

Chief Marketer

Data Helps Indiana Tourism Org Boost E-mail Relevancy

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Killing the print edition of its visitors guide may have been the best database-augmenting action Indiana's [South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority](#) ever took. In doing so, the group put itself in a position to deliver better-qualified leads to its member organizations by focusing on online communication.

"Believe me, it wasn't easy," South Shore CVA president and CEO Speros A. Batistatos says of shuttering the print edition he launched 16 years ago. "But it was time to realize it had fulfilled its purpose. We had to embrace technology and analytics and all the information the Internet provided us."

The South Shore CVA serves tourism-focused businesses in the northwest [Indiana region](#). It's decision to move to a digital-only guide means that content doesn't have to be static. It can be updated if new businesses or events pop up within the community. It also means advertisements don't have to be static either: Member organizations can change their ads to reflect seasonal offerings or test new campaigns.

The 2009 decision to eliminate the 72-page guide, along with several print newsletters, freed up around \$200,000 a year. But Batistatos doesn't just view the change in terms of money saved. "It is less about cost savings and more about the strategic deployment of those dollars."

The move to e-newsletters and a digital guide went hand-in-hand with the organization's efforts to boost its database. In addition to the digital guide, the South Shore CVA has reinvested the money it saved in to a series of monthly e-mailings, and an auto-responder upgrade for its Web site. It also contracted with [Ruf Strategic Solutions](#), a marketing and business intelligence firm, to augment its knowledge of prospects who sign up for its mailings.

A sign-up page on the South Shore CVA's main site offers more than 20 areas of interest to tick, but the dirty secret is that between half and 70% of enrollees don't indicate any interests at all.

That's where Ruf steps in. The company, through a partnership with [Simpleview, Inc.](#), overlays the basic address information captured through the South Shore CVA's Web sites and live events with a variety of demographic and psychographic data points, such as personal interests and presence of children.

The overlay information helps the South Shore CVA target relevant e-newsletters to consumers who have elected to receive these communications. If a prospect has agreed to receive the South Shore CVA's newsletters, the organization can send or suppress specific monthly mailings based on their potential for being opened. The organization mails between 3,000 and 5,000 newsletters to individuals on its 110,000 file every month.

If overlay data revealed presence of children, the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority suppressed the March mailing of its St. Patrick's Day-themed newsletter. [Click to expand](#)

"We are doing a great deal of segmentation," says Batistatos. "We're putting together a golf e-mailing. We did a gaming one, and we have a huge religious tourism component."

Relevance works. The company's consumer e-mail open rates are around 34%. Open rates reach 42% for its business to business newsletters. That's up from between 10% and 15% in 2009.

Aside from the e-newsletters, making the main guide all digital means the organization can keep the content fresh. It also means marketers only need to be in the guide during months with strong earning potential. As Batistatos notes, a high-end restaurant might not want to have an ad run during a month when the region is hosting a number of amateur sporting events, or kids' events. But that same restaurant would want to be front-and-center when, say, a bankers' convention comes round.

Even better: thanks to tracking options embedded within the e-mails, both the participating merchant and the South Shore CVA can determine exactly who is responding to its offers—and merchants can access demographic profiles of their respondents as well.

Overlaying location information can also help convince merchants that the guide goes to a critical mass of individuals in their marketing footprint. The South Shore CVA has managed to convince at least one advertiser to participate in its Visitors guide as a result of information generated through Ruf's analysis.