarterly community photography contest. Residents and visitors alike can upload their favorite photos, on-line, at www.ShowUsYourCharlotte.com. Prizes are awarded for first and second place winners each quarter and include certificates for local restaurants, attraction passes and activities such as kayaking or harbor cruises. The VCB retains the rights to the photos and uses them to promote Charlotte County in print and online.

The VCB recently completed a dedicated smart phone app, in Portuguese, for the Brazilian travel market in cooperation with other tourism bureaus on the Southwest Gulf Coast. A German language travel app is in development for Charlotte County. German vacationers travel to the U.S. during the summer, which is traditionally our slowest season.

Tourism is our community's largest economic contributor. Revenues generated by tourism help to pay for many of the services and amenities we all enjoy. The programs under the umbrella of the Visitor and Convention Bureau are important to the health and growth of our economy and local businesses.