

VOICE COLUMN AUGUST

By John Groh

Diversification is key to success in tourism marketing

Most financial planners will tell you that a diversified portfolio allows you to maximize your investments over the long haul. By not putting all your eggs in one basket, you minimize your risk and enhance your profitability. Tourism is no different.

As tourism in the Rockford region has grown over the past 30 plus years, our constant has been sports tourism. As a result of investments by our region in facilities like the Mercyhealth Sportscore Complexes and the UW Health Sports Factory, we have realized tremendous growth. Most recently, this growth was on full display in June as the new indoor facility at Sportscore Two opened to the public the same week that the region played host to one of the largest sporting events our community has hosted – Premier SuperCopa, which brought 15,000 people to Rockford and Loves Park.

We are often viewed as a soccer haven in the industry, as our complexes are perfectly built to host these mega events. However, the RACVB board and staff believe we need a diversified approach in our tournament recruitment efforts and as a result we have seen quite the mix of business over the years.

Take, for instance, the USA BMX Midwest Nationals. The tournament held at Searls Park on the northwest side of the community has been a showcase for the community for the past 40 years. This year, nearly 4,000 people attended the event (with participants and spectators from throughout the United States, Canada and Australia).

Another great example is the Rock River Off-season Competition (R2OC), a premier robotics event presented by UTC Aerospace Systems and Woodward. Under the stewardship of a local nonprofit volunteer board and committee, R2OC, a certified 501(c)(3) organization, will for the first time offer up to four \$1,000 scholarships to 2017 R2OC student participants—a \$4,000 total commitment split evenly between R2OC and Rock Valley College Foundation—in addition to as much as \$7,000 in grant funding courtesy of R2OC for robotics start-up expenses for grade school and middle school programming in Boone, Stephenson and Winnebago counties.

Now in its 5th year, the R2OC competition will feature more than 700 participants making up 36 teams from throughout the region. For those not familiar with this competition, you are missing out. This varsity sport for the mind features teams of 10 or more high school students who are challenged to build and program a robot to perform prescribed tasks against a field of competitors, raise funds, design a team brand, and hone teamwork skills.

A final example is the success of Tough Mudder in our market. After bringing more than 15,000 people to our community in 2016, we are expecting even stronger attendance this year as the competition expands to include the Toughest Mudder competition, which will feature competitors racing throughout the night to determine supremacy over the obstacle course built on the grounds of the Chicago-Rockford International Airport.

Diversification beyond our hallmarks of soccer and softball has given us an advantage in the industry. Following this approach, we will continue to showcase all aspects of our great community to competitors who travel from all over the world to Rockford and the region. Sports tourism is a central component of what we do at the RACVB and we are seeing an even brighter future thanks to our ability to attract and host events of all kinds.