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Tourism councils want state marketing leader with local knowledge

By **Cassius Shuman** - March 29, 2021 11:05 am



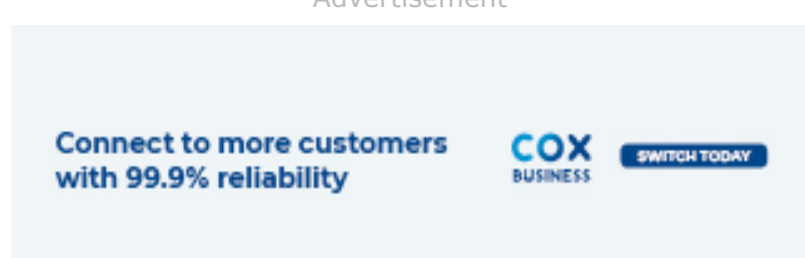
BLOCK ISLAND experiences a surge from about 1,000 inhabitants during the winter to 20,000 during its summer tourism season. / COURTESY BLOCK ISLAND TOURISM COUNCIL

PROVIDENCE – Rhode Island’s tourism council leaders believe the state’s next chief marketing officer should be someone with local knowledge, marketing experience and a collaborative spirit who can hit the ground running in helping the industry recover from the pandemic-induced recession.

R.I. Commerce Corp. is hiring an executive search firm to find someone to fill the position, which handles marketing both tourism and commerce. The job description states that the purpose of the position “is to market the state to a broad audience as a destination for tourism and commerce, attracting transient, corporate and group travel, as well as job-creating businesses.”

In interviews with Providence Business News, tourism leaders stressed the importance of the hire, as the state deals with revenue losses due to restricted travel during the pandemic. R.I. Commerce Corp. commissioned a study in 2017 that found the state generated \$6.5 billion in revenue and \$775 million from state and local tourism taxes with more than 24 million people visiting the state.

Kristen Adamo, CEO, and president of the Providence Warwick Convention & Visitors Bureau, has said her tourism region lost \$73 million during the pandemic due to a lack of meetings, conventions and sporting events. For her, there is an urgency to hiring a new chief marketing officer.



“It’s a full-blown crisis in Providence,” said Adamo, noting the need for someone “who has a connection to Rhode Island. We need someone who can hit the ground running. I feel we’re going to need a strategic, big-picture thinker, and someone who can outline a tourism strategy.”

Adamo says there is a balance between tourism and economic development that the chief marketing officer must manage at the agency. “Sometimes it swings to economic development, but someone who possesses destination marketing experience would be important,” she added.

“Now is the perfect time to look for someone,” she said. “We are just on the cusp of coming out of this [recession] – at least in Providence. We’re going to be a little slower to recover probably than the southern part of the state, but we are seeing a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Adamo said the approach to tourism marketing should incorporate a strategic plan communicated with the state’s six tourism regions to inform decision-making and policy. “One of the strengths of Rhode Island is that it’s small, and the regional tourism organizations work together,” she said.

Adamo said a silver lining from the pandemic has been the strengthening of the relationship between R.I. Commerce and the tourism regions. “We talk a lot more, and we’re more integrated into what each other is doing,” she said. “So, there will be an ability to hit the ground running for a new chief marketing officer.”

Jessica Willi agrees. “It would be wonderful to have someone in the position who has some destination marketing experience. That is number one on my wish list,” said Willi, who is executive director of Block Island’s Tourism Council.

Willi noted that the position is not just focused on tourism. “They also have to be in charge of business attraction,” she said. “It’s rare to find somebody who does both those things equally well.”

Willi thinks the agency places a greater value on business attraction and finding someone with those credentials to serve in the position. Despite that, she said the agency is aware of the need for someone with knowledge of Rhode Island.

“It’s helpful to know the nuances of the state,” she said. “It’s important to know the history – and our wonderful quirks.”

Willi cited former Chief Marketing Officer Lara Salamano, a Rhode Island native, as an example. Salamano, who served as chief marketing officer from 2016-2019, graduated from the University of Rhode Island with a degree in merchandising and design.

Matt Sheaff, the agency’s director of communications, has been serving as acting CMO since Heather Evans resigned from the role in May 2020.

The state’s six regions include the Blackstone Valley, Block Island, Newport/Bristol, Providence, Warwick and South County.

“Every region has their nuances,” said Willi. “I would never think that I could market any of the other regions.”

Evan Smith, CEO and president of Discover Newport, says the chief marketing officer should have marketing and tourism experience, with a focus on the travel industry. “It should be someone capable of establishing a working culture inside of [the agency] that celebrates and fully embraces the importance of the travel industry to the state’s economy.

“Over the last 12 months the global travel industry has suffered greater losses, both in terms of jobs and revenue, than any other industry nationally or internationally,” said Smith. “With the vaccination program now being deployed at an accelerated rate, consumer confidence is starting to grow and people’s interest in traveling again is getting stronger by the day.”

Smith said he thinks “having local geographic knowledge could become a tie breaker” for a candidate. “While I believe it is very important for the chief marketing officer to have strong and productive working relationships with the regional tourism offices, I would also say that to be successful, the chief marketing officer will need to have a strong working relationships with other key travel-related businesses and services” in the state.

Louise Bishop, president of the South County Tourism Council, feels the same way.

The next CMO should be a consumer marketing professional with a background in tourism who knows Rhode Island, she says. She stressed the need to become familiar with the regions in order to work collaboratively with them.

“I believe the best thing to have happen is to get somebody in now,” she said, “so that they’re really ready to hit the ground running with the marketing” for 2022.

Bishop said even though the chief marketing officer “is a shared position” balancing tourism duties with business attraction, “it should be more focused on tourism. It’s almost as though they don’t recognize the value of tourism. It is the No. 3 or No. 4 revenue generator in this state. It’s undeniable.”

“I believe we have been lacking coming out of the state department,” said Bishop. “I think the regions have been holding up the state.”

Bishop believes the lack of focus on tourism has led to “a lack of recognition that other states get. ... I would like to see a more-sophisticated campaign for Rhode Island. Fun-sized was rolled out four years ago. Yes, we’re the smallest state, but it’s time to change the narrative and show our beauty.”

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