

07.20.12 freshwatercleveland.com

northeast ohio tourism: a big business gets even bigger

Douglas J. Guth | ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME - PHOTO BOB PERKOSKI



How do you export an entire region? That's the question Northeast Ohio's promoters are pondering as the investment in local tourism is projected to reach into the billions of dollars over the next few years. Harnessing the economic power of the tourism industry means telling the world loud and proud, "Northeast Ohio is the place to be."

Bringing the 18-county Cleveland Plus region to the disposable income-flush masses should not be a hard sell these days, says Lexi Hotchkiss, director of communications with [Positively Cleveland](#), the region's tourism and economic development group.

Cuyahoga County alone is undergoing a \$2 billion tourism investment revival over the next five years, a confluence of high-profile projects including a new casino, a medical mart and convention center, and the dramatic renovation of Cleveland's illustrious art museum.

"Two-billion is not chump change," says Hotchkiss. "It's a big deal that can have a domino effect [on the area]."

The tourism industry is Cuyahoga County's fourth-largest employer. Tourism is bigger business locally than many people realize, adds Hotchkiss. The industry is Cuyahoga County's fourth-largest employer. In 2011, 30 million people visited the Cleveland Plus region, sustaining 163,000 jobs with \$13 billion in economic impact. During that same time frame, 14 million visitors descended upon Cleveland, supporting 61,000 jobs.

With the local travel economy steadily growing post-recession, keeping the region in the minds of potential visitors is a constant challenge, area advocates say. It's not that the nation has a negative perception of Northeast Ohio; it's more likely they're not thinking about us much at all. A 2012 poll conducted by the Cleveland Plus Marketing Alliance revealed that about 60 percent of people living outside Northeast Ohio had "no opinion" on the region.

Positively Cleveland is one of the organizations aiming to switch the outside perception from "neutral" to "positive." The group hosts 65 national travel writers per year, with the goal of showing them as much of the city as possible, be it a culinary tour of top Cleveland restaurants or unique landmarks such as the house where *A Christmas Story* was filmed.

"Our goal [with national media] is frequency and reach," says Hotchkiss. "Once you get a journalist here, the city sells itself."

The aim is to draw a consumer base increasingly interested in "experiential tourism," she says. "People want to immerse themselves in a culture, eat our food, visit our neighborhoods, and do whatever they can to experience what Cleveland is all about."

That see-it-all attitude can trickle down throughout a wider region that offers 100 miles of riverfront, three major national halls of fame, the nation's second-largest performing arts center and more.

In the U.S., football is king, and the annual [Pro Football Hall of Fame](#) enshrinement festival translates into a significant windfall for both Canton and Northeast Ohio, says Joanne Murray, festival director for the [Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce](#).

Two weeks worth of events surround the early-August induction ceremony that welcomes the NFL's best into the hall. According to a survey conducted by the chamber in 2005, the enshrinement festival has an annual economic impact of \$26.7 million for Stark County. The state, meanwhile, reaps \$48.4 million from over 700,000 visitors staying at hotels, buying gas and shopping at local malls. Those numbers don't include the \$7.4 million in tax revenue for local government, notes Murray.

The numbers are sweet, but the yearly recognition Canton receives from national media outlets is priceless, says the festival director. When reporters from big-time networks like ESPN, NBC and CBS brand Canton as the "Hall of Fame City," or mention during a game broadcast watched by millions that a particular player "will be in Canton one day," it gives the entire region a boost.

"That kind of credibility translates into tourism, no doubt," Murray says. "People coming here for the hall will come back [to Northeast Ohio] for other things."

Murray collaborates with the hall and [Canton/Stark County Convention & Visitors' Bureau](#) on marketing the event. The chamber has trade partnerships with radio stations and newspapers to promote the enshrinement festival, tying in the annual event with the hall's year-round football-related offerings. The hall is currently undergoing a \$27-million renovation and expansion that will be completed in time for the 2013 induction ceremony.

"For a community our size, having something so well known and respected is a true gift," says Murray. "It puts us on the map, providing excitement and economic impact."

When it comes to sports, Northeast Ohio perhaps is best known for football, but golf has become a huge draw for the region as well, says Dan Colantone, president and CEO of the [Greater Akron Chamber](#).

The Bridgestone Invitational is a premier PGA tour event attracting golfers from all over the world to Akron's [Firestone Country Club](#), resulting in an economic injection of about \$20 to \$25 million annually. Similar to the incalculable benefit Canton receives through national exposure of its football museum, Akron is garnering global attention from golf fans every time Tiger Woods or Rory McIlroy launches a drive down Firestone's famed fairways.

"You can't put a price tag on the exposure Akron gets from Bridgestone," says Colantone. "You have Akron being shown as a place to live, work, play and visit. The tournament is a magnet for us."

Golf also acts as an economic development tool for Akron, adds the chamber director. When hosting company executives or real estate site selectors, bringing them to Firestone for a PGA event is the equivalent of a sales pitch for the region.

"We're showing off Akron as a place to do business and recruit talent," Colantone says. "It's all about the quality of life here."

While local organizations are working hard to promote the region, native Northeast Ohioans must be their own ambassadors, says Hotchkiss of Positively Cleveland. The tourism group's Cleveland Champions Program is enlisting influential locals to bring meetings into the city. However, you don't have to be a titan of industry to spread the good word.

"Tourism is playing a key role in turning things around," Hotchkiss says. "We can all be a part of the process."

- Image 1: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Tourists - [Photo Bob Perkoski](#)

- Image 2 & 3: Lexi Hotchkiss, director of communications with Positively Cleveland - [Photos Bob Perkoski](#)

- Images 4 & 5: Bridgestone Invitational Golf Tourney - courtesy of Falls Communications

- Images 6 & 7: Enshrinement Festival - courtesy of the Pro Football Hall of Fame

- Image 8: Pro Football Hall of Fame Museum - [Photo Bob Perkoski](#)