



A Big Year for Houston, A Big Year for Houston First

HOUSTON (April 26, 2019) — This has been a busy and productive year for Houston First Corporation (HFC) and Brenda Bazan, President and CEO. After taking the reins of Houston’s official destination and marketing organization a little over a year ago, Bazan has taken impressive steps to more strategically position HFC to meet its goals and objectives.

“This has been a transformative year for Houston First and for me,” said Bazan. “I had to make some major decisions, but I am so grateful to my talented team for their tremendous effort and professionalism. I know any success achieved this past year was because of their dedication and support.”

Bazan stepped into her leadership role at HFC only five months after Hurricane Harvey devastated the Houston area, and left a number of unparalleled challenges for Houston First. HFC operates ten city-owned performing arts and convention venues including the Wortham Theater Center, which is home to the acclaimed Houston Ballet, Houston Grand Opera, Da Camera and Society for the Performing Arts. In 2017 the Wortham and Theater District Parking Garage were severely damaged by flood water and closed for restoration.

The damages exceed \$153 million. Bazan and her team balanced HFC’s 2018 budget and reopened the Wortham in time for the fall 2018-2019 performing arts season. A stellar accomplishment by any standard.

“It was one of my biggest challenges, but certainly my proudest moment to be able to say, ‘Welcome Home,’ to the artists, patrons and operations teams. It still gives me goose bumps,” Bazan said.

Houston First Corporation also ended 2018 with record-setting achievements in sales and marketing.

- **Meetings & Conventions**

- For the fourth consecutive year Houston set a new record for future meetings and conventions with **816,023 room nights booked**, a **1.6% increase over 2017**. The number of booked meetings and conventions rose from 429 in 2017 to 498 in 2018.

- **Promotion & Branding**

- Branding assets for Houston are seeing records as well, traffic to the Houston First network of websites rose to **8.4 million**, representing a 14% increase over 2017. HFC's portfolio consists of 13 web properties including: VisitHouston.com, MyGayHouston.com, HolaHouston.com, AvenidaHouston.com and the new HoustonTheaterDistrict.com.
- Annual social reach set a new record at **6.1 million** via the base of nearly 900,000 followers across all channels. A [live dashboard](#) was unveiled on HoustonFirst.com which tracks the performance of HFC's largest social channel, VisitHouston as well as competitive destinations.
- Houston was celebrated in **15 national lists** for best places to travel in 2019 including: *The New York Times*, *Travel+Leisure*, *Boston Globe*, *Bloomberg* and *Conde Nast Traveler*. This was a direct result of the pitching effort led by HFC in 2018. Houston First's broadcast creative continues to connect with audiences.
- The [Urban Rhythm TV spot](#) debuted in 2018 and features popular figures like JJ Watt, James Harden, Jose Altuve, Kam Franklin and Lyle Lovett. Research revealed that after viewing the spot, **more than half the audience indicated intent to visit Houston**. This is up from 33% in 2017.

- **Visitation to Houston**

After experiencing the costliest natural disaster in US History (tying with Hurricane Katrina) the 2018 travel statistics in the city of Houston, Harris County and the MSA still showed moderate gains across the board - from personal trips to spending to employment.

More than **22.3 million domestic and international** combined visits to Houston occurred in 2018, a figure that reflects growth toward a benchmark goal of 25 million to the city of Houston by 2020.

- **Domestic US Travel**

According to audited research from OmniTrak, almost **19 million domestic visits** to Houston occurred in 2018, which is a ten percent increase from what was reported for 2017. When applying a more modest three-year rolling average, designed to soften volatility, visitation still shows growth over 2017 with 18 million domestic travelers.

Of the 19 million visitors, approximately 75% were overnight visitors and 25% came for day trips. Roughly 72% of the domestic total came to Houston for leisure activities, while 18% were here for business and 10% characterized their trip outside of these two categories.

Most notably, **Millennials** continue to advance Houston's numbers domestically. This trend is echoed in both 2017 and 2018 Omnibus studies, also conducted by Omnitrak, which gauges sentiment and intent to travel.

- **International Travel**

Preliminary research provided by Travel Market Insights Inc. indicates an estimated 3,280,000 international visits to Houston for 2018, a 6.3% decrease from 2017.

According to Skift, foreign policies and a strong dollar have led to stagnant international tourism growth, a trend expected to continue in 2019.

Other notable milestones and *firsts* for Houston First in 2018:

- **Augmented Reality (AR)** provides an interactive customer experience. It is the future of how content is consumed and Houston is leading once again in the destination space.
 - In 2018, Houston became the first destination to launch an Augmented Reality (AR) wayfinding app. [Visit Houston AR](#) makes exploring Houston faster and more convenient.
 - Shortly after the wayfinding launch, work on the next milestone began-- integration of AR into advertising. On April 18, 2019, HFC launched a national [print campaign](#) with integrated AR functionality in the Wall Street Journal. The first destination to deploy the technology in this way and the first-ever Wall Street Journal advertiser to do so.
- Houston is the only destination to develop and launch a private label e-commerce platform. The **Houston Marketplace** gives locals and visitors alike the opportunity to shop a variety of things to do in Houston. Since its launch, the program has produced more than \$100 thousand in sales revenue for area partners through sales of more than four thousand tickets, tours and experiences. Today consumers can shop more than 80 experiences including: museums, attractions, events, bars and restaurants.
- **Comicpalooza**, the largest pop culture festival in Texas, welcomed a record-breaking crowd of 50,778 attendees from 47 states and 18 countries during the 2018 Memorial Day weekend. The event produced more than 12,000 total hotel room nights and had an economic impact of more than \$20 million.
- The opening of **KHOU's Avenida Houston Studio** located on the plaza at Avenida Houston gave the George R. Brown (GRB) another accolade. The GRB is the only convention center in the nation to boast a network-affiliated television station with daily broadcasts.

- Houston First established the Organizing Committee structure and developed the master plan for the **23rd World Petroleum Congress (WPC)** which will be held in Houston December 6-10, 2020. The WPC is a triennial gathering and is considered the premier oil and gas event in the world. It is projected to draw more than 15,000 attendees, including 500 CEOs, 100 ministerial delegations and 1,000 global business media to the Energy Capital of the World. It will be the first time since 1987 that the WPC will be held in the US.

“The travel industry is a significant part of Houston’s economy, pumping on average just under \$18 billion annually into this region and supporting more than 140,000 jobs,” said Bazan. “That’s a big deal and it’s why the Houston First team is committed to developing new and more efficient ways to inspire potential visitors around the world to visit Houston.”

ABOUT HOUSTON FIRST

Houston First is the official destination marketing organization for the city of Houston. A local government corporation formed in 2011, Houston First also owns the Hilton Americas-Houston Hotel, manages the George R. Brown Convention Center as well as 10 city-owned properties and the new Avenida Houston entertainment and convention district. Learn more at HoustonFirst.com.

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