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THE GROWING ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN TOURISM MARKETING

In early November, marketing and public relations professionals from tourism industry offices across the United States attended the Second Annual Symposium on the Use of Social Media in the Tourism Industry ("Social Media Tourism Symposium," 2011). The topic of the conference speaks to a growing trend in tourism promotion. Attendees focused on best practices for interacting with consumers via social media channels—an important skill, as social media is fast becoming one of the most vital, cost-efficient tools in tourism marketing. Effective use of social media has been proven to boost the number and length of visits, as well as visitor satisfaction and number of return visits.

Destination Marketing Organizations and Tourism Marketing Strategy

The tourism industry as a whole encompasses a variety of different service and consumer product industries. One type of tourism office is a destination marketing organization, or DMO. The goal of DMOs is to increase tourism to a particular city, state, or region. DMOs seek to achieve their goals by branding the area as a whole and advertising that brand; promoting specific institutions, restaurants, accommodations, attractions, activities, and events that take place in the area; and offering information and assistance to visitors.

The Growth of Social Media

Social media, which Merriam-Webster defines as "forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content ("Social media," 2011)," has seen exponential growth during the past several years. In September 2005, 16% of 18-29-year-old internet users were social networking site-users; by May 2010, this number had grown to 86%. Likewise, between September 2005 and May 2010, the number of 30-49-year-olds, 50-64-year-olds, and 65+ year-old internet users using social networking sites has risen from 12% to 61%, 7% to 47%, and 5% to 26%, respectively (Henrikson, 2011).

Measuring Social Media Influence

Gammet Interactive compiles "How Social is Your DMO," a quarterly ranking of state DMOs. Each state's website and social media offerings are rated on the basis of three factors: usage of social media tools, content, and user engagement. In order to measure these factors, Gammet analyzes each state's DMO presence in the following areas: Quantcast, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, user-generated reviews, content sharing, blogging, backlinks, geo-location, and mobile. As social media has evolved during the past two years, Gammet has adapted its ranking algorithm to include emerging technology trends. In the most recent "How Social is Your DMO" ratings, published in July 2011, Florida ranked first. Before this, in Q2 2011, Michigan placed number one on the list (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Quantcast. Quantcast is a site that measures site traffic. In determining the social ranking of DMOs, Gammet looks to see if the DMOs site is Quantcast certified. Gammet explains that having a Quantcast-certified site is beneficial to DMOs because it allows DMO's to keep track of site traffic. "These numbers can then be accessed and utilized by stakeholders, legislators, and/or possible site sponsors/advertisers. It can also give a DMO some benchmarks in terms of how they measure up to other organizations in their geographic area, competitive set or budget structure (Gammet Interactive, 2011)."

Google. Gammet enters each DMO's location plus the phrase "vacation deals" into Google search, then DMOs are rated based on their position within the results page. A higher position in Google search results indicates a higher reach among audiences looking for travel information about the area represented by each DMO (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Facebook. Gammet assesses each DMOs Facebook presence based on whether or not the DMO runs a Page and how many "Likes" the page has received, as well as the quantity and recency of photos (posted both by the DMO and by site users), videos, and textual interactions with fans. Gammet also checks the homepage of the DMO's site for a link to the DMO's Facebook page; if such a link exists, the DMO is awarded points. The existence of a Facebook link on the homepage of the DMO's website helps drive traffic to the DMOs Facebook page, and allows for greater integration between the website and social networking platforms within the DMO's online presence (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Twitter. Gammet analyzes each DMO's Twitter stream in terms of the number of followers, the number of times the DMO was "listed," and several Klout influence scores to measure engagement. Klout, which is a service available from www.klout.com, measures the number of people influenced by an individual or brand's social networking behaviors, the amount of influence exerted by the individual/brand, and the influence of the other individuals/brands in the network. As with Facebook, Gammet checks for a Twitter link within each DMO's site, and awards points if such a link exists (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Flickr. Gammet checks whether or not DMOs run a branded account on Flickr; if such an account exists, points are awarded. Points are also awarded for an account created by the DMO for the particular destination, and points are increased as number of photos increases. Additionally, each DMO receives points for the number of images that have been tagged with the name of that DMO's state (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

YouTube. Gammet explains, "in order to receive points for YouTube, the DMO will have had to create an account or channel for destination and upload videos to create viral buzz. We measure the score based on the number of videos on the YouTube page and the number of subscribers to that specific page (Gammet Interactive, 2011)."

User-generated reviews. Gammet awards points to DMO sites that feature user-generated content, reviews, and/or testimonials. Points are also awarded to DMOs that incorporate reviews and ratings from third-party sites to boost consumer confidence in the state's image and brand (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Content sharing. The ability for a user to share site information with friends or family members facilitates word of mouth promotion. Gammet checks to see if each DMO website offers one or more tools "that [make] it easy for the user to share the information with their friends (Gammet Interactive, 2011)."

Blogging. Gammet deems DMO blogs a "very important" element of social marketing strategy and explains their analysis of the blogs as "based on recognition of the blog on the website and/or if there is a news or information feed frequently updated, along with an area designated consumer/user comments. There will also

be more points awarded if the blog had been updated frequently with consistent content. This period we added in blog comments for the last three posts to help measure engagement (Gammet Interactive, 2011)."

Backlinks. Backlinks within a website boost search popularity and offers insight into the amount of content from the site that is being referenced elsewhere on the internet. Generally, the higher the link popularity and number of backlinks a given site has, the more the information from that site is being shared. Gammet uses Open Site Explorer, a SEOmoz product available at www.opensiteexplorer.com to measure link popularity and backlinks for each DMO site (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Geo-location. The analysis of geo-location social media efforts will likely grow in future "How Social is Your DMO" reports, as the current algorithm includes points awarded for participation in a geo-location-related program and the presence of a geo-location link on the DMO's homepage (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Mobile. With the popularity of smartphones and tablets ever on the rise, Gammet recognizes the importance of DMOs maintaining user-friendly apps and/or versions of their websites optimized for mobile users. In addition to awarding points for the presence of a link to a mobile site on the DMO's homepage, Gammet searched for the DMO using an Android mobile device to try to find a mobile site for the DMO. In order to measure the success of a DMO's app(s), Gammet awarded points for any app linked to the DMO's website. Gammet also searched the Apple iTuens Store and the Android Market for apps related to each DMO, and awarded points for any apps found (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

Case Study: Pure Michigan Facebook Campaign

Arguably the most recognizable name in social media, Facebook, "a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family, and coworkers (Facebook, 2011b)." Facebook has more than 800 million active users, more than 50% of whom log on to Facebook once or more per day (Facebook, 2011c). Facebook offers businesses and organizations several tools to reach their target audience and foster positive relationships between brand and consumer. Businesses can create a facebook "Page" for free; Facebook defines a Page as "a space to interact with your fans, get to know potential customers and build a community." Consumers and brands take part in a virtual conversation via posts to the "wall" of the business/organizations Facebook Page. Pages can also be customized with photos, videos, and textual information about the business or organization; additionally, apps can be added to Pages for added features and capabilities to engage Page visitors (Facebook, 2011a).

Facebook offers free analytics tools for owners of Pages; information includes demographic information about fans, traffic rates for Page visits, user engagement and activity, and tips for improvement (Facebook, 2011a).

Because of the prevalence of Facebook among internet users of all ages, Facebook is becoming almost a necessity for building brands and operating a business. Consumers use Facebook as a means of gaining information about a product or service, and rely on Facebook for interaction with the brand. Benefits of customer-brand interaction via Facebook go beyond the sharing of information; when someone is a Facebook fan of a product/service, he/she is 41% more likely to recommend that product/service to friends (Karr, 2011).

As previously mentioned, Michigan was awarded the number one spot in Gammet Interactive's Q2 2011 "How Social is Your DMO" report. Even though Michigan was bested by Florida for the top spot in the July 2011 rankings, Michigan once again received high social media ratings, placing second overall, and receiving the highest Facebook marketing score (Gammet Interactive, 2011).

As of December 2011, the Michigan Facebook Page includes frequent wall posts by Pure Michigan; the purpose of these posts are generally to update fans on Michigan news, share fun facts, and/or promote current deals and/or contests. The Page also sees daily fan interaction, as fans post photos, comments, questions, and other Michigan-related content. During the 2011 holiday season, fans are encouraged to post pictures of their Michigan Christmas trees. Fans can submit photos year-round for inclusion in special "fan photo" albums. Examples of album titles include "Pure Michigan Facebook Photos from Our Fans – November 2011, Michigan Sunrises and Sunsets – From Our Facebook Fans, and Pure Michigan Facebook Photos – October 2011 ("Pure Michigan," 2011).
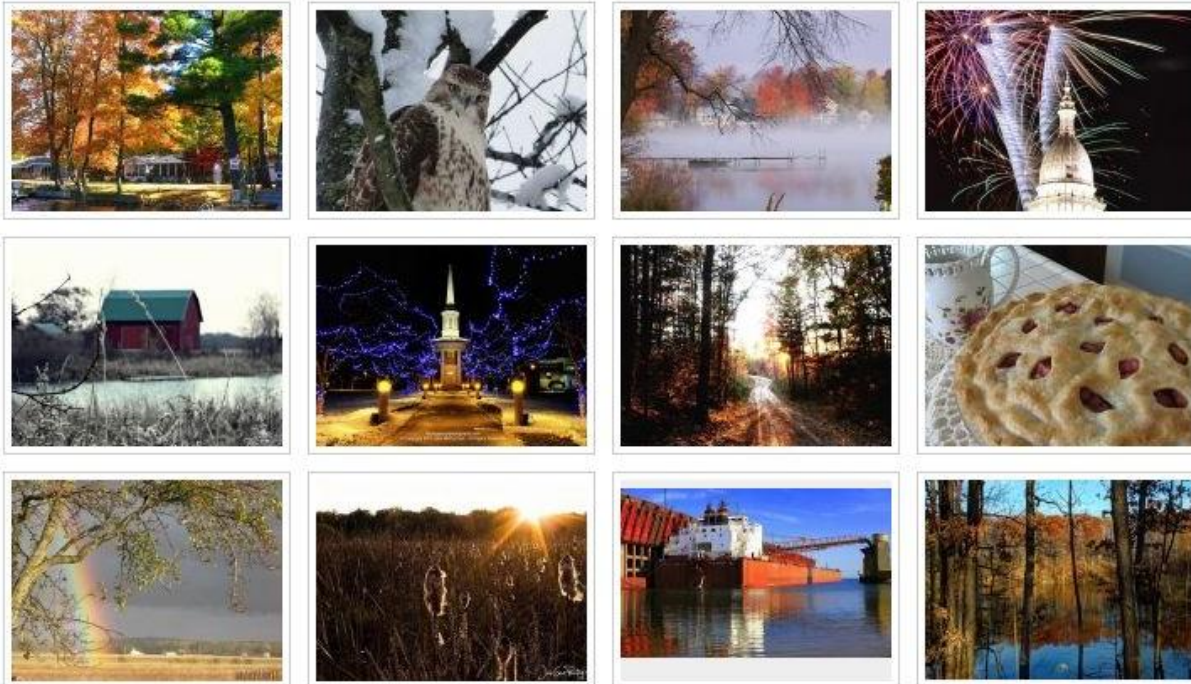
In the "Videos" section, Page visitors can view promotional videos created for the Pure Michigan campaign. The Pure Michigan Facebook Page also includes a section that allows users to read the @PureMichigan Twitter stream, with a "Follow" button incorporated into the page ("Pure Michigan," 2011).

In addition to adding the Twitter app to their Facebook Page, Pure Michigan developed two special apps to enhance their Facebook presence: "Welcome," and "Merchandising." Pure Michigan's Welcome app encourages Page visitors to "Like" the Pure Michigan, post content such as travel trips, sign up for the Michigan.org eNewsletter, watch current Pure Michigan commercials, take part in featured deals, and visit other social media sites run by the Pure Michigan team. Additionally, the "Welcome" section highlights upcoming events taking place around the state of Michigan ("Pure Michigan," 2011).

The Merchandising app features Pure-Michigan-themed products for sale, including glasses, apparel, and other items ("Pure Michigan," 2011).

Michigan was recognized in June 2011 for having doubled their Facebook fans—bringing the number of fans from 50,000 to 100,000—in less than two months ("Pure Michigan Facebook fans," 2010). Michigan's DMO brands the Facebook page for the state "Pure Michigan," and positions Michigan as "a year-round travel destination for those who live, work, or play in this great state. Michigan's Facebook presence has continued to grow in the past several months, becoming the first state tourism Facebook page with over 200,000 fans in March 2011 (Marketwire, 2011). As of December 2011, the number Pure Michigan fans has surpassed 333,000 ("Pure Michigan," 2011)."

According to data compiled by market research and consulting firm, ForeSee Results, the Pure Michigan Facebook Page has been extremely successful as a source of information and a motivating factor that increased the number of travel plans to visit the state. According to the ForeSee findings, "nearly three quarters of the Pure Michigan Facebook fans learned about places and activities in Michigan they did not know about [previously]...a third of those fans were inspired to travel to or within Michigan after reading the posts ("Pure Michigan Facebook fans," 2010)." This high rate of audience response is indicative of the power of social media as a promotional tool within the tourism industry, and Michigan's ability to effectively use social media in a tourism marketing campaign.

Case Study: Explore Chicago Foursquare Campaign

One of the newest trends in using social media for tourism marketing is utilization of location-based services—which allow consumers with GPS- and internet-compatible mobile devices to take part in social networking based on the people and services that are nearby at any given time. Examples of location-based social networking services include foursquare, Facebook Places, Yelp, SCVNGR and loopt. The most prevalent of these is foursquare, which debuted in March 2009 (Foursquare, 2011), and has grown to include more than 15 million users as of December 2011 (Wasserman, 2011). When a foursquare user "checks in" to a location using their smartphone, their location is shared with their network, and foursquare offers information about the location itself, as well as nearby stores, restaurants, and other attractions that the user may find interesting and/or want to visit. When foursquare users check into certain locations, they can earn virtual points and badges (Foursquare, 2011).

Because the information-sharking capabilities of foursquare and other, similar location-based social networking services is so closely linked to the goals of tourism marketing, the use of location-based social media is a natural choice for DMOs.

With the development of the Explore Chicago foursquare initiative in mid-2010, Chicago was one of the "pioneers" of using location-based social networking to enhance tourism promotions (Van Grove, 2010a; Van Grove, 2010b).

The Explore Chicago campaign encourages Chicago visitors to travel to different places in the city; as they visit specific attractions, visitors receive badges as rewards. The four badges—Chicago Blues Badge, Windy City Badge, Celery Salt Badge, and On-Location Badge—encourage visitors to experience four unique cultural aspects of the city of Chicago ("Explore Chicago: Games & social media," 2011).

Explore Chicago with Foursquare!

77 unique neighborhoods, 552 parks, and 7,300 restaurants all add up to countless Chicago check-ins on Foursquare! Explore Chicago's diverse neighborhoods as you earn one of four Chicago-themed Foursquare badges. Meet your friends at a historic blues club on the south side, search for the perfect Chicago-style hot dog on the north side, and re-enact your favorite scene at one of the many movie locations in between.

Windy City Badge

Our newest Chicago Foursquare badge takes you to discover hidden gems in neighborhoods throughout the city.

On Location Badge

Re-enact scenes from your favorite shot-in-Chicago movies while earning the On Location Badge on Foursquare! Choose from 7 movie experiences!

The Chicago Blues Badge

Meet your friends at an historic blues club or discover the studios where the electrified blues were first recorded while earning your Chicago Blues Badge!

The Celery Salt Badge

Search all over town for the perfect Chicago-style hot dog, or challenge your friends to a hot dog eating contest while earning Explore Chicago's Celery Salt Badge on Foursquare!

As visitors explore each Explore Chicago location, they can view "tips" such as historical facts and movie trivia ("Explore Chicago: Games & social media," 2011).

In addition to utilizing the current social media trends to engage visitors, the Explore Chicago campaign creates material to supplement and complement social media initiatives. For example, the Explore Chicago website offers descriptions of each of the foursquare badges and the included destinations, as well as downloadable audio tours that offer narration for each set of sites ("Explore Chicago: Games & social media," 2011).

Hint: Get the story behind each of the check-ins by downloading our free Chicago Blues Audio Tour, narrated by blues legend Buddy Guy!
www.downloadchicagotours.com

Historic Blues Sites

1. Historic Site of the IL Central Depot: The Black Ellis Island, Roosevelt & Indiana
Two granite blocks mark the former spot of the Illinois Central Depot, or the Black Ellis Island, where thousands of southern African Americans arrived to start new lives in Chicago - the Promised Land.

2. Location of Historic Maxwell Street Market, Maxwell Street &

For visitors who are less tech-savvy, the Explore Chicago site offers a thorough description of the foursquare service, as well as step-by-step instructions for how to use foursquare ("Explore Chicago: Games & social media," 2011).

What is Foursquare?

Foursquare is a FREE downloadable game for smart phones and other mobile Internet devices. Users sign up for an account and 'check in' at different attractions around the city: museums, cafes, bars, restaurants and parks, for example, to earn points and interact with other users by leaving tips for them to discover.

Download Foursquare here!

HOW TO UNLOCK THIS BADGE

1) Download Foursquare to your smart phone or mobile Internet device;

2) Follow Explore Chicago on Foursquare (required to earn this badge);

3) Pick a movie-themed experience at the left and "check-in" at five of the eligible locations.

New to Foursquare? Click Here.

Explore Chicago also offers a location-based activities to visitors do not have smartphones and/or are uncomfortable using location-based social media services. Explore Chicago's "Scavenger Hunts" are PDF files available for download directly from the Explore Chicago website. Visitors follow a path, filling in answers to clues along the way, and learning more about the city. If they successfully visit all the locations, visitors are encouraged to take a picture of themselves and upload it to Flickr. Ten Scavenger Hunts are available on the website as of November 2011 ("Explore Chicago: Games & social media," 2011).

Neighborhood Scavenger Hunts

Explore Chicago's neighborhoods in a new way with these fun and challenging scavenger hunts. Each hunt will take you to an exciting Chicago neighborhood where you'll discover architectural landmarks, public art, museums, parks, restaurants, shops and other unique flourishes you might otherwise overlook.

Lincoln Square Scavenger Hunt

URBAN EXCURSIONS
EXPLORE CHICAGO
★ ★ ★ ★

Explore: Take the CTA Brown Line to the Western stop.

A hip, urban neighborhood with Old World flavor, Lincoln Square offers a picturesque array of shops, restaurants, and bars to suit every taste. Named after Abraham Lincoln, this area was once home to German, English and Polish immigrants, and is now a destination for trendy shopping, dining and entertainment.

CLUE 1:

Lincoln Square's ties to Germany begin in the Western "L" station at the corner of Western and Lincoln Avenues, where a piece of the Berlin Wall is permanently on display. Just east of the station, at the intersection of Lincoln and Leland Avenues, there are many more references to Germany in the Lincoln Square Mural and Maypole. Painted by Lothar Sanchez-Speer, the mural depicts historical and iconic German buildings and landscapes, including the Liebfrauen Cathedral of Munich, Cologne Cathedral, the Alps and the Rhine River. Take a look at the blue and white maypole, the city's first, and a traditional component of German May Day and Midsummer celebrations. **Which two city officials are represented on the Maypole?**

Answer: _____

CLUE 2:

Head southeast on Lincoln Avenue and look for the former Krause Music Store (4611 N. Lincoln Avenue). Check out the elaborate terra-cotta ornamentation and the attention to detail, for which its architect is well-known. **This was the last commission of which famous Chicago architect?**

Answer: _____
TIP: If you have some extra time, continue southeast on Lincoln Avenue where you'll find the Old Town School of Folk Music, a performance venue, teaching facility and retail store. Welles Park, also nearby, hosts the Old Town School's annual Chicago Folk and Roots Festival.

Lincoln Square

CLUE 3:

Next, turn around and head back northwest on Lincoln Avenue, past the mural and maypole. On the west side of the street, you'll see Merz Apothecary, purveyor of bath, body, and natural health products since 1875. Further down, stop at Chicago Brauhaus, home of traditional German specialties and steins of cold beer, where you can celebrate Oktoberfest every day. **How many different kinds of schnitzel can you find on the menu?**

Answer: _____

CLUE 4:

Cross the street and walk towards the fountain in Kempf Plaza. Nearby, you'll see an ornate lamp post, a gift from the City of Hamburg, Germany. **This lamp is similar to the lamps that grace which famous Hamburg bridge?**
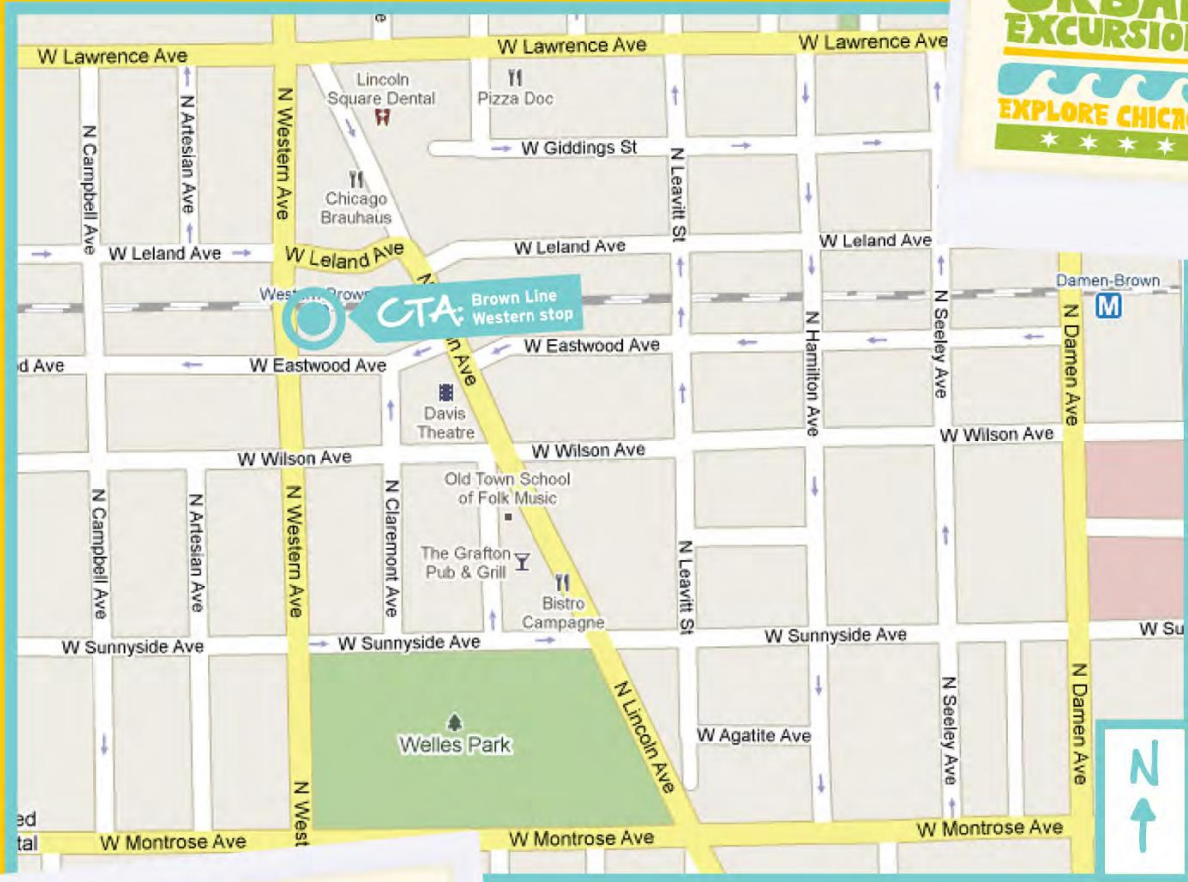
Answer: _____

www.ExploreChicago.org

Lincoln Square Scavenger Hunt

URBAN EXCURSIONS
EXPLORE CHICAGO
★ ★ ★ ★

Map labels:

W Lawrence Ave

N Campbell Ave · N Artesian Ave · N Western Ave · Lincoln Square Dental · Pizza Doc · N Leavitt St

W Giddings St

Chicago Brauhaus

W Leland Ave

Western Brown · CTA: Brown Line Western stop · Damen-Brown Ⓜ · N Hamilton Ave · N Seeley Ave · N Damen Ave

W Eastwood Ave

Davis Theatre · W Wilson Ave · W Wilson Ave

Old Town School of Folk Music

N Campbell Ave · N Artesian Ave · N Western Ave · N Claremont Ave · The Grafton Pub & Grill · Bistro Campagne · N Leavitt St

W Sunnyside Ave · W Sunnyside Ave · W Sunnyside Ave

Welles Park · W Agatite Ave · N Seeley Ave · N Damen Ave

W Montrose Ave · W Montrose Ave · W Montrose Ave

N ↑

Lincoln Square

Chicago Cultural Center

www.ExploreChicago.org

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Use the clues on the reverse side of this sheet to locate distinctive landmarks in Lincoln Square and answer a corresponding trivia question. Then take a digital photo of yourself to prove you were there.

2. Share your digital photos with us and other scavenger hunters by uploading them to **www.flickr.com/groups/explorechicagogames/**.

3. Visit **www.explorechicago.org/games** to see if your answers are correct or bring your completed form to the Chicago Cultural Center Visitor Information Center, where a Visitor Information Representative will confirm your answers.

4. Congratulations! You've completed your Chicago Neighborhood Scavenger Hunt. If you've enjoyed this one, find more scavenger hunts at **www.explorechicago.org/games.**

Chicago Cultural Center Visitor Information Center | 77 E. Randolph Street
Open daily, Monday – Thursday 8 am – 7 pm; Friday 8 am – 6 pm; Saturday 9 am – 6 pm; Sunday 10 am – 6 pm; and Holidays 10 am – 4 pm

One of the strengths of the Explore Chicago campaign is its integration of social media and DMO website. Visitors to the DMO website are encouraged to utilize one or more of Explore Chicago's social media offerings, and visitors to each of the Explore Chicago social media outlets are drawn back to the website for enhanced content. This strategy is working for Chicago, as reported by a study that is currently underway by Nichols Tourism Group (NTG) and the National Laboratory of Tourism and eCommerce (NLTeC) at Temple University. The preliminary findings of the study show that The Chicago Office of Tourism and Culture's website had a direct impact on consumer spending behavior and helped to fuel a $32 million increase in spending and 66 thousand additional room nights from extended stays in 2010. In addition, the number of planned return visits has increased (Dooley, 2011).

Conclusions

As social media continues to grow, so will the importance of harnessing it as a marketing tool for all industries. The tourism industry is primed to take advantage of social media outlets, as the industry has long relied largely on destination reputation, consumer opinion, spread of information, and positive word-of-mouth advertising. In many instances, such as the case of the Pure Michigan campaign and the Explore Chicago campaign, integration of social media into the marketing strategy of a DMO has shown remarkable, measurable results in increased rates of visits as well as visitor satisfaction. As a result, DMOs around the country are becoming more reliant on social media as a cost-efficient and effective tool for tourism marketing.

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