

Early in February approximately 500 tourism professionals from all over the State of Illinois convened in Chicago for the 2014 Illinois Governor's Conference on Travel and Tourism.

The annual conference began with exciting news highlighting estimates that indicate Illinois welcomed more than 101 million visitors in 2013 for only the second time in history. Also, hotel motel tax collections for 2013 are projected to reach a record-breaking figure of nearly \$230 million, statewide. Although numbers specific to Winnebago County have not yet been released, I feel good about what this means for our Region.

In addition to the State of the Industry discussion, the conference also honored the innovative work of industry professionals with the Illinois Excellence in Tourism Awards. Awards were presented in eleven categories and judged by a panel of marketing and tourism professionals on clarity of message, creativity, originality, and the project's overall success.

The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau was honored to receive the following Illinois Excellence in Tourism Awards:

Best Tourism Branding for Misery Loves Company. Launched in March 2013, Misery Loves Company was a fun, friendly, tongue-in-cheek tourism campaign masquerading as a response to Forbes Magazine's latest ranking of the Rockford Region as the 3rd most miserable city in the USA. The campaign included video created by RACVB's advertising agency, Graham Spencer, and was promoted through email blasts, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, creative imagery and messaging on and throughout RACVB's website and social media channels; news releases and media outreach/interviews to regional/Midwest media outlets; and t-shirt sales at eight locations.

Best Social Media Marketing, for Stroll on State. The social media campaign for November's Stroll on State event reached 294,692 Facebook fans, 381 Instagrammers, 200 Twitter users and received 1,805 views on YouTube. The success and awareness of the event is due in part to the intentional integration among these social media platforms allowing RACVB to engage hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors.

It is truly an honor to be recognized by our peers as the best of the best in the tourism marketing industry. Over 100 other projects and campaigns were submitted for each of these categories. While Misery Loves Company and Stroll on State were very different initiatives, these awards demonstrate the importance of having marketing efforts that are worth remembering if we want to remain a leader in the destination marketing space. These things don't happen by accident. We have a strategic approach and a great staff that work together to implement solid plans.

In February, we also learned that the industry's trade association, Destination Marketing Association International, has reaccredited RACVB. In receiving this designation, DMAI's certifies that RACVB meets the highest standards in destination marketing and management. We were first accredited in 2009, and remain only one of 180 in the nation to be an "accredited" bureau. This accreditation, essentially the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for our industry, communicates to the community, buyers and

potential visitors that RACVB demonstrates a significant measure of excellence in destination management and marketing.