

# Revitalising US urban tourism post COVID-19: A brand strategy case study

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## Abstract

*After the COVID-19 pandemic, many US cities have suffered financially due to people adopting a hybrid work approach and moving from cities to the suburbs. Meanwhile, suburban residents are hesitant to visit cities due to concerns about increased crime rates since the pandemic. This has created a branding and marketing challenge for urban areas, particularly in smaller metropolitan areas that rely heavily on suburban commuters and day visitors. As a result, cities need to rebrand to better reach the new suburban consumers and bring them back into the city. This paper provides a case study on how the city of Providence, Rhode Island, addressed these issues through a marketing campaign targeting individuals who live up to an hour outside the city. The paper also describes how the city commissioned a market research study to determine the best strategy for the rebrand to move forward.*

## Keywords

*urban tourism, post-covid-19 recovery, marketing strategy, market research, consumer behaviour, travel trends*

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's hybrid work culture, 43 per cent of US employees now spend at least some of the week working remotely.<sup>1</sup> By comparison, only 17 per cent of workers conducted business virtually before 2020.<sup>2</sup> A jump of this size affects how consumers buy, how they spend their time and where they interact. Cities no longer have the same appeal as they once did, as the necessity to commute to an office has decreased.

What does this mean for cities and other bustling metropolitan areas where employees no longer have to commute daily in for in-person work? Metropolitan cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles saw their commuter population decrease in 2020.<sup>3</sup> While some professionals have returned to the office, the number of commuters is not expected to return to pre-pandemic levels any time soon.

When suburban populations do not return to offices as frequently (or, in some cases, at all), this impacts on how the city operates and can have long-term consequences for the social and economic status of the area. Globally, the value of office buildings in cities is expected to decrease in value by US\$800bn, with cities like San Francisco, New York, Munich, Shanghai and Paris seeing the largest drop in demand for office space.<sup>4</sup>

With fewer people coming into the office, lunchtime traffic has declined significantly, and these once vibrant metropolises are now missing the after-work crowds in restaurants, bars, shops and entertainment venues. Office locations in cities such as Philadelphia, Miami and Washington, DC have all seen average employee spending fall by at least US\$2,000 per year.<sup>5</sup> Extended business trips have experienced a downturn

as well, with hotels reporting fewer bookings at either end of the working week.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, some cities have seen an increase in crime rates, including an uptick in homicides and carjacking.<sup>7</sup> This issue has been sensationalised by the various mass media outlets reporting disturbing crime stories, which in turn have been amplified through social media. As a result, over three-quarters of Americans believe the national crime rate has worsened, despite statistics to the contrary.<sup>8</sup>

Homelessness likewise continues to be problematic, with year-on-year increases documented in many cities.<sup>9</sup>

The combination of all this negative press is deterring out-of-town tourists and even local consumers from visiting major cities and partaking in such offerings as shopping, live entertainment and dining.<sup>10</sup>

The combination of decreased commuter dollars and unease felt by casual weekend visitors has caused serious deficits in how often the suburban populations are visiting the major cities in their areas. The falling frequency of visits to downtown areas drives down the generation of revenue in the local economy, which in turn decreases the desirability of the city as a destination to nearby travellers. This in turn creates the conditions for crime and homelessness to continue to increase. And so the cycle repeats.

Compared with before the pandemic, the desire to settle in the suburbs has increased by 4 per cent while preference for city dwelling is down by 8 per cent.<sup>11</sup> The reason for the decline in city population is that people are willing to sacrifice proximity to stores, restaurants and schools for larger homes and more land.<sup>12</sup>

This shift to the suburbs has a significant ripple effect. A city's vibrancy, particularly in its downtown core, is an integral part of marketing the destination for leisure visits, meetings and conventions, and business opportunities. As cities vie for tourism business and economic investment, a thriving, safe city centre can be a powerful lure.

### REBRANDING CITY LIFE FOR THE LOCAL TOURIST

Tourism agencies that support cities, typically called destination marketing organisations (DMOs), have seen their mission shift dramatically post pandemic. Traditionally, DMOs focused their efforts outside their market, adhering to the classic mantra 'heads in beds'. A large goal now is to help provide a consistent flow of visitors to the city, which does not necessarily mean exclusively tourists.<sup>13</sup> For example, DMOs have begun doing more product development, creating events that they can then market. They have also taken a larger role in stewarding and evolving their city's brand, focusing not only on the visitor but also on the local population. For example, the city of Vancouver developed the #VancouverComeBack campaign to encourage locals to visit restaurants and local attractions.<sup>14</sup>

How does this all add up? There is a branding and marketing problem for several urban areas and more pressure on DMOs to bring new traffic into cities. As a result, DMOs needed to answer the following questions:

- How does a city attract suburbanites to dine, shop and visit museums, theatres and events?
- How does a city overcome safety perception issues?

- What would encourage people to visit the city if their employer does not require them to work at an office?

This is where local tourism initiatives come into effect.

Smaller metropolitan areas, like Providence, Rhode Island, that lack the budget and resources of bigger cities, are also grappling with the challenge of attracting more traffic. These 'second-tier' cities, with less name recognition, smaller budgets and more competition, face a daunting task as they strive to make up for the loss of commuters and visitors post pandemic.

A comprehensive brand strategy focusing on regional tourism can positively impact a city's economy, politics and culture. However, regional tourism branding is complicated as it is not only based on image and association but also personal experiences and beliefs about the destination.<sup>15</sup> As cities are impacted by negative experiences and the media, any push to improve brand image can be complicated. Improving brand equity will give local tourism a competitive advantage over other local destinations. The way this can be executed is through various communication methods that reach their core audiences.<sup>16</sup>

Effective branding and messaging are instrumental in shaping a city's reputation and help to encapsulate its essence, including its values, culture and unique selling points.

To this end, the following actions help improve a city's brand:

- *Promoting amenities that are unavailable in the suburbs:* Improve perception of the city within suburban communities by promoting the unique experiences to be found in the city, such as the restaurants, bars and events.

- *Showcasing the city as a cultural destination:* Seeing the attractions, experiences and hospitality available in their local city will remind locals that it offers so much more than their immediate neighbourhood.
- *Attracting local investment:* Investors are drawn to cities with a positive brand presence, seeing long-term value and growth potential. Having a more upscale atmosphere will attract residents to the city for experiences they cannot get elsewhere, increasing the city's reputation in a positive way.
- *Competing for group business:* A bustling downtown, a strong city brand and local engagement and support can be powerful lures when vying for lucrative meeting, convention and sporting event business.
- *Promoting staycations:* A vacation does not require travelling long distances. With travel expenses at an all-time high due to inflation, many are looking towards local offerings for a getaway. Suburbanites can open their wallets to hotels in the local vicinity if they see the city as a destination in which to relax and stay without overspending. Staying locally will give locals a greater opportunity to spend on other areas of the city, such as dining and entertainment.

### THE PROVIDENCE MARKETING PLAYBOOK: FROM MARKET RESEARCH TO CREATIVE CAMPAIGN

The successful marketing of local tourism requires understanding the target audience, their needs and what would drive them to visit a city. This information will help customise advertising and communication to drive the highest conversion for visitation.

Providence, Rhode Island, did just this. The city's DMO, the Providence Warwick Convention & Visitor Bureau (PWCVB), was tasked with combating lower visitation due to COVID-19. The goal was to attract people to the city and make downtown Providence the go-to destination for dining, shopping and entertainment for the nearby suburbs.

### METHOD

To develop a comprehensive marketing initiative to attract local visitors, the first step was to understand more about this audience in order to target them as efficiently as possible.

PWCVB wanted to learn the following:

- the audience with the highest propensity to visit the city;
- current perception of the city among suburbanites;
- barriers to visiting;
- drivers to increase visitation; and
- the role of media and ad channels in driving visitation.

To this end, PWCVB reached out to Provoke Insights, a full-service market research firm, to conduct a 40-question online survey among 500 respondents who met the following criteria:

- live up to one hour away from downtown Providence (this included all of Rhode Island and the following counties in Connecticut and Massachusetts: Norfolk, Bristol, Plymouth, New London, Windham);
- have a household income greater than US\$50,000; and
- be aged 25–65.

The survey data were collected using proprietary survey sample panels. A random stratified sample methodology was used, followed by weighting to ensure the sample represented the population in terms of age, gender, geography and region. The sample was modelled using 2020 US Census data.

The research results revealed that Rhode Islanders aged 25–39 were more apt to take advantage of the city than other cohorts. They preferred visiting restaurants (78 per cent), followed by shopping, while parking (40 per cent) was the largest reason for not visiting. Half stated that the top sources for local destination information are social media, followed by the news (48 per cent) and referrals from friends, family and colleagues (46 per cent).

Proprietary data from the study provided a clear picture of the target audience's needs and barriers to visiting Providence. The research found:

- The Net Promoter Score (NPS) for Providence, a key metric in understanding the likelihood of promotion, is 2. This score, calculated by subtracting the detractors from the promoters, provides a clear indication of the city's appeal. Thirty-one per cent of respondents were city promoters, while 29 per cent were detractors, leaving 41 per cent of suburbanites with a neutral view

of this urban area (Figure 1). Those who positively perceived the city appreciated its small size and urban feel. However, those who did not recommend visiting the city were concerned about safety and parking, with some stating that other cities in the surrounding area, like Boston, offered more activities.

- Many respondents (71 per cent) mentioned that restaurants were a reason to visit Providence. They mentioned that the city had a diverse restaurant scene; however, those who went to these dining venues did not frequent the city more than others.
- Providence was also strongly associated with the event 'WaterFire', which was the third driver of city visitation after dining at restaurants and shopping. WaterFire is an event that includes an installation of over 80 bonfires located on the city's three rivers. Torch-lit vessels travel down the river while music from around the world is played.<sup>17</sup> The majority of respondents (81 per cent) stated they dined at a restaurant the same day as they attended the event.
- Younger visitors were more likely to recognise the city as a cultural hub, while older residents were less likely to share the same sentiment (25 per cent vs 16 per cent).
- Half of those who work in downtown Providence do not take advantage



Figure 1 Likelihood to recommend downtown Providence, RI as a local destination

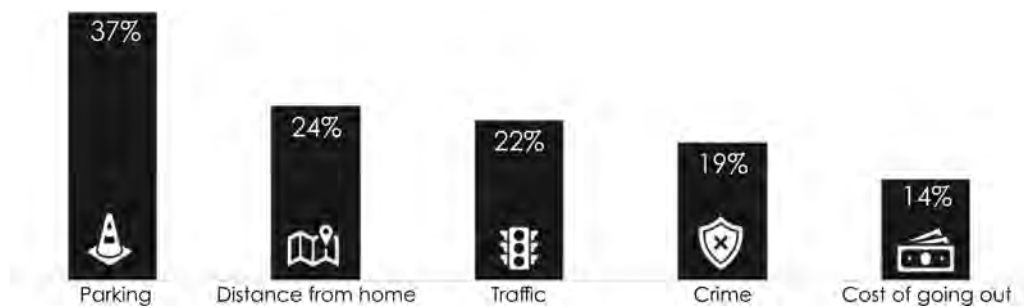


Figure 2 Reasons most commonly given for not visiting downtown Providence, RI

of the amenities the city offers after hours. Restaurants are working to motivate these working professionals to stay.

- Difficulty with parking (37 per cent), distance from home (24 per cent), traffic (22 per cent) and crime (19 per cent) are critical reasons keeping visitors away (Figure 2).<sup>18</sup>
- More than one-third of Rhode Island residents (37 per cent) agree that Providence is an unsafe city.

Armed with this information, PWCVB developed a year-long strategic marketing campaign to promote downtown Providence to a target audience of those within a one-hour drive of the city. Its goal was ‘to position downtown Providence as a safe, welcoming, vibrant destination for residents and visitors’. The campaign began in June 2023 and wrapped up in June 2024.

Channels deployed during the campaign have included:

- *advertising*: a comprehensive campaign including digital assets, billboards, over-the-top/streaming and search;
- *public relations*: pitches and releases highlighting downtown assets and events; an op-ed by the PWCVB president highlighting the need to support downtown;

- *web*: a dedicated landing page featuring downtown assets, dedicated blog posts, a more comprehensive guide to parking facilities, etc;
- *social media*: content dedicated to downtown events and assets, with an emphasis on winter activity, as those have been the months with the most need; and
- *collaborative efforts*: window clings with QR codes that lead to the downtown web assets.

The research provided by Provoke Insights provided clear steps on what PWCVB should do. The PWCVB began with the easiest fixes — adding more online information about parking and making it more prominent on the GoProvidence.com website, weaving in more photos of the city’s Downtown Improvement District’s ‘Clean and Safe’ team to send a subtle message about safety, etc.

In developing the overall campaign, PWCVB worked with North Street, a marketing firm with offices in New York and Rhode Island. The marketing firm used the research as a roadmap to devise a unique strategy. The goal was to personalise the city centre, by highlighting the people who live and work there and by offering ample options to craft a unique itinerary specific to the visitor.



The campaign, called 'Downtown is Your Town', focused on several residents and workers in the city who shared their picks on dining, shopping, events and attractions. The campaign profiled a broad range of people, including an executive, an actor and a small business owner. They became the faces of the campaign, appearing in online advertisements and social media posts, as well as on the web landing page (Figures 3–5).

Data gleaned from the Provoke Insights research showed that negative perceptions of Providence were inherently local, with those outside Rhode Island having either positive or neutral responses. PWCVB utilised

media relations efforts to attempt to shift perceptions, meeting with reporters who cover downtown, walking them through key points of the research and highlighting the collaborative nature of the work being done to enhance the city's vibrancy. The chief executive of PWCVB penned an op-ed on a local news website encouraging locals to revisit downtown.

In addition to marketing existing resources, PWCVB and its partners developed events that drew more people into the centre of the city. For example, a group of arts organisations developed activities around the theme of illumination, which were then marketed as a holiday event under the umbrella,



Figure 3 Display ads from the campaign



Figure 4 Outdoor billboard from the campaign

A collage of advertisements from The Providence Journal. The top section features a woman, Lisa, smiling in front of a boutique. The text reads: "Downtown Providence is Your Town. Meet Lisa. As an interior decorator and owner of Homestyle, a wonderful and whimsical boutique on Westminster Street, Lisa has an eye for the original. If you're looking for a holiday gift for someone special or just fresh inspiration for your own office, Lisa's style makes Downtown visitors feel right at home. Plan your Providence visit today at: DowntownPVD.com. PVD DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE". The bottom section features a rooster logo with an anchor and a speech bubble that says "100 WAYS TO BUY local RI". The text reads: "This holiday season, keep it local and support Rhode Island's renowned restaurants, eclectic shops, and art organizations and fun family attractions. Visit BuyLocalRI.org for 100 Ways To Buy Local throughout the state. Find ideas for shopping, dining and things to do in every corner of Rhode Island. FIND OUT MORE AT BuyLocalRI.org". The bottom of the collage includes logos for GoPVD, Bank Newport, Dave's, and Rhode Island Foundation.

Figure 5 Advertisements in The Providence Journal



**Table 1:** Campaign results

<i>Metric</i>	<i>Increased by</i>
Website sessions on GoProvidence.com	3,000.0%
Google organic search to GoProvidence.com	290.0%
YouTube video views	416.0%
YouTube video shares	31.5%
YouTube watch time	139.0%
Facebook followers	8.6%
Facebook post engagement	60.0%

Data compares July 2023–June 2024 vs July 2022–June 2023

**Table 2:** Campaign results vs industry norms

<i>Media type</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Travel &amp; hospitality norm</i>
E-mail marketing	11.15% click-to-open rate	8.70% click-to-open rate
Digital display	0.51% click through rate	0.47% click through rate
YouTube	1.21% click rate	0.78% click rate
Facebook	2.56% click rate	0.90% click rate

‘Three Nights of Light’. Using the proven draw of WaterFire to attract visitors, other activations in the downtown core spread people throughout the city. Corporate sponsorship underwrote a large part of the marketing programme.

PWCVB also used budget for window clings bearing QR codes that led to the downtown landing page on its website. Businesses in the city centre have committed to displaying the clings.

## RESULTS

The campaign has been a demonstrable success, with increased website usage, search, YouTube and Facebook (see Table 1). The campaign has also surpassed several industry standards across multiple channels (see Table 2).<sup>19–22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As the results show, Providence, Rhode Island, is an example of a city overcoming the hurdles of a

post-COVID world. Investing in research and brand strategy was critical in helping PWCVB increase positive perceptions of the city and bring more traffic downtown. A diverse media plan made Providence seem more than an occasional dining destination. Rhode Islanders and neighbouring locals took notice of these communications, utilising PWCVB’s media and tourism assets. In turn, these campaigns and the rotation of fresh and lively events helped attract visitors to learn more about what the city offers. Furthermore, influential media outlets such as *Vogue* actively promote visits to Providence, underscoring its appeal and cultural richness.<sup>23</sup>

Other cities considering driving growth by targeting their suburban population should invest in market research before developing an advertising campaign. Research will ensure that the marketing efforts help maximise the return on investment.

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