Dear Industry Partners:

As we reflect on this past year and what it’s meant to our industry, it’s important to acknowledge the devastating challenges experienced across every sector of tourism. We’ve lost businesses that represented bold dreams of entrepreneurs and the livelihoods of so many people, changing the face of our industry forever. However, in compiling the contents of this report, I quickly realized it’s equally important to focus on the tremendous opportunities that 2020 presented.

Collaboration took on an even deeper meaning as businesses came together with Visit Duluth to reassure visitors protocols were in place to safely welcome them to our city. Restaurants creatively maximized outdoor dining options, lodging and accommodations implemented additional sanitizing methods, attractions and retail adjusted capacities as we all continued longing for the return of events, concerts, conventions and sporting events. Competitors became friends, sharing information, ideas and best practices as everyone learned how to navigate the ever-changing guidelines and mandates.

Increased communication became more essential than ever before, and Visit Duluth is committed to ongoing endeavors to enhance and these initiatives. We proactively conducted visitor sentiment surveys to measure confidence and create customized campaigns that resonated with consumers. We sought partner feedback to ensure these efforts had the greatest positive impact on tourism while encouraging responsible travel. Weekly video updates to partners have carried over into 2021 as a means of providing the most relevant and timely information about what’s happening behind the scenes.

Our team’s gritty determination to lift up the hospitality industry, restore tourism’s vitality and help businesses thrive remains our focus as Duluth’s visitor economy emerges from the pandemic. In the true spirit of partnership, Visit Duluth is here to serve you and celebrate resilience as we all look to brighter days ahead.

- Anna
A Letter from the Board Chair
2020 was a year filled with hardship and uncertainty but shaped with collaboration and transformation.

While our industry faced insurmountable challenges, we came together as an industry to ensure Duluth was a safe destination for all visitors.

This past year was momentous as our industry faced and continues to overcome unprecedented restrictions not seen in most of our lifetimes.

With this comes opportunity as the Visit Duluth Board of Directors looks for new inventive ways to help revitalize our industry in the coming year.

Now more than ever we are committed to supporting, promoting, and expanding tourism in Duluth.

- Jesse & Brianna
The year started like any other. Then everything changed.

At the beginning of the year, our team was excited to continue building on the success of our “Find it in Duluth” marketing campaign and to start the initial stages of building the new VisitDuluth.com website. We were looking forward to hosting many meetings, conventions and sporting events and promoting our partners throughout the upcoming year.

When the pandemic was declared in March, our plans shifted dramatically. The crisis impacted almost every aspect of daily life on a global scale, and travel was shut down. Our team adapted by providing support for our partners and local businesses, working with planners to reschedule and revise events, and partnering with local, regional and national organizations to preserve the Travel and Hospitality industry.

As the summer approached and some restrictions began to ease, travel resumed on a limited basis. We created our new “Be Here” campaign to welcome visitors who were ready to travel and to showcase the many outdoor opportunities available in Duluth. We continued our efforts to support the industry and struggled to find ways to stabilize our organization after budget and staff cuts.

Early fall showed some signs of improvement, but the approach of the holiday season brought increased restrictions and additional challenges to our already devastated industry. As the year ended, uncertainty about the future remained, but we continued to be optimistic and dedicated to providing support for the recovery.
Flexible Marketing
A flexible approach to marketing in 2020 allowed us to respond to quickly changing conditions.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we shifted our marketing efforts to focus on keeping visitors aware of open businesses and helping our partners stay informed on the ever-changing guidelines and regulations and providing education and funding opportunities.

Promotional campaigns across all mediums were paused in April due to the shutdown. In June, when it was safe for businesses to open with limited capacity, marketing resumed. Canadian outdoor in Thunder Bay and Winnipeg remained paused for the entire year due to border closure.

Event promotion quickly changed to highlighting open businesses and showcasing attractions with various new campaigns. We featured attraction partners in outdoor digital billboards throughout the year and teamed up with several local organizations for marketing initiatives. We also worked in collaboration with regional DMOs to encourage safe travel to Duluth and Northern Minnesota with the hashtag #DreamNorthMN.

We created landing pages to announce when Duluth was open for business. We adjusted our partner listings to reflect current conditions and inform visitors about restrictions.

We partnered with Brand Point for digital distribution campaigns during the Summer, Fall and Winter seasons to increase reach and support awareness of Duluth as a fun, safe destination.

Duluth finished 2020 as the strongest performing market in the state. According to STR.
We launched a brand new campaign.

As the pandemic progressed, Mayor Larson delivered this message: “People will need to get back to this lake. This water. This place. To remember who they are and what really matters.”

We developed a new campaign concept to incorporate that message and to respond to visitor’s changing travel planning priorities and needs.

**THE ICON:**
The Be Here icon was developed to convey the message of being near “this water” and in “this place.” Be Here also ties to the concept of getting back to who you are, of being more present.

**THE TAGLINES:**
The taglines, shown in the examples, were crafted to engage visitors through messaging that inspires interest, invites exploration, evokes emotion, and showcases the uniqueness of Duluth.

During the summer months, our campaign featured the natural beauty of Duluth, outdoor recreation opportunities and Lake Superior. In fall, road trips and outdoor activities centered around fall colors were featured. As the cold weather approached, we transitioned to showcasing safe winter outdoor activities like Spirit Mountain and Drive Thru Bentleyville. We reached our audience through a mix of marketing mediums including tv, outdoor, media placements, digital and social media platforms.
As they were forced to spend more time at home, many Americans spent more time on social media platforms in 2020.

Our growth in organic reach (how many unique users see your page) in 2020 over 2019 illustrates that expanded audience.

Giveaways performed well with a common response from followers sharing their happiness to have something positive on their newsfeed. While our social voice changed through the summer due to staff furloughs and our post frequency decreased without a full-time social media manager, our channels continued to grow and our followers remained engaged.

Posts focused on Duluth’s outdoor beauty and green space, COVID-19 updates, and future planning. November and December were instrumental in gaining a new audience with Bentleyville being one of very few holiday events offered in the region.

How excited were people for the 2020 Bentleyville Drive-thru?

Very!
Video filmed, edited, and posted by Visit Duluth on November 16 became our most popular post in history, reaching 825,000 people organically with 43K engagement.

While we had modest growth in our followers (+9%), we saw significant increases in reach. 2020 annual reach was 2,029,606, which was up 80% from 2019.

Our Instagram followers grew by 21% in 2020, and we were able to expand our reach through the platform to 359,070, which is an increase of 50% over 2019.

We added a new platform to our social media toolkit in 2020 with the addition of a TikTok account, a popular video-sharing social networking service.
Media, Outreach & Communication
It was a very different year.

With travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders in place, earned media and media FAMs looked very different in 2020.

We hosted three travel bloggers in the summer resulting in content focused on Duluth’s outdoor recreation, family fun, and beer scene. With few strategic press trips, earned media declined from 2019, but was still substantial.

Our public relations strategy focused on support of our industry, monitoring of COVID-19 updates, and preparing for future FAM opportunities.

Snowmobile Stunts in the City

We were thrilled to host a site tour with Red Bull and Levi LaVallee in September to plan filming of his extreme ride through Duluth in 2021.

THREE TRAVEL BLOGGERS

We hosted three Travel Bloggers in 2020. Down from 24 hosted in 2019.

$6M AD EQUIVALENCY

2020 ad equivalency was down from $8 million in 2019.
Supporting the Recovery

Changing conditions called for quick action.

Responding to rapid changes brought on by the pandemic was all in a day’s work throughout 2020. We were part of several initiatives to support recovery in the industry.

COVID-19 Resources

At the start of the pandemic, we established space on VisitDuluth.com to post the most recent updates, share resources with our partners and support the local community. We included links to guidance from the CDC and the Minnesota Department of Health.

30 Days of Giveaways

The 30 Days of Giveaways campaign was Visit Duluth’s initial effort to support partners and local business while operations for many were rapidly changing. We launched on March 19, 2020 and over the 30 days, we gave away 45 gift cards that we had purchased totaling more than $3,000. Over the course of the campaign, we had nearly 25,000 submissions and 50,000 page views on our website. In addition to local press and substantial positive feedback on social media, we received shout-outs from industry partners, such as the Minnesota Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus, Explore Minnesota Tourism, and CrowdRiff.
Choose Your Duluth Getaway Giveaway
We created a contest offering visitors the chance to create their own perfect Duluth getaway by choosing when they would like to come and what they would like to do during their visit. The prize consisted of gift certificates to use once travel was safe and the winner felt ready to come to Duluth. It was a great way to promote several partners while showcasing the unique attractions, lodging, dining, and retail options Duluth offers. The contest generated 22,422 page views, giving the participating partners some amazing exposure during the three weeks the contest was active. We collected over 3,000 registrations and reached 244K people through our social media channels.

Strong Northland Restaurant Initiative
The Greater Downtown Council, Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce, Hermantown Area Chamber of Commerce, and Visit Duluth, along with many supportive partners, developed the Strong Northland program to provide an economic stimulus to our area through the purchase of pre-paid restaurant vouchers. With the participation of forty-four area restaurants, Strong Northland encouraged the public to support their favorite eateries, spend their hard-earned money locally, and remember that when we act together, we can make a tangible difference for our economy. The campaign was shared by all participants through email, social channels and on their websites.

Local Holiday Gift Guide
With COVID restrictions in place during the holiday season, we wanted to encourage support of our community businesses. In this push to shop local we created a “crowd-sourced” local holiday gift guide on Visit Duluth’s Facebook page. We asked visitors, locals, and Partners to share their favorite ideas with the goal of having the comment section become a list of local gift ideas for everyone to explore and SHARE. Over thirty businesses participated. In addition to the Facebook post, we also created a landing page on VisitDuluth.com with the suggested gift ideas and links to Partner pages.

Duluth Holiday Home Movie
Local musician, Teague Alexy, came out with a catchy new holiday tune mentioning Duluth called Christmas Bells, Holiday Drums (Jingle, Jangle). We worked with Alexy to create a music video to his song by asking our followers to share videos of enjoying winter and the holidays in Duluth. We edited the video together to create a holiday “home movie” of Duluth. We collected 20 follower video submissions and the final video resulted in 3.3k video views!
Conventions, Groups & Meetings
Communication was key.

The New Year started with our team eager to engage in new initiatives with meeting planners. COVID-19 impacted our efforts significantly. The focus became maintaining relationships with planners and our partners by connecting regularly through email, phone, and virtual meetings. Every effort was made to ensure support was there for them as we navigated through cancellations and changes.

Communication with planners was continuous regarding current health and safety guidelines and distributing information about our industry partner’s commitment to keeping guests safe. Information was shared through website updates, email campaigns, social media posts and industry articles.

In 2020, focus was placed on sponsoring virtual meetings and creating videos showcasing Duluth as a viable option for indoor spacing, outdoor spacing and how Lake Superior is big enough for all of us!

With increased levels of connection through virtual meetings, phone calls, email, social posts and emphasis on virtual tours, Duluth has been kept “top of mind” for planners.

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**BE HERE:**

**Brighter Days**
Email/LinkedIn Campaign was our first initiative to connect with planners that had business booked in Duluth. This was a way to say we are in this together.

**BE HERE:**

**Paths Crossing**
Email/LinkedIn Campaign was to stay connected. When the time is right for you to start planning, we are here for you.

Planners commented how seeing a beautiful Duluth image lifted them up and reminded them we are here for them in support.

**Holiday Card**
Sales Directors had the option to participate in a Holiday email card which featured each person enjoying a seasonal activity with a personalized message.
Shifting
Sports
It was a year of change.

The first quarter of 2020 started out strong with youth hockey and volleyball tournaments, the Northland Invitational Figure Skating Competition and First Robotics Regionals.

Things took a turn in March when COVID-19 started. Visit Duluth was scheduled to participate in two live marketing events that were canceled due to the pandemic. In mid-March, the Fastenal Parallel 45 Winter Festival as part of the Coop FIS Cross Country Ski World Cup in Minneapolis and in May, the Spring Cup Soccer tournament at the National Sports Center in Blaine did not occur.

With the uncertainty of COVID-19, sports venues closed and events canceled during Minnesota’s first shut down over many months. Beginning in late winter and continuing into summer, dance competitions, soccer and baseball tournaments, as well as mountain biking events, were canceled as city fields and trails were closed. Limited hockey tournaments were able to take place over the summer with strict safety protocols in place.

With the easing of restrictions in the fall, indoor hockey was able to safely resume for a brief period of time until the end of November, when another shutdown was enforced for the remainder of 2020. The Duluth sports community stayed strong and remained resilient!

These numbers reflect first and fourth quarter results.

No events were held during the second and third quarters.
Supporting our Partners
Helping visitors plan their trip.

The pandemic brought many changes to the Visitor Center. Our business office closed and communication with visitors transitioned to online and phone options only. Staff furloughs and steep budget cuts meant we could no longer mail out Visitor Guides. We continued to offer the guide in digital format.

Interest in Duluth stayed strong, and thousands of inquiries came from visitors seeking information about local safety guidelines and which businesses were open.

2020 Visitor Guide
39,576 Visitor Guides were distributed between January and March. Distribution ceased after the shutdown began in March.

Top Inquiries:
Countries: Canada, Germany, Netherlands
States: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan
Cities: Minneapolis, Rochester, Fargo, ND, Sioux Falls, SD, St. Cloud, St. Paul
Meet our Team
The 2020 Visit Duluth Team

Anna Tanski
President/CEO

Anne Bubacz Hamann
Director of Sports

Leah Byrne*
Director of Partnerships

Sheri Cosgrove
Director of Web Development and Design

Maarja Anderson Hewitt
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Kim Kervina*
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Hannah Peterson*
Sales Manager

Sue Mageau
Vice President of Marketing

Heather Morrow*
Sales Services Coordinator

Lori Steinbach
Visitor Services Manager

A Team in Transition

Changes in funding resulted in furloughs beginning June 15. By year-end, we permanently laid off four team members (indicated by*).