



# THE GORGE

BRAND SUMMIT REPORT AND NARRATIVE



*To prepare a Brand Summit Report and Narrative, Creative Studio listens and learns from stakeholders who can provide perspectives and information that allow development of brand strategy recommendations. The following recommendations regarding implementation of a brand strategy were developed as a result of dozens of opportunities to hear from business owners, government officials and residents in The Red River Gorge region of Kentucky and are intended to provide steps that lead to successful brand implementation.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Recognize the need for a unified, cohesive brand to promote The Gorge and its surrounding communities.
- Accept the wisdom of blurring county lines when it involves implementing the marketing strategy for The Gorge brand.
- Acknowledge the need for a champion to lead implementation of The Gorge brand strategy developed as part of the RRED project.
- Adopt “The Gorge” as the primary reference to the region and use the newly created mark to complement ongoing promotions.
- Realize that cities and towns in The Gorge region are a significant part of what makes the region appealing to visitors.
- Encourage all tourism-related businesses and organizations in the region to support the champion in brand implementation so that there is one source and brand identity from which all outreach efforts emerge.
- Acknowledge the collaborative efforts of The Gorge area tourism directors who have formed a reliable, experienced group that is well poised to implement the brand strategy as the Red River Gorge Tourism Council.
- Allow the Red River Gorge Tourism Council to operate in a manner that reduces duplication in time and effort of tourism directors so that each becomes a specialist in a specific area of tourism work for The Gorge region.
- Confer with leadership of the Northern Kentucky Convention & Visitors Bureau (also known as meetNKY) to gain a greater understanding of the benefits of a unified front to promote tourism. The Northern Kentucky CVB was formed more than 40 years ago, uniting Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties in their efforts to attract meetings and visitors to the Northern Kentucky region.
- Establish a community of volunteers, Friends of The Gorge, that can support and assist the tourism directors in their initiatives.
- Hold quarterly meetings organized by the brand champion where government officials, business owners and volunteers build relationships and discuss opportunities and challenges regarding the tourism industry and have a status report of the brand strategy implementation.
- Consider the brand strategy a continually evolving guiding tool that should be reviewed annually and updated as needed to ensure that brand strategy implementation stays on course with the latest, effective marketing practices.



## **NARRATIVE**

*The following narrative documents salient points of the RRED tourism development project and serves to preserve for historical reference background of the project. The narrative also summarizes learnings from listening opportunities that were used to create the recommendations above.*

### **Background**

Local residents and business owners in the Red River Gorge area have seen the number of visitors to their region grow in recent years. That influx is destined to continue to increase organically from the roughly 500,000 visitors now — especially as The Gorge’s reputation has spread through the climber and adventure tourist populations across the United States and internationally. A thriving tourism industry is a welcomed source of income for this part of Kentucky that seeks new avenues for boosting its economy.

Business leaders and government officials sought to determine a realistic, positive economic driver that would increase revenue and business opportunities while maintaining the integrity of the natural beauty of the region. With leadership provided by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, Red River Economic Development LLC (RRED) was established in January 2018 with an objective to determine ways to boost prosperity for residents, businesses and governments in the four-county area of Kentucky that is home to The Gorge and adjacent communities.

After much study and assessment of The Gorge area, specifically Lee, Menifee, Powell and Wolfe Counties, tourism was identified by RRED as the right economic driver on which to focus. Business and government leaders in the four counties recognized how the region’s natural beauty presents a foundation from which more visitor opportunities could emerge. They leaders knew well that The Gorge is an attraction for rugged adventurers. But they also realized the potential to attract another type of visitor who is drawn to the area’s beauty yet prefers superior accommodations in a relaxing haven. This higher price point alternative would complement the cabins and campgrounds that currently are the main options for overnight stays.

The idea emerged to fund a feasibility study to determine a recommended site and assess what it would take to establish an upscale resort in The Gorge that would create a new tourism-related revenue stream. After soliciting bids on the feasibility study, Edmonton, Canada-based Stantec, a top 10 global design firm, was engaged to develop the feasibility plan for the upscale resort, working in concert with MXD Development Strategists Ltd, a full-service development consulting firm based in Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

Louisville-based Qreative Studio, a creative services company, was brought on board by Stantec to produce a brand strategy for the region as requested by RRED. RRED members recognized the need for a unified brand strategy that would serve to promote The Gorge area and its many attractions, adventure opportunities, lodging options, restaurants and other tourist-related businesses. Regardless of whether an upscale resort development project occurs in The Gorge, the strategy developed can be implemented to create a useful brand identity that would serve the region well.



## Observations and assessment of current marketing efforts

The people who live in The Gorge region have a strong passion about and love for the natural beauty of their area. They are protective of these natural assets and will battle for their preservation. A core group of regular visitors feels the same way. For the economic health of the region, it is important for business owners and residents to realize the critical significance of finding new revenue streams and business opportunities to allow their communities to thrive going forward. Tourism has been identified as a logical industry to achieve this goal.

To date, the adventure tourism industry in The Gorge region has held its own with largely organic growth in lieu of a coordinated brand or fully implemented unified marketing strategies. Currently, many area businesses develop and launch their own promotional efforts, including websites, social media accounts, email serve lists, brochures, maps and signage.



These efforts appear to be fairly effective in attracting customers to the specific businesses they promote, but they do not provide visitors with a full range of details about the variety of attractions and businesses that would offer further enjoyment of The Gorge. An attempt to provide a unified online portal began in 2014 with the RedRiverGorgeGuide.com website, created as a collaborative effort of Lee, Menifee, Powell, Wolfe and Estill Counties. It provides a useful framework for promoting the region. However, the website has not been completed as some tabs, including adventures, amenities and lodging, contain no information and the most recent entries on the blog are four years old.

While individualized marketing efforts of tourism entities in The Gorge may have served well the entities they were created to promote, the result has been a fractured identity for the region. The hodgepodge of promotional efforts — websites, slogans, logos — that exist today serve to confuse rather than effectively inform visitors who seek information in advance of travel or upon their arrival at The Gorge.

The fractured identity is further impacted by the fact that there are multiple tourism boards in The Gorge region that operate independently, leading to a silo effect that follows county lines and city borders. The four counties have their own tourism boards that are charged with marketing their communities. In fact, Powell County has three tourism boards, and Menifee County has yet to establish a tourism board. The tourism boards have varying degrees of staffing, ranging from full time directors to volunteer leadership. Funding for the tourism boards is complicated by the way tax dollars are distributed by the Commonwealth of Kentucky, which reinforces a silo effect that inhibits unified tourism marketing efforts.

According to tourism directors, visitors often arrive at The Gorge and check out one or two spots that got their attention and drew them to the region. Many think they've experienced all that there is of The Gorge and depart without even being aware of



many of the area's natural assets and other attractions. Tourism directors say visitors frequently ask: What else is there to do here?

### **Need for a unified brand strategy**

The lack of a unified brand strategy means the region falls short of luring additional visitors who would bring new dollars to The Gorge while they experience its full complement of natural beauty, adventurous activities, small town charm and relaxing atmosphere. A brand identity embraced by all businesses, organizations, governments and tourism boards in The Gorge region would benefit existing businesses as well as newly launched ventures founded to serve the burgeoning tourism industry.

For the sake of successful marketing and promotion of the region, it is important for county lines to blur so that the area can function as a whole — in the same way visitors view the region already. Area tourism directors observe that it is not important to visitors to know what county they are in. County lines are irrelevant reference points to tourists who know that they have traveled to The Gorge and want to experience all they can while they are there.

For the marketing strategy and brand implementation to be effective in attracting more visitors to The Gorge, it is imperative that there be a champion of this initiative. The champion could be a person. It could be a nonprofit organization funded by grants and donations that links existing tourism boards. But ideally there would be a new regional tourism entity created that would have authority to implement the brand strategy and oversee and maintain its standards.

Much can be learned about the positive results of a regional tourism entity from the Northern Kentucky Convention & Visitors Bureau (meetNKY). For more than 40 years, that entity has served as a unified effort, successfully promoting tourism in Boone, Campbell and Kenton Counties in Northern Kentucky.

Tourism directors and others in The Gorge region are proponents of having a unified brand, ideally implemented through a regional tourism entity. This regional entity could prevent the current redundancy of efforts as each tourism director does all of the same tasks. Instead, with a regional entity, each could be a specialist in areas of tourism such as festival and event planning, adventure attractions, lodging, food and beverage, and communications.

In fact, in recent years there have been positive efforts at collaboration by tourism directors in The Gorge region. The aforementioned RedRiverGorgeGuide.com website was launched with the intention of becoming an online portal for visitors to reference. A web portal of this type is essential for promoting the area. The champion that owns and implements the brand strategy plan would need to either finish and manage RedRiverGorgeGuide.com or create a new portal to serve this purpose. At a minimum, the site would aggregate information about all tourist-related businesses and services in The Gorge region and put links to websites and Facebook pages where detailed information about each business or service could be obtained.

Another collaborative effort by tourism directors occurred in 2019 when they contributed funds and worked together on branding and marketing materials focused on promoting The Gorge. These marketing materials were used at the Kentucky State



Fair and have been stocked at highway rest stops and other places in the region where tourism materials are distributed.

Because of their collaborations, the tourism directors have established strong working relationships and a shared calling to promote the region. As a result, they are poised to serve as the champion that implements the marketing strategy as the Red River Gorge Tourism Council.

## WORTHY OF NOTE

An important factor to keep at the heart of this brand development: There is a strong allegiance to preserving the natural beauty of The Gorge that currently is shared by locals and visitors. No one wants the area to turn into an over-commercialized tourist destination similar to the Gatlinburg/Pigeon Forge area in Tennessee.

Should the resort feasibility study intrigue and attract a developer to invest in The Gorge, this destination would draw a type of visitor uncommon to the region. The luxury accommodations, fine dining, spa and accoutrements of such a resort would attract patrons far different from the rugged cliff climbers, trail hikers and bikers, off roaders, hunters, fishermen, horseback riders, and campers who frequent The Gorge today.

The footprint of resort visitors on the area would differ from the adventure types, which is an effective way to diffuse visitor traffic. They would be likely to experience resort services, entertainment options, and gorgeous views. But they also would be likely to explore communities in the area and visit shops and local dining options, producing a positive financial impact on area businesses — existing ones and those that will emerge as more visitors arrive.

With or without the resort, the choice of The Gorge as a tourist destination will continue to grow — and not just at the current pace triggered by adventure tourists around the globe. In the wake of the pandemic and need for social distancing, tourist destinations in natural settings that offer lots of space and fresh air are likely to experience profound

