Marketing Your Historic Site

Practical strategies for museums, historic sites, and downtowns — from someone who has been the travel agent, the editor, the product designer, and the marketer.

JANICE BARNIAK

VINCENNES/KNOX COUNTY TOURISM

About Your Presenter

Janice Barniak

Certified Indiana Travel Professional and Executive Director, Vincennes/Knox County Tourism. Current president, Southern Indiana Regional Marketing Committee.



- **Newspaper Managing Editor**

  10+ years; four Hoosier State Press Association Awards

- **Travel Agent**

  3 years, International Association of Travel Agents

- **Product Marketing**

  Toy design and import/export

- **Stand-Up Comedian**

  Across the Midwest



The Real Challenge: Shoestring Budgets

Historic sites often have skeleton staffs — and a budget that makes "shoestring" sound generous.

This presentation is about making your money go as far as possible — and earning attention rather than buying or begging for it.

How Do We Make People Care?

> "Your ordinary is your audience's extraordinary."
>
> — Smithsonian Marketing Panel

Those of us who work in historic sites, museums, and downtowns share a very particular marketing problem: we are surrounded by extraordinary things and have become completely accustomed to them. Someone going into detail about removing tape from historic documents went viral. We are living in a world where attention is currency — and the first step is recognizing what we already have.



Stop Marketing the Thing. Start Marketing the Feeling.

Attraction designers — including experts from Indiana Landmarks, Purdue Polytechnic, and Meowulf attractions in Las Vegas, Denver, and Los Angeles — suggest shifting the foundational question:

Old Question

"What do we want people to see?"

New Question

"How do we want people to feel?"

Most historic sites are great at listing what they have — 7 rooms, 4,000 artifacts, a bullet hole in the dining room glass. But none of that answers the visitor's real question: **"Why should I care?"**

Design the experience around awe, curiosity, nostalgia, or fear — and the marketing will naturally reflect that feeling.

People Buy Experiences, Not Products

We went from buying eggs and flour to make a birthday cake, to buying a cake and balloons, to buying an entire experience at Chuck E. Cheese. The shift is real and accelerating.

1

Product Era

Buy ingredients, make it yourself

2

Convenience Era

Buy the finished product

3

Experience Era

Buy the memory, the feeling, the story



The Power of 10 — Revamped

Roger Brooks' placemaking principle calls for 10 major destinations, 10 public spaces each, and 10 things to do per space. For small destinations, that feels overwhelming.

The real challenge: Find nine other people, businesses, or nonprofits to partner with and champion each other. A museum, an ice skating rink, and a restaurant — thrown together — become a tourism package and a full experience.

Vincennes Results

By packaging five museums with an apple orchard, restaurants, festivals, and the riverfront — and marketing heavily to motorcoach tours — the innkeepers tax funding that goes to their operating budget increased by **42% over three years - we aren't counting this year because it's not over, but it's going to surpass that.**

The Quarter Rule

A person will travel about a quarter of the time they expect to spend on an experience. A four-hour experience draws visitors from an hour away. A one-hour tour draws visitors from 15 minutes away.

1/4

Travel Time Rule

Visitors travel ~25% of the expected experience duration

Package

Work Backwards

If you want more travelers from further away, partner to package experiences

10

Champions

Each partner contributes a small amount; combined reach multiplies results

To expand reach: make experiences longer, more immersive, or partner with other sites. A multi-experience ad will convert at a higher rate for travelers coming from further away.



The Tale of Two Kayak Ads

Two identical videos. One highlighted beautiful vistas and trip length. The other answered common questions: there are bathrooms, kids are welcome, it's not as strenuous as you think.

> The "bathroom version" performed **six times better.**

The museum is not the story. The visitor's interaction with the site is the story. Ask: what objection are you overcoming? Boring? Parking? Wheelchair access? Hidden fees? That's your next video.

Perfect Is for Procrastinators — Be a Pollinator

Seed Early

Start 60–90 days before your season. A vendor announcement is a post. Unveiling this year's boot mug is a post.

Go Lean

Many smaller pieces outperform one big polished campaign.

Stay Consistent

Keep your audience aware and not bored with steady, varied content.

Vincennes once worked with a polished Indianapolis marketing firm. Every year since that firm closed, they have **outdone those numbers.** Less professional marketing comes off as more authentic.

A great marketer once said: a star hitter is great, but what you really need is a bunch of guys who just get on base. Get the bases loaded — that's far more valuable than one perfect campaign.

The "Gravy Train" of Free Publicity — Purple Cow Marketing

Seth Godin's "purple cow marketing" means doing something so remarkable people talk about it. Holiday World's roller coaster where you ride in a gravy boat through cranberry sauce generated **millions in free advertising** — picked up by Disney blogs, coaster sites, and TV stations two hours away. The Indy 500's Blackhawk helicopter and Weinermobile races? Same principle. You can't buy that kind of engagement.



Vickie, Zeta, and the Power of a Human Story

Zeta & the Candy Mix

A grumpy warehouse worker's tall tales about what goes into crane machine's win-every-time candy mix sold out the entire inventory. They weren't selling candy anymore — they were selling a legend. People wanted to be part of it.

Vickie & the Cemetery Walk

A personal note to media — "One actress is portraying her great-grandmother, talking about the first policeman to die on duty in the county. She gets choked up." — booked interviews with three radio stations, a newspaper, and a TV station an hour away. Three of nine actors portray their own relatives. **The marketing was in the design.**

Design the experience around the human story first. The marketing will follow naturally.

Tie Into Holidays, Anniversaries & Big Moments



National Coffee Day

Announced a coffee crawl — visit five shops Black Friday weekend, get a prize. Sign-ups rolled in within hours, riding the holiday wave.



The Eclipse & the Demon Portal

Eclipse coverage generated controversy — and controversy generated engagement. A local made a shirt: "Vincennes: Come for the Eclipse, Stay for the Witchcraft." You cannot buy that.



America 250

Coverage reached Fort Wayne, Capitol Chronicle and Bloomington Limestone magazine, two hours north — far beyond the normal reach of a small destination.

The Latest from Indiana Tourism & Google

1 Google Is Holding

Google retains 90% of searches despite AI. 95% of users use both ChatGPT-style searches and Google.

2 Expect a Traffic Drop

Anticipate a 20–30% drop in website visits as AI answers questions directly. Incoming traffic will stay longer and engage more.

3 Optimize for AI

Write at a 6th–8th grade reading level. Use verifiable data (e.g., exit surveys), cite credible sources, and add traveler testimonials and ratings.



Technical Tips: SEO, GEO & Voice Search

Structure for AI Crawlers

Use lists and headers. Avoid large blocks of text. It can take 6–8 months for AI to index your site.

Personalized Results

Search results are no longer democratic. AI serves different results based on demographics. Include target demographics in your descriptions.

Voice Search

62% of adults voice-initiate searches. Phrase content as questions: "What are things to do in Vincennes?" yields ~30% higher click-through than destination names alone.

Blog Your FAQs

Keep answers to common Google questions as blog posts on your site to capture AI-driven traffic.

Own Your Audience

Don't Rent Your Audience

If Facebook stopped working tomorrow, would you still have a marketing strategy? Build your own list. Vincennes collects visitor info at three sites — Grouseland alone has ~1,000 mailing addresses and 1,600 email addresses, partly thanks to a feather attached to the digital stylus for that ye-olde-quill look.

Why It Works

The biggest predictor of whether someone will visit your site is whether they've been there before.



And If All Else Fails — Try Dogs

In the newspaper industry, a dog on the front page could increase sales. Last year, Vincennes posted dogs dressed to match our monuments and received **170,000 views.**

> So if you're ever in a marketing meeting asking what your audience wants — it's definitely a dog wearing a historically accurate costume.

Your Assignment: Five Things to Do This Week

01

Collect Your Stories

What stories — like Zeta — can you share? Your maintenance man? Your volunteers?

02

Find Your Barriers

Ask visitors: "What almost kept you from coming?" That's your next ad.

03

Find Your Nine Partners

Stop marketing yourselves separately. Start marketing the place together to draw regionally.

04

Make a List of What's Weird

Weird is remarkable. Remarkable gets talked about.

05

Name the Feeling

Looking at your lists — what feeling are you actually marketing?

The Unselfish Secret to Getting People to Care

None of it is about putting forward yourself as the best at anything. A lot of it is about putting others and the visitors' needs, entertainment, and feelings first. We started by asking: in a world where attention is currency, how do you get people to care? The answer is: the most effective marketing is to be extremely unselfish. You get people to care by caring more about them — maybe more than you do about any aspect of your site.

Oh, and if that doesn't work — November 1st, the dog costumes will be on clearance.



Join the Indiana Tourism Association

Indiana Tourism Association's upcoming **Attractions Conference** brings together the best minds in destination marketing, attraction design, and tourism strategy. (Not me, the really big fish.)

Connect with peers, hear from national experts, and bring back tools your site can use immediately — no matter the size of your staff or your budget.

INDIANA TOURISM ASSOCIATION | ATTRACTIONS CONFERENCE

