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STATE AND LOCAL PROMOTION AT A WORLD'S FAIR

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ABSTRACT

The Myrtle Beach-Grand Strand area successfully utilized the World's Fair to increase their volume of business. This was accomplished through an effective marketing program.

STATE AND LOCAL PROMOTION AT A WORLD'S FAIR

INTRODUCTION

First, congratulations to Knoxville for the job you have done in planning and staging the World Energy Exposition. The World's Fair at Knoxville has been a financial success. It seems obvious that long range benefits will also come to Knoxville and Tennessee as a direct result of the Fair.

Tennessee and the Knoxville area have long been recognized as a major vacation market area for South Carolina, particularly Myrtle Beach and our coastal areas. In 1980, we had many discussions in South Carolina about the World's Fair. Would an exhibit at the Energy Exposition in Knoxville be a sound investment as a marketing medium for vacations in South Carolina? This was the question we attempted to answer.

We had heard that the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and North Carolina were all going to have exhibits at the Energy Exposition. We also learned the State of North Carolina had appropriated \$400,000 for a state exhibit in the World's Fair. After some study, our Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism determined that we really couldn't afford to divert over \$400,000 for a World's Fair exhibit without seriously affecting some of our ongoing and established tourism marketing programs.

In February, 1981, the idea of a Knoxville World's Fair exhibit was again discussed at our South Carolina Governor's Conference on Tourism. Particular interest was expressed from the chambers of commerce of Myrtle Beach, Charleston, and Hilton Head Island and the Discover Upcountry Carolina Association. At that time, our PRT Department agreed that, if there was enough local interest, we would provide a state matching grant

from our tourism funds-sharing program. As it turned out, there was insufficient local interest at that time to raise the matching funds required.

In October, 1981, interest was revived in the Myrtle Beach area about being represented at the World's Fair. In response to this interest, our PRT Commission agreed to provide a grant of \$125,000 in state money if at least \$300,000 would be raised locally to meet total budget needs for a South Carolina exhibit in the World's Fair. It was also agreed that the exhibit would be managed by a local or state consortium or non-profit association comprised of representatives from the communities providing the financial resources.

The Myrtle Beach-Grand Strand emerged as the one area that felt able and justified in raising the money needed for a quality exhibit in the World's Fair. A man named Cecil Brandon headed a highly successful fund-raising campaign. Mr. Brandon was later selected by the Chamber of Commerce as the Grand Strand Citizen-of-the-Year for his leadership in this project. The Chamber, the County, municipalities of the Grand Strand, hotels and motels, banks, golf courses, restaurants, and other businesses all contributed money to the World's Fair drive. They raised more than \$300,000 in the Myrtle Beach area to go along with the \$125,000 in State money from our PRT Department.

A Grand Strand World's Fair Association was organized as a non-profit organization. We did not manage this exhibit from the state level. The Chamber of Commerce at Myrtle Beach provided the office space and other support for the Association. Harry Lockwood was Director of the Fair Association. The state as well as local organizations were represented on the Association board. I think that this mechanism worked out very well.

Exhibit space for the South Carolina Grand Strand display was rented in the Lifestyles and Technology Pavilion. We believe this has been an ideal location.

The total budget of roughly \$425,000 was spent in these ways: \$75,000 for exhibit space, \$150,000 to build a very fine exhibit, \$125,000 for promotion materials, and about \$75,000 to provide staffing throughout the six months duration of the World's Fair.

A house was rented in Knoxville to house the attractive and knowledgeable ladies who all came from the Myrtle Beach area. I understand that there was no turnover in the staff. All six of those young ladies have staffed the Grand Strand Fair exhibit at Knoxville from late April to date.

Every day throughout the Fair, two Grand Strand vacation prizes were offered to Fair visitors who registered at the exhibit. This totaled up to about 185 hotel and motel vacation prizes and about 185 vacation prizes that involved campgrounds. These prize offerings provided one of the highlights of the Myrtle Beach exhibit.

More than a million attractive color brochures were printed and designed especially for visitors to the Fair. It spotlighted the Myrtle Beach-Grand Strand area. The brochure also contained the addresses and telephone numbers of the South Carolina Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department and the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce to enable interested persons to obtain additional information about South Carolina or the

Myrtle Beach area. A telephone line was also set up at the exhibit where hotel/motel or campground reservations could be made directly to the Myrtle Beach area.

Our Department's ten State Welcome Centers maintain records of visitors who stop at the Centers. We did a special survey of World's Fair visitors this summer at the Interstate 26 Welcome Center, located in the upper part of the State. This is the main Interstate route that comes in from Knoxville.

Throughout the World's Fair this year, our staff at the I-26 Welcome Center used a questionnaire to survey travelers who had just come from the World's Fair. The questionnaire was very simple and asked for "your comments about the Fair and what is your destination in South Carolina."

The reports from the Welcome Center indicate that about 50% of the comments about the World's Fair were positive and the other 50% were generally in the negative category. One of our staff members at the I-26 Welcome Center said, "We have decided that there must be two World's Fairs going on. One is very delightful and the other is disappointing." People seem to put their comments into those two categories. Let me emphasize that this pertains to only those visitors that stopped at that center and would not typify the obvious satisfaction that the majority of people had who went to the Fair in Knoxville. We also need to keep in mind that a person is more likely to write down negative things than they are positive things.

Most Fair visitors who stopped at the I-26 Center stayed an average of two days at the Fair and then toured the South or visited the coast. Much of this touring was pre-planned. However, many of the Fair visitors said that the South Carolina Grand Strand exhibit directly influenced their decision to come to Myrtle Beach or other destinations in South Carolina. Many of them were visiting the state for the first time, too.

Our overall tourism business in South Carolina showed a substantial increase in 1982. We believe some of this increase can be attributed to the Fair. The traffic count at the I-26 Welcome Center for a five-month period from May through September registered 224,000 visitors in 1981 and 280,000 visitors in 1982. This is an increase of over 25%.

We believe that the Interstate system has probably worked to the advantage of South Carolina in attracting Knoxville World's Fair visitors. The Interstate highways provided a convenient way to get to South Carolina. There was a conclusion by our Welcome Center people that the Myrtle Beach-Grand Strand exhibit has been a great benefit. Most of the World's Fair visitors who stopped at the Center reported they had seen the exhibit.

In September and October, our Welcome Center staff noticed "a different type of traveler." The pattern switched from the family to the retired couple who planned to make their trip to the Fair after the busy peak season. "The different character of our visitor required more of us because they asked more questions. They hang on to every word. We have seen more bus tours, too, in September and October."

I have a summary of direct comments from World's Fair visitors who were surveyed at our South Carolina Welcome Center on Interstate 26. This digest of comments by visitors from many states provides a good sampling of the South Carolina destinations by those who had been to

Knoxville for the World's Fair. We would be glad to share this digest of comments with any of you who may be interested.

Myrtle Beach was obviously the number one destination in South Carolina because the World's Fair promotion efforts were geared to that area. But a substantial number of people specified Charleston. Fishing was also popular. And some visited the upcountry--mountain area of our state.

I'm going to read to you the comments that came from Ashby Ward, Executive Vice President of the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce and Harry Lockwood of the Grand Strand World's Fair Association.

Ashby says, "Our hope initially was simply to expose persons visiting the Fair to the Myrtle Beach name. Our interest was in the development of future business. In the meantime we have become aware of a large number of people who have made comments in our Chamber Office and local businesses that they had planned to visit our destinations following their visit to the Fair, but after visiting our exhibit, decided to come to the Grand Strand. We are also aware of a number of bus tour operators who are planning to bring groups to our community as a direct result of our World's Fair exposure. We must point out that tourism business along the Grand Strand is running considerably above the '81 level. This increase is bucking the trend of lower tourism numbers in some areas of the nation."

Mr. Ward goes on to conclude, "It is too easy to develop exact figures of the effects of the Fair, but I feel certain that this whole promotion effort in a year of economic downturn has been helpful to our tourism economy.

Additional comments from Harry Lockwood get into the statistical area. He brings out that over 9,000,000 visitors have attended the Fair. (His letter was written October 5, 1982.) We learned today from Carroll Logan and Bob Roark that World's Fair attendance has gone well over the 10,000,000 mark--close to 11,000,000. About one tenth of the visitors to the Fair stopped at the South Carolina Grand Strand booth and over half of those, more than half a million, took the time to register for the vacation prizes. I just learned yesterday that total visitors to the Grand Strand World's Fair booth topped the one million mark. With a total investment of approximately \$425,000, that translates into less than 50 cents per contact. This includes not only the personal contact by the staff at the booth, but also the visual contact of the exhibit, carrying home a beautiful brochure, and the other promotional materials.

Several Grand Strand businesses have reported that many of their guests and customers have come to the beach this year as a direct result of having visited the Grand Strand exhibit at the World's Fair. In addition to the immediate benefits of visitors coming from the Fair to the beach, we will see additional visitors for years to come as a result of our exposure at this Fair.

SUMMARY

To sum it all up, we believe that South Carolina's \$425,000 investment made in the World's Fair at Knoxville has been a wise one. We believe it has been a venture into a new and different market, supplementing our tried and proven and established marketing procedures. The project created a lot of community pride and togetherness, especially in the Grand Strand area. In addition to those direct benefits, we believe that some longer range values will be realized.

The people in the Myrtle Beach area, at one time during the summer, were intrigued with the idea of a future World's Fair at Myrtle Beach. However, this idea was set aside after further evaluation. It was concluded that a World's Fair from April-October may not be in the best interests of the Grand Strand. If it were possible to have a world's Fair from November through March, this would be ideal for the Myrtle Beach area. However, the traditional April 1-November 30 time frame for World's Fairs conflicts with the established prime vacation season when facilities of the Myrtle Beach area are already being fully utilized through regular vacationers and those attracted through established promotion programs.

This past year, our South Carolina General Assembly created "the World Heritage Expo Authority" and a commission has subsequently been appointed to explore the concept of a permanent type exposition in South Carolina. Attending the meeting here today are the chairman of the Authority, Virgil Sumner from Columbia; the chairman of the Authority's feasibility study committee, Bennett Helms; and Bob Drake from our Governor's staff, a member of the feasibility study. We will be meeting later today with officials of the Knoxville and New Orleans World's Fairs to look at the question of what it really takes to put on a fair or permanent type of exposition.

Looking ahead to the 1984 World's Fair at New Orleans, a decision is yet to be made on whether South Carolina will be represented at that Fair. We realize that, compared to Knoxville, New Orleans is a little out of range of our present major market areas for visitors. On the other hand, New Orleans may have some bigger advantages to offer in reaching a broader future market in international and national visitors. We'll be meeting today with some of our fine folks from New Orleans. In the near future, our PRT Department and our State Legislative Committee on Tourism and Trade may soon visit with officials from Louisiana to further explore the possibility of a South Carolina exhibit in the 1984 World's Fair at New Orleans.

In conclusion, let me say "thank you" to the people at Knoxville for a job well done at the Energy Exposition. We were pleased to have the opportunity for South Carolina and our Grand Strand to be represented at this 1982 World's Fair.