

SUCCESS STORY



PIGEON FORGE, TENNESSEE

Tourism isn't just the leading industry in Pigeon Forge, it's the city's only industry. When wildfires struck neighboring Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 2016, media attention quickly focused on the family vacation destination. While 14 lives and 2,000-plus structures were lost near the fire's epicenter in neighboring Gatlinburg (located six miles south), Pigeon Forge was comparatively unscathed with no fatalities and none of its many businesses experiencing any operational interruptions. Media coverage and, most significantly, consumer perceptions were quite the opposite. Stories across social and traditional media outlets depicted Pigeon Forge as engulfed, inaccessible and, in many visitors' eyes, non-existent.

For businesses and their employees, both of whom rely on the more than 10 million people who visit Pigeon Forge each year to watch shows, ride coasters, sleep in overnight accommodations, dine in restaurants and spend money, the immediate aftermath was grim.

The Pigeon Forge Department of Tourism, along with city officials and the department's marketing agencies, acted quickly and concisely with a comprehensive response plan that focused on a simple message—the city was open for business.

While late November and December are typically spent preparing for the following year's new tourism campaign, officials in Pigeon Forge quickly pivoted to a "Come See Us Now" mode, marketing a very direct and intentional message via radio, television, social and earned media outlets to inform and ensure visitors that Pigeon Forge not only wanted but needed guests.

IMPACT STATEMENT

The Pigeon Forge Department of Tourism immediately took the lead in correcting misperceptions by leading the effort to inform consumers that the popular family vacation destination was indeed open for business following the November 2016 wildfires.

Approximately 6,000 residents call Pigeon Forge home but more than 10 million people visit each year.

In 2017, Pigeon Forge marked \$1.3 billion in tourism revenue, the city's sixth record-breaking year and its third to exceed one billion.

Wildfire recovery marketing efforts garnered more than 150 million impressions and an 80 percent improvement among target prospects' travel intentions to Pigeon Forge between the months of January and March 2017.

Multiple efforts were deployed to get eyes and ears on the ground in Pigeon Forge: a print outlet writers' tour, a blogger tour comprised of key influencers, radio DJ remotes broadcast live from various attractions, and children of television anchors in key feeder markets were invited to produce "kid reporter" destination stories.

"In the hours and days immediately following the wildfires, we realized that people everywhere, but especially within our 300-mile drive market, thought that Pigeon Forge was gone," said Pigeon Forge Department of Tourism Executive Director Leon Downey. "To keep our tourism industry alive, we first had to educate and inform everyone that Pigeon Forge was, in fact, still here."

As donations of everything from diapers to bottled water poured in by the semi-truckload from across the country, Downey said that, while these everyday essentials were much needed and appreciated, visitation was one of the best ways to help Pigeon Forge. In January 2017, Downey made several trips to television stations in feeder markets to spread the news and spent a day doing 26 back-to-back television interviews against the backdrop of The Island in Pigeon Forge, all to reinforce that the destination was ready to welcome guests.

The city's 2017 first quarter gross revenue was down slightly but rebounded in April, posting an eight percent increase for the fourth month of 2017, an uptick that continued and culminated with another record-breaking tourism season in Pigeon Forge.



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