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# Visit Williamsburg's influencers campaign gains traction on social media platforms as Historic Triangle bounces back from pandemic

By ABIGAIL ADCOX  
VIRGINIA GAZETTE | AUG 24, 2021



FEEDBACK



Anna Hartman, 27, a lifestyle blogger who lives in nearby Providence Forge, stands outside of the Williamsburg Inn. Courtesy of Anna Hartman, @lifestylebyannaelizabeth (HANDOUT)

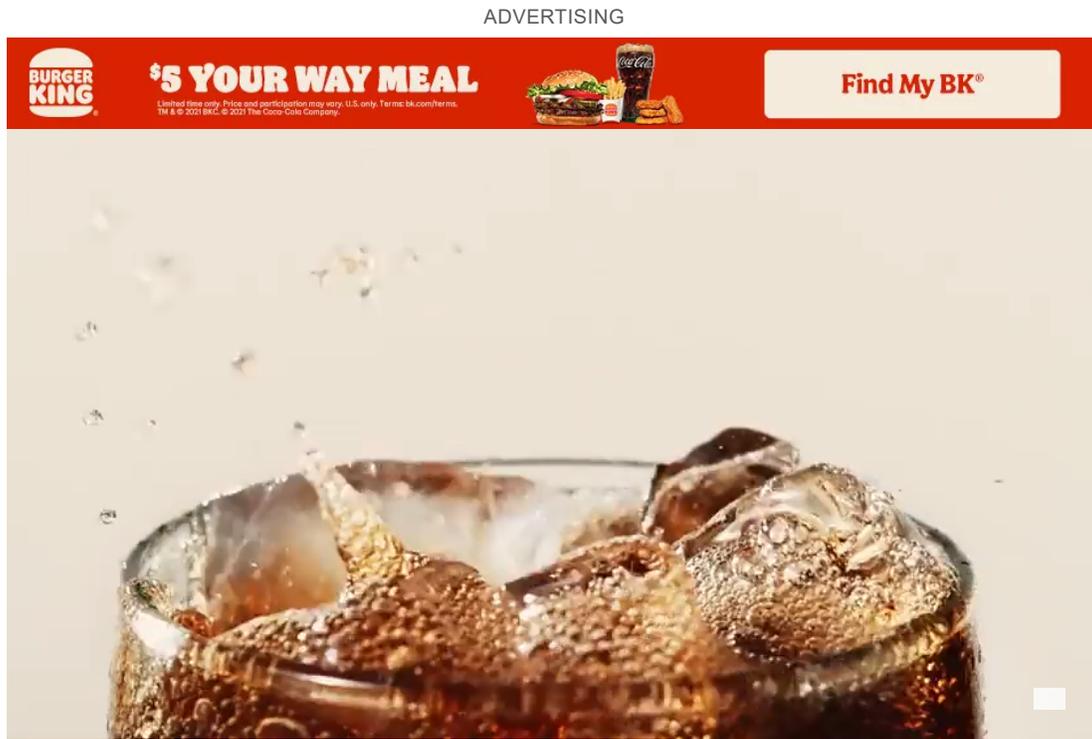
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Over a year into the start of the program, Visit Williamsburg is ramping up its influencer marketing program to attract visitors to the Historic Triangle through its out-of-the-box strategy.

FEEDBACK

Since launching in July 2020, they have hosted 37 influencers, including Olympic gold medalist Shawn Johnson East. Through the program, Visit Williamsburg [hosts influencers to the Historic Triangle](#), and in turn the influencers share their experiences via social media and blog posts.



Influencers are generally identified as individuals with a following on social media. This could be through creating content in the form of videos, posts, blogging or a combination. Sometimes, influencers specialize in areas such as lifestyle, food or travel.

“Influencers provide a deep level of engagement, allowing Visit Williamsburg to showcase a first-hand experience in an authentic way. They also increase awareness, connect the destination to potential new social media followers, and aid in content creation,” said Victoria Cimino, chief executive officer of Visit Williamsburg, in an email.

Visit Williamsburg, the destination marketing organization that promotes the Historic Triangle, coordinates trips with influencers. According to Cimino, the ad agency that Visit Williamsburg works with identifies influencers based on certain factors such as subject matter (travel, lifestyle), follower counts and geographic locations.



FEEDBACK



Rachel Lipton shares a photo of her treat outside of the Wythe Candy & Gourmet Shop in Colonial Williamsburg. Courtesy of Rachel Lipton, @liketheteaeats (HANDOUT)

Influencers are also compensated for their visit. According to Cimino, 7% of their paid media budget of \$9.1 million goes to the influencer marketing program, and they have spent around \$246,000 on the program so far this calendar year.

Cimino presented to the Williamsburg Tourism Council some of their most recent metrics during their July meeting. Cimino said that overall engagement across social media channels (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) is up 104% for the months of May and June. Since July 2020, Visit Williamsburg has also gained 11,980 new Instagram followers, an 83.1% increase, according to Cimino.

Overall, Historic Triangle tourism is rebounding from the COVID-19 pandemic and tax revenue is tracking higher than last summer's numbers.

During the tourism council meeting, metrics from the Smith Travel Research Report were also presented, which supplies data on the hotel industry. In May 2021, the occupancy rate was 47.2% in the Historic Triangle, which is calculated based on rooms sold versus available rooms. The rate is up compared to May 2020's occupancy rate of 13.7%. In May 2019, the rate was 54.8%.

Despite the increase from last year, meals and room tax revenue is still tracking mostly below 2019 numbers for Williamsburg from March to June, according to Williamsburg's July financial report.

In May, meal tax revenue in 2021 was \$622,045 compared to 2019's \$664,730. In June 2021, meal tax revenue was \$704,917, slightly up from \$701,214 in 2019.

Lodging tax receipts in Williamsburg were also down from 2019 revenue. In June 2021, lodging tax receipts totaled \$90,614, down from \$108,352 in 2019.

In James City County, two recent months have tracked above 2019 revenue numbers for the \$2 per room, per night lodging tax, according to data shared by a county spokesperson. In May 2021, lodging tax revenue was up to \$89,512 from \$76,633 in May 2019. In June 2019, tax revenue totaled \$91,312 while June 2021 was \$85,999.

Prepared food and beverage tax revenue, which is 4% of meal and beverage sales in James City County, is still tracking below 2019 revenue. In 2019, prepared food and beverage tax revenue, such as restaurant meals, reached \$822,683, compared to June 2021's \$783,533.

The Williamsburg Tourism Council is a [government organization created by statute](#) through the General Assembly in 2018. As a public body, the council is funded through sales and transient occupancy taxes and budget allocations from Williamsburg, James City and York.

FEEDBACK

The council receives funding from the 1% sales tax increase and \$2 transient occupancy tax, which was provided by Senate Bill 942. The bill, which was passed

County.

## Familiarization tours

The program aims to highlight different areas of the Historic Triangle, including restaurants, activities and more. Once an influencer agrees to the trip, Visit Williamsburg starts what they call a “familiarization tour.”

The tour is essentially an itinerary of things to do and places to eat within the Historic Triangle, which allows influencers to combine their personal interests with local businesses or attractions that would benefit from their visit and promotion. So far more than 120 industry partners across three municipalities have participated, according to Cimino.

Once an agreement has been made with an influencer, Visit Williamsburg will attract industry partners who are interested.

Adam Steely, owner of Illy Caffé and a partner in Blue Talon Bistro, said his businesses have hosted one to two influencers each month for breakfast, lunch and dinners.

“The great thing about Williamsburg is the experiential side of it ... it is easy to tap into the national awareness of Williamsburg as a historical site,” said Steely. “I think is difficult to convey through a print ad what the experience of coming to Williamsburg is like.”

Steely said that he supported the “out-of-box” approach, as it was different from typical media ads. When influencers come into one of his restaurants, Steely said they typically pay for their meals but the eatery will try to send a few extra plates for them to try different foods, free of charge.

FEEDBACK

## Sharing the experience

Sharing their honest, authentic experiences is a huge component of the influencer marketing program. Rachel Lipton, a 30-year-old food and travel blogger, visited the area last month through the program.

Lipton, who lives in Baltimore, said that Visit Williamsburg initially reached out to her and from there, they curated an itinerary. Though she is a full time social media manager for an education company, Lipton said her Instagram account, @liketheteaeats, is a hobby and an area for her to have fun.

Through her social media and blog, Lipton shares experiencing new cities through food. During her visit to Williamsburg in July, Lipton visited Charly's Airport Restaurant, Shoofly Dairy Bar, the Colonial Parkway, Historic Yorktown and more with her fiancé.

Before most meals, Lipton generally snaps a photo or 10, to capture the experience, and then later shares. Lipton said her and her fiancé have adopted a strategy where they will order two appetizers and split one entrée.

“The appetizer section is where the chef can flex their creative muscles ... but the entrees they're going to do a chicken, they're going to do a steak, they going to do a fish,” said Lipton.

Rachel Lipton's meal at Charly's Airport Restaurant. Courtesy of Rachel Lipton, @liketheteaeats (HANDOUT)

Many influencers also contribute to The WilliamsBLOG, which shares blog posts on topics including “Where to Fish in Williamsburg” and “Summer for Deux: 8 Outdoor Date Ideas in Williamsburg.”

According to Cimino, nearly 200 hotel bookings can be attributed to readers of The WilliamsBLOG.

Anna Hartman, 27, a lifestyle blogger who lives in nearby Providence Forge, has contributed to several blog posts including “Why You Should Celebrate the Holidays in Williamsburg” and “7 Key Elements to Planning Our Romantic Staycation in Williamsburg.”

FEEDBACK

Hartman said she receives a lot of direct messages through her social media platforms asking for recommendations, and she likes to direct them to blog posts which have links to destination sites.

“I think a lot of people, especially my age, think of Williamsburg initially ... as like a colonial historic spot and not really think about the restaurants and shops and stuff like that that is so unique to Williamsburg,” said Hartman.

## Multifaceted marketing strategy

The influencer marketing program is only one piece of Visit Williamsburg’s \$9 million media strategy, which works to attract visitors to the Historic Triangle.

Their media strategy also includes television, streaming audio, programmatic digital and paid social media.

Cimino said that marketing strategies are continuously monitored and optimized.

“All of Visit Williamsburg’s marketing tactics are rooted in data and research. The influencer marketing strategy is no different and continues to be a strategic component of Visit Williamsburg’s marketing plan,” said Cimino.

According to Dawn Edmiston, clinical professor of marketing at William & Mary’s Raymond A. Mason School of Business, the use of influencers for paid and unpaid marketing is not a new concept nor is it unique to the city of Williamsburg.

Edmiston said that whether cities attract influencers to the area through paid means, there are also circumstances where an influencer is promoting your area just by simply visiting and sharing their experiences.

Edmiston said that the use of influencers is “word of mouth marketing to the next level.”

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Though, Edmiston did stress that Visit Williamsburg should measure the impact of the program beyond social media metrics but also in future consumer behaviors.

One strategy that Edmiston suggested was offering special promotions to the followers of influencers and then tracking how many of those promotions are actually activated. This could be something like a hotel promotion, and tracking how many people booked a hotel and used an influencer's discount code.

“We need to build awareness of what makes our community special and the fact that they've chosen influencers who are very diverse and can see our community through different eyes, I think is really powerful,” said Edmiston.

For more information on the influencer marketing program and to view The WilliamsBLOG, visit [visitwilliamsburg.com](https://www.visitwilliamsburg.com).

*Abigail Adcox, [abigail.adcox@virginiamedia.com](mailto:abigail.adcox@virginiamedia.com), 757-264-8149*

Topics: Influencers, Visit Williamsburg, Williamsburg Tourism Council, Historic Triangle, influencer marketing program, marketing strategies, blogs, The WilliamsBLOG, Anna Hartman, Rachel Lipton, bloggers, blog, Abigail Adcox

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# 'It's cutting edge': In the Edge District, businesses, localities work to make area a destination

By ABIGAIL ADCOX  
VIRGINIA GAZETTE | OCT 26, 2021



FEEDBACK



FEEDBACK

The Edge logo beside a beverage from Column 15. Courtesy of Column 15 (HANDOUT)



Sandwiched on the corner of James City County, Williamsburg and York County, the Edge District has become a spot for foodies, brewmasters and more.

With more than 15 restaurants, retail and craft beverage producers, the Edge district — located where all three localities' boundaries meet around Merrimac Trail — is working to market the area as a destination for locals and tourists.

ADVERTISING



“So there’s a lot of this kind of becoming true neighbors, not just businesses next door to each other, but taking pride in a shared identity and then trying to encourage people to make the most of their time in the Edge District,” said Robby Willey, co-owner of Virginia Beer Co. and the Edge District’s liaison member on Williamsburg’s Economic Development Authority.

FEEDBACK

The area’s [branding efforts](#) first stemmed from a partnership between the three Historic Triangle localities and area businesses owners in 2019. Since then, new businesses have opened in the Edge District and marketing efforts, such as an official logo and website, have taken off.

Wiley said Jim Noel, economic development director for York County, held the initial group meeting between businesses and later sought and received funding for the initial branding efforts. Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency **awarded** \$600,000 to the city of Williamsburg to conduct environmental assessments around the district.

In July, representatives from all three localities got together for a Running with Scissors event at the Edge District which acted as their official opening. The event, which was hosted by the Greater Williamsburg Business Council, included a series of ribbon cuttings for businesses in the Edge district to celebrate the area's growth.

Last week, the Virginia chapter of the American Planning Association announced that the Edge District was the winner of the Holzeheimer Economic Development Award. In a news release announcing the award, APA Virginia said that the awards panel was impressed by the persistence of private and public stakeholders in the Edge District despite challenges arising from COVID-19.

“The Edge District is an innovative project that focuses its scope outside of geographically separated tourist districts and recognizes the potential of a multi-jurisdictional business corridor to provide a unique sense of place and revitalize economic growth ‘on the edge,’” according to the release.

Virginia Beer Co. did a special release in March 2020 called the "Double Breakfast Special" which is modeled after the interior of Shorty's Diner to help promote that they had reopened for takeout. Courtesy of Virginia Beer Co. (HANDOUT)

**Stephanie Heinatz, founder of Consociate Media which is working on the marketing for the Edge District, said that initially they held focus groups with the businesses to identify what they wanted to convey to the public about the area.**

Though initial marketing efforts were delayed last year because of the pandemic, Heinatz and her team have recently been working on the website and building a presence on social media, as well as rack cards and stickers promoting the Edge District in the community.

**FEEDBACK**

“Being able to come out on the other side of this pandemic and have like a unified brand to recruit more costumers and visitors to an area based on the fact that there is a lot to offer here,” said Heinatz. “I think it’s going to be a really positive thing for the businesses that are located there.”

Among business owners, there is also a shared sense of community that has resulted in partnerships, special beer releases, events and more.

Virginia Beer Co. has released several beers during the past two years promoting the Edge District and several of the neighboring businesses. In March 2020, they released a beer with graphics modelled after the inside of Shorty's Diner to bring awareness that Shorty's Diner had reopened for takeout.

This summer, they released a beer that mirrored branding for the Edge District around the time of the Running with Scissors event called, "Hi-Diddly-Ho, Neighborino!"

**FEEDBACK**

Virginia Beer Co. co-founders Chris Smith and Robby Willey brewed a special beer in the summer called "Hi-Diddly-Ho Neighborino!" It's an imperial sour ale that was released as an Edge District collaboration. Courtesy of Consociate Media

Down the road, Column 15, a coffee roastery, opened May 15 at their permanent location on Merrimac Trail.

James Kroll, co-founder of Column 15, said that having the area branded as a destination provides cohesion for promoting their business.

“Anything that helps one business helps all of them,” said Kroll. “It’s also made it a lot easier and simpler to approach other businesses and talk to them about doing direct partnerships that we can cross-promote.”

Both Kroll and Willey said that they have seen a number of customers visiting their business in addition to the others surrounding them, as well as actively recommending other businesses in the area.

“They go to coffee in the morning and then we usually recommend an ice cream from Shoofly, because we do a partnership with them where they do our nitro floats,” said Brittany Wyatt, who is apart of Column 15’s operations, wholesale and marketing team.

Joanne Stephans, co-owner and general manager of the Velvet Shoestring, a consignment store on Second Street, said that she has seen the development over the past 15 years and was excited when introduced with the idea of branding the area.

“I think as a community re-branding and just naming it, it does help,” said Stephans. “It is on the edge of Williamsburg and it’s cutting edge, you know, the culinary and our business is booming.”

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**Moving forward, Willey said that he would like to see a business association come together for the Edge District.**

“The idea has always been that over time there will have to be a bit more involvement in the private sector, the business owners kind of taking the reins from the public sector, and figuring out how to continue to finance the marketing angles and build additional community support,” said Willey.

As a business association, they could collectively address marketing tactics and work with the localities to build additional infrastructure, such as sidewalks, in the area.

“It’s nice to see the neighborhood has developed around us as we’ve continued to grow our reputation,” said Willey. “It really expands the viability of visiting Williamsburg.”

*Abigail Adcox, [abigail.adcox@virginiamedia.com](mailto:abigail.adcox@virginiamedia.com), 757-264-8149*

Topics: the Edge District, the Edge, James City County, York County, Williamsburg, Virginia Beer Co., Column 15, Consociate Media

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FEEDBACK

# What does it take to transform Busch Gardens Howl-O-Scream into Christmas Town? Lights, trees and lots of helpers

By ABIGAIL ADCOX  
VIRGINIA GAZETTE | NOV 04, 2021



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FEEDBACK

Staff hang lights throughout Busch Gardens Monday afternoon November 1, 2021 as the park begins converting from Howl-O-Scream to Christmas Town. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

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*On the first day of Christmas Town preparation,*

*Busch Gardens staff brought to us,*

ADVERTISING



*10 million twinkling lights,*

*1,500 fresh-cut Christmas trees,*

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*900 hand-placed wreaths,*

*And one partridge in a pear tree.*

In just nine days' time, Busch Gardens Williamsburg is transforming the more than 400-acre theme park from Howl-O-Scream's spine-chilling experience into a winter wonderland for another one of their signature events, Christmas Town.



FEEDBACK



Staff remove Halloween decorations at Busch Gardens Monday afternoon November 1, 2021 as the park begins converting from Howl-O-Scream to Christmas Town. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Though Christmas Town opens on Nov. 12, preparation started almost as soon as last year's event ended in January.

“We need to plan what decor pieces we need to either replenish or refurbish because maybe they’ve taken up damage,” said Matthew Edwards, entertainment manager for Busch Gardens. “We need to assess all the inventory stock once the previous season’s event is up.”

That means that each piece of inventory, each light bulb, each wreath, is assessed and tested to make sure it works properly before it is stored for the year in one of their warehouses.

**FEEDBACK**

If there is damage or an item is no longer working, Edwards said they take note so they know how many new items need to be ordered or refurbished.

For this year’s event, the park will be adorned with more than 10 million lights, thousands of feet of garland, tens of thousands of ornaments, one “Frosty the Snowman” statue and more. Nearly every staff member employed at Busch Gardens is pitching in, as well as members from its sister park, Water Country USA, to complete the changeover in time.

This year was also unique because of supply chain shortage issues. With the timing of Christmas Town, Edwards said any replacements for new items had to be complete last February if they hoped to receive them in time.

He said they focused on the inventory they had available and how it could be reused or refurbished while giving returning visitors a new experience. Though much of the charm that keeps visitors coming back is the traditional aspects of Christmas Town, Edwards said.

Each year, each country has a different theme. At the Ireland section of the park, there will be a rural Christmas theme, while in Italy there will be an angelic harmony theme complete with angels and gold decorations.

The themes also allow for color cohesion throughout different sections of the park, from reds and greens to whites and golds.



FEEDBACK

Philip Boykin strings lights through a tree at Busch Gardens as staff begins converting the park from Howl-O-Scream to Christmas Town Monday afternoon November 1, 2021. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

In the process of setting up Christmas Town decorations, staff members are also removing the Howl-O-Scream elements throughout the park, from cobwebs draped over bushes to life-sized spiders hanging from trees.

“In general, Christmas Town has a bigger thematic package, because it is quite literally every single building has something added to it,” said Edwards.

“Halloween we don’t necessarily have to do as much. Darkness and lighting effects can play into the look or that shadow effect.”

Since Howl-O-Scream emphasizes the dark elements of the park, it also allows workers to start placing items for Christmas Town. If you visited the park during the later days of October, you might have noticed that many of the 1,500 Christmas trees were already in place.

Once Howl-O-Scream came closed on Oct. 31, it also signaled a transitional period for the landscaping staff. Along with setting up Christmas decorations, landscape

replaced with more than 8,000 dusty miller plants by Christmas Town's opening.

Jason Ingram, landscape manager for Busch Gardens, said his smaller-than-normal staff has their work cut out for them. Down by four workers, they are busy keeping the grounds up to the standards visitors expect.

A lot of detail goes into the maintenance and beautification of the theme park, which has been named "World's Most Beautiful Park" for the past 31 years by the National Amusement Park Historical Association.

FEEDBACK

All 900 of the hanging baskets around the park will be filled with a greenery arrangement specifically for Christmas Town, custom-created by the landscaping staff using only plants and other items found on the grounds.

"It's what brings people to Busch Gardens, they want to see what new display is going to be in the front window box. We throw a new wrinkle in every year," Ingram said.

Even the Christmas trees used during this year's event will not go to waste — all 1,500 trees will be chopped up into wood chips that can be used as mulch.

Landscaping crews remove decorations and flowers at Busch Gardens Monday afternoon November 1, 2021 as the park begins converting from Howl-O-Scream to Christmas Town. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Once it all comes together, Edwards said visitors can expect to see a mix of the traditional elements they love with new shows and experiences.

**This year**, three new shows will debut, including a Christmas-themed Celtic Fyre performance. There will also be a scavenger hunt to spot special ornaments, along with revamped themes throughout the park.

“It’s a labor of love. We are all here because we love doing it. This is just the best time of year,” said Edwards. “To come every night and see the guests’ reaction, taking photos and laughing ... you don’t find that in too many jobs.”

For more information on Christmas Town and admission, visit [buschgardens.com/williamsburg/](https://buschgardens.com/williamsburg/).

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**When:** Selects dates from Nov. 12 through Jan. 2

**Where:** 1 Busch Gardens Blvd., Williamsburg

**Cost:** Single-day tickets start at \$39.99

**Details:** [buschgardens.com/williamsburg/](https://www.buschgardens.com/williamsburg/)

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