



BLOWING ROCK

Tourism Development Authority

Year-End Report 2017

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The mission of the Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority is to develop and promote travel and tourism to and within the town of Blowing Rock by executing a strategic marketing plan with the goal of increasing the number of overnight guests and extending the traditional tourist season.

2017 In Review

From the Director:

2017 saw several opportunities and challenges throughout the year and regardless of the calendar year-revenue number, the year should be considered a success. It is believed that the fiscal year will end near flat if not just above f/y '16-'17 in revenue.

At the start of the year we saw Chetola lose more than 100 condos in the rental pool and reduce our overall inventory by more than 10%. Because these units are larger and more expensive to rent, it had a more damaging effect on occupancy tax collections than would a cheaper rental unit. According to Smith Travel Research, in North Carolina year-end hotel/motel occupancy was -2.3% compared to 2016 but was still the second highest annual occupancy on record. Second to last year's record. The state also saw an increase of room supply of 2.5%. The use and interest in alternative lodging such as AirBnB, Home away and VRBO continued to grow in 2017. We started looking into monitoring the use of these properties and have contracted with STR Helper to help us in discovering and monitoring this rental type.

The TDA was busy throughout the year implementing new technology for the visitor thinking of Blowing Rock as a destination and for those already in town. We updated the main website www.blowingrock.com with new imagery, responsive design and the ability to book a room directly from the homepage. New electronic interactive kiosks were installed on Main Street at The Martin House and at the parking deck on Wallingford Avenue. The kiosks are unlike any others in the area and provide up to date, relevant information that customers are searching for. Having the ability to play video and connect to the web gives us great opportunities for promoting events. The parking deck on Wallingford saw the installation of car counters and availability signage to ease the frustration of parking areas being full and without warning to incoming traffic. Drivers are alerted that the parking area is either full or open before pulling into the facility.

On the media and public relations front, Blowing Rock enjoyed another banner year. Amanda worked on integrating new blogs into the website that helped to add relevant content throughout the site. This addition helps to validate blowingrock.com as a trusted source of information and boost referrals to the site. Media relationships remained strong throughout 2017 and earned media placement continued to be strong as ever. Paid media placement in 2017 was across traditional platforms such as print, radio and television but other new digital opportunities such as Pandora, I-Heart Radio, e-blasts, geo-fencing and social media ads were also utilized. Different media campaigns included outdoor/millennial, girls getaways, romance, meeting and events. Target audiences were women 35+, families 35-55, retirees 55+, millennials 25-35 and meeting planners.

Signs look good for the coming 2018 travel season. Many folks are still enjoying the bump from the National Parks Service 100 th Anniversary and the interest in the Blue Ridge Parkway. Groups like the Shriners will again be returning to Blowing Rock after being absent for a couple years. Small market meetings continue to have interest in Blowing Rock with properties like Chetola and Meadowbrook Inn while our destination wedding business is better than ever. According to Parks and Recreation, the American Legion building or Broyhill Park is booked nearly every weekend through mid-November with weddings. Destination weddings mean business. The continued interest from "digital influencers" and travel writers means that we should again see plenty of earned media and stories from regional or even national media. The completion of Valley Boulevard this year will be a positive for the town and give us a beautiful gateway into this region.

Tracy Brown
Director, Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority

2017 in Review

Notable in 2017

Named Top 10 Small Southern Town by USA Today
New Interactive Digital Kiosks
Parking Count System at American Legion Deck
Visitor Profile Study by Magellan Strategies
Redesign of BlowingRock.com
\$25k Support for new trees in Memorial Park
\$25k Support for Middle Fork Greenway
\$25k Support for Moses Cone Estate
Ski Season suffers a slow start
Earned Media in Southern Living, Our State Magazine, UNC TV, Trip Advisor, USA Today, Country Living Magazine, MSN, NC Business, Atlanta Journal, NY Times, Toronto Sun

USA TODAY Names Blowing Rock Third in List of 10 Best Southern Small Towns

PUBLISHED THURSDAY, MAY 11, 2017 AT 11:03 AM



Blowing Rock recently added another accolade to its already impressive kudos list when readers of USA TODAY voted the Town to the newspaper's 2017 Ten Best list of Southern Small Towns. Travel experts picked a list of 20 small towns from which to choose and readers voted Blowing Rock third.



"We're honored to be recognized by the travel editors of USA Today and even more excited that the readers, our visitors, voted for Blowing Rock. When you look at the list of towns recognized and competing for this recognition, it's pretty impressive. Every town listed is deserving. They're all beautiful, quaint towns. Blowing Rock is a special place to many folks across the country and polls like this just prove that. We're proud of our people and destination," said Tracy Brown, Executive Director, Blowing Rock TDA.



2017 Board Members:

Dean Bullis, Chair

(Tourism Representative)

Rob Dyer, Vice Chair

(Lodging Representative)

Lance Campbell

(At-large Representative)

Doug Matheson

(Council Representative)

Lorry Mulhern

(Lodging Representative)

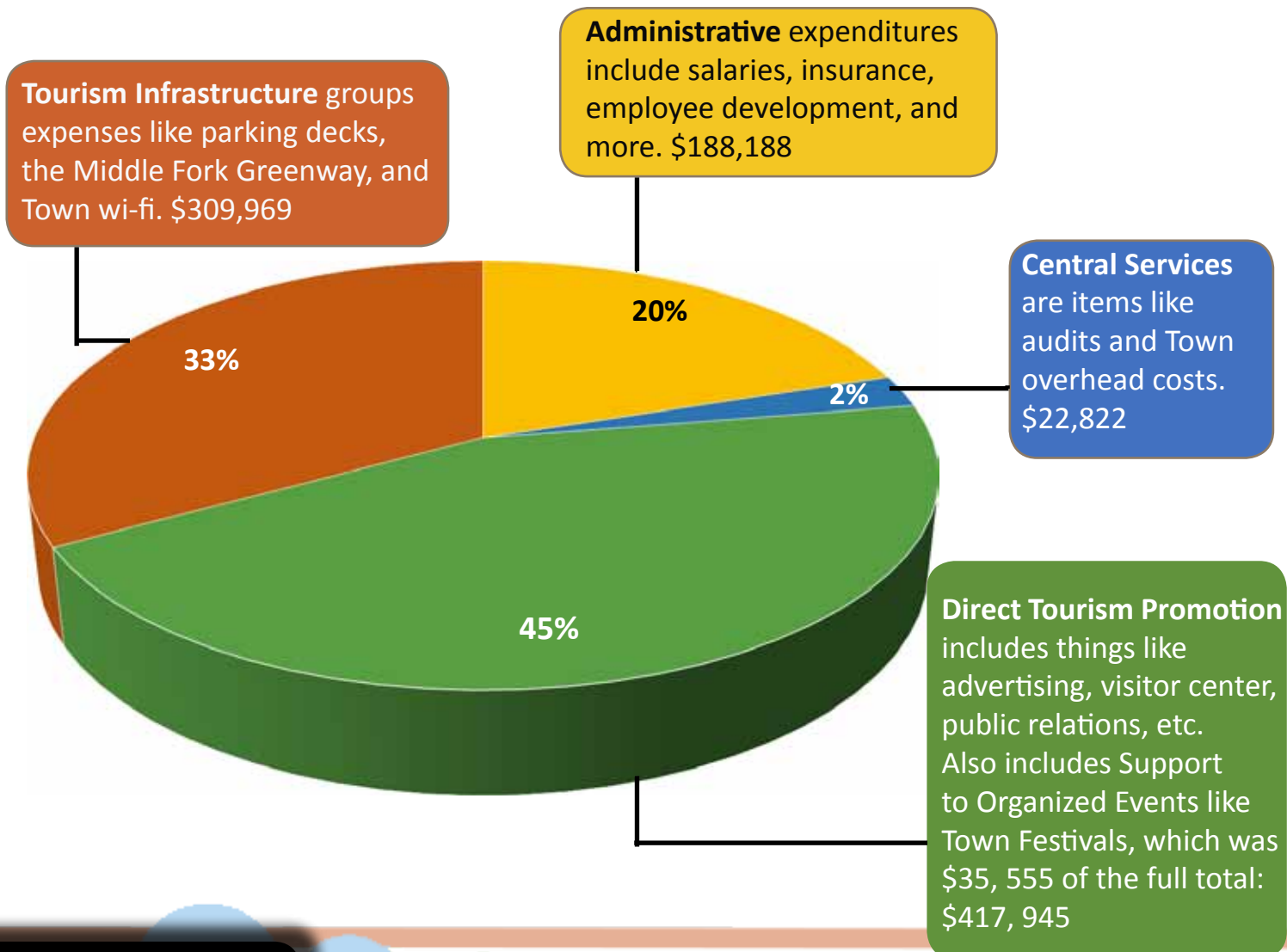
TDA staff provides a report to its board on a bi-weekly basis to keep members informed of activities.

Budget & Expenditures

According to TDA Bylaws, the Authority shall use two-thirds of the funds remitted to it by the Town Council to promote travel and tourism in Blowing Rock and shall use the remaining one-third of the funds remitted for tourism-related expenditures.

Expenditures Overview

The expenditure of revenues is budgeted with the TDA mission in mind. Expenses are assigned to five categories.



Revenues & Impact

The TDA is funded by a 6% occupancy tax that is paid by visitors that stay in overnight lodging. Tax collection was down on the calendar year by 9% due in part to Chetola condos being pulled from inventory for the first quarter of the calendar year. The condos represented nearly 11% of inventory.

Gross occupancy taxes in 2017:

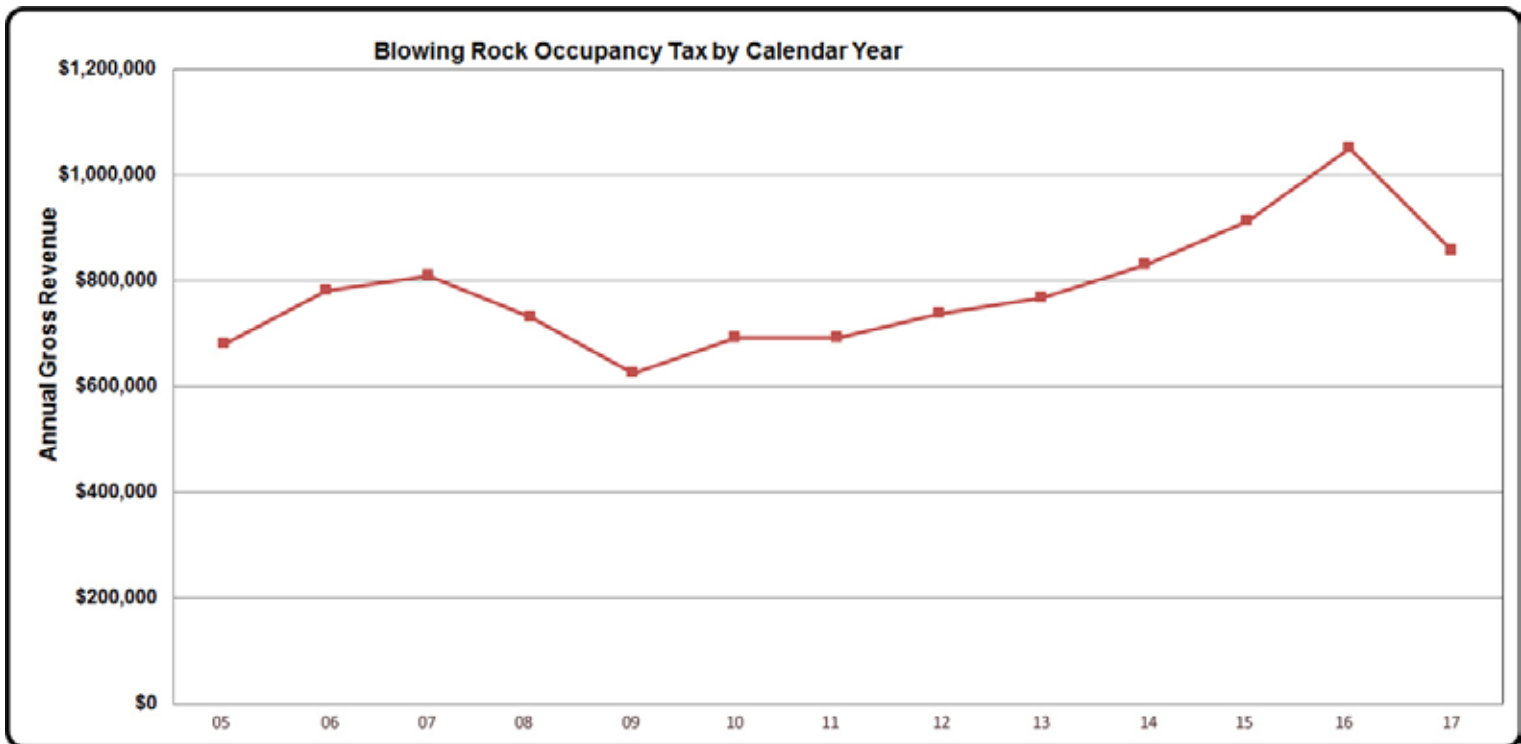
\$958,257

Direct sales at lodging businesses:

\$15,970,950

Visitor Spending in excess of:

\$47,000,000



Marketing & Advertising

Ads like these were placed throughout 2017 in media like:

WNC Magazine

Pandora.com

Charlotte Magazine

Small Market Meetings

Blue Ridge Outdoors



The TDA continued to use fresh imagery from local photographer Todd Bush in print and digital campaigns as well as editorial purposes. New television spots were edited for schedules in Charlotte, the Triad, and Triangle. New digital “geo-fencing” technology was used in and around Charleston.



Marketing & Advertising

10 campaigns, including General, Outdoor/Millennial, Holiday, Small Meetings, Winterfest, Savor, Art & Antiques Show, Blowing Rock Horse Show, Art in the Park, & Blowing Rock Music Festival.

27 different media outlets used for ad placements

12 billboards in three different Designated Marketing areas and Boone

The Blowing Rock TDA advertising schedule includes a mix of television, print, billboards, radio, digital, and media contests.

Major advertising campaigns are one of the ways the TDA provides event support for events in town.

In 2017, TDA advertising campaigns included Millennials as part of the mix.

Substantial portions of the media buy were focused on Special Events such as Winterfest, Art in the park & Savor.

Leveraged media and trade are a couple ways that the TDA stretches the media budget for added value.

Website & Social Media

www.BlowingRock.com 2017 vs. 2016

- .55%** increase in sessions
- 1.28%** increase in New Users
- 7%** increase in mobile acquisition

Completed a redesign of BlowingRock.com utilizing new images and content for better search engine optimization. The TDA works to keep the website up to date in look, design, and functionality.

461,933 Sessions
347,994 Users
1,115,144 Pageviews
 on www.BlowingRock.com



Email Marketing in 2017

- Blowing Rock has over 7,500 active contacts in our email database. Contacts sign up on their own on www.BlowingRock.com.
- Seven email blasts were sent in 2017, ranging across seasons, events, & topics. Features included WinterFest, Savor Blowing Rock, Symphony, Fall Color, Ski Season, and more.
- Average open rate for our emails was about 32%. Typical open rates for travel & tourism mailers are around 16%, according Constant Contact (the email management company the TDA utilizes).
- E-blasts were also sent through Charlotte Observer, Raleigh News & Observer, and the Greensboro News & Record to 50k-80k recipients per blast.

Social Media Mission: Engage our current visitors present on the platforms, and give them share-worthy material to attract new visitors.

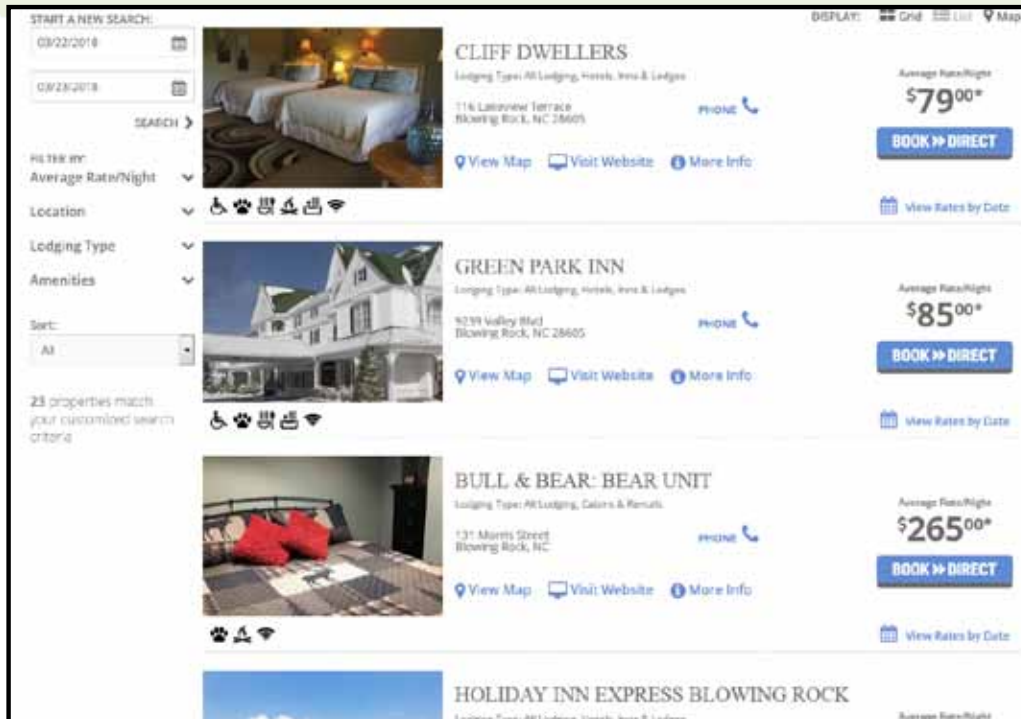


Facebook is our oldest social media platform, and had 57,117 likes at the end of 2017.

Blowing Rock's Instagram feed continued to increase followers in its third year.

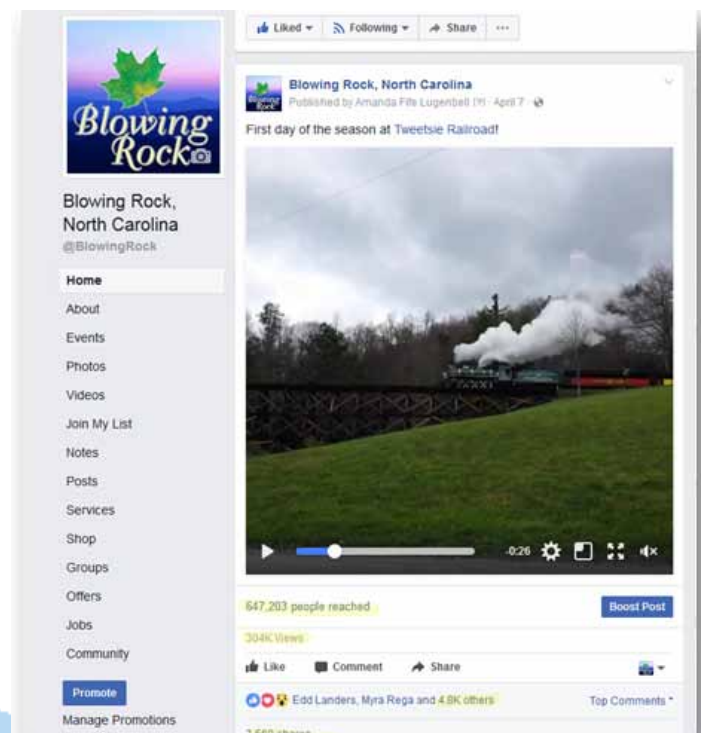
Website & Social Media

In 2017, the TDA contracted with JackRabbit Systems, which develops online travel software for destination and travel websites. The company provides BlowingRock.com with a BookDirect Search Engine Website that allows potential visitors to enter travel dates, view rates and availability from participating lodging properties, then book directly with the property through redirect links.

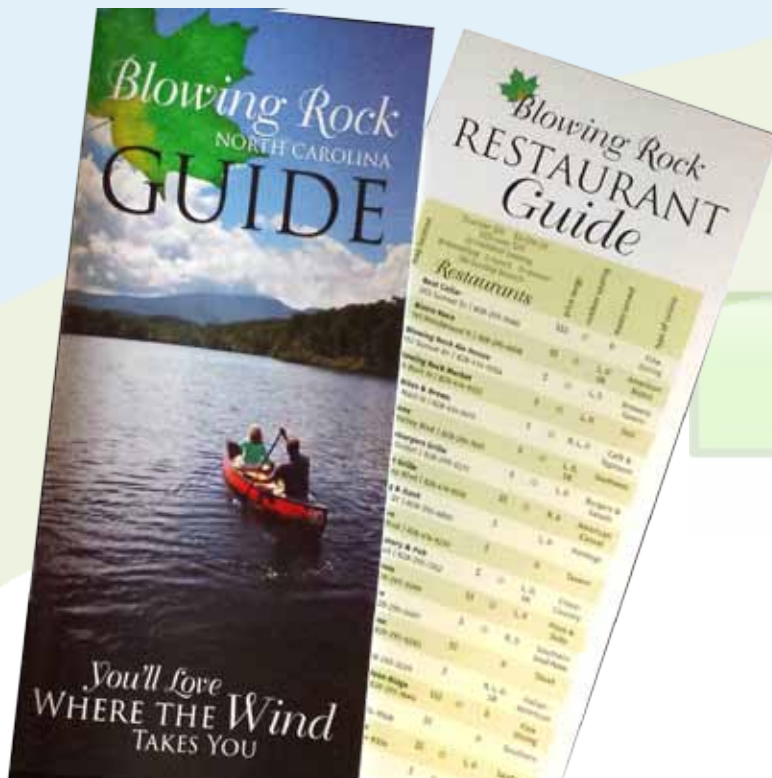


JackRabbit's BookDirect Search Engine went live in December of 2017.

Social media audiences continue to be responsive to images and video that are simple and authentic- like this unedited clip of Tweetsie's steam engine starting the 2017 season. Our efforts across social platforms center around featuring those unique things that make the Blowing Rock area special.



Operations & Internal Communications



The Blowing Rock Guide is our main printed informational piece.

80,000 were printed and distributed.

Each year, the Blowing Rock TDA creates several additional pieces in-house to be printed for distribution, including the Blowing Rock Community Calendar, brochures for visitors, the Restaurant Guide, and a number of event posters.

Surveys

Surveys were conducted at various times throughout the year to gauge customer satisfaction and business sentiment, including intercept surveys at Winterfest and Art in the Park.

An exhaustive Visitor Profile Study was conducted by Magellan Strategies that will help guide us in content development in all avenues of marketing.

The Tattler, in its eleventh year of distribution in 2017, gives **weekly updates** on local happenings and news that affects tourism-related businesses in Blowing Rock. The newsletter is now sent with an email management program and has an open rate consistently just over 40%, higher than the government organization average of 26%.



Community & Media Relations

- 16** press releases produced, plus several media alerts
- 10** travel writers & digital influencers hosted
- 1** Blue Ridge Parkway AAA Tour
- 81** confirmed media placements, representing an estimated “earned media” value of over **\$175,000**

In 2017, Blowing Rock was featured in **Our State Magazine , Travel and Leisure Magazine, US News and World Report USA Today, UNC TV NC Weekend, Southern Living Magazine, and MSN** among others.



Maintaining relationships with others in the media keeps Blowing Rock top of mind for potential updates and promotions!



Local

Guides and Maps continue to be available at the kiosks, Chamber, Town Hall and participating businesses.



The new digital kiosks allow for interactive displays and mapping to assist visitors.

Seasonal



A new Blog was added to the Daily Fall Photo postings on the website. Now in it's 9th consecutive year, the Blog and photos have again proved to be very valuable to weather stations and media regarding the color report, weather and travel conditions.

Networking

The TDA Staff attended several conferences & meetings to stay current in the changing landscape of Destination Marketing.

- Visit NC 365 Tourism Conference in Greenville, NC
- LEAD Tourism Conference at WCU
- Southeast Tourism Society Marketing College in Dahlonega, GA,
- Blue Ridge Parkway Association
- NC High Country Host
- Boone Chamber of Commerce
- Blowing Rock Chamber

Partnerships are key to being a successful destination in today's competitive environment. The Blowing Rock TDA continues to strengthen long lasting relationships while building new partnerships throughout the region. In 2017, participation on boards, work with research groups, and hosting guests all played a part in maintaining partnerships, like those with these regional organizations:



Plus: The Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce, Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, Boone Tourism Development Authority, Boone & Blowing Rock Area Lodging Association, Appalachian State University, Grandfather Mountain, Tweetsie Railroad, Appalachian Ski Mountain, The Blowing Rock, Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show Foundation