



LLOYD D. LEVENSON INSTITUTE
OF GAMING, HOSPITALITY & TOURISM



SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Atlantic City Stakeholder

Report – November 2021

Sarah Rose Grady, MA
Assistant Director, LIGHT

Supported by
Jane Bokunewicz, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty Director, LIGHT

Background and Purpose of Study

Through community discourse and ongoing efforts by the city, county and state it has become clear that Atlantic City is in need of a new marketing campaign and a strategic plan for promoting its tourism product. To this end, the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority (CRDA), secured the services of Masterpiece Advertising of Atlantic City (Masterpiece). Masterpiece sought research to inform the design of the campaign and plan for the city, and so partnered with The Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming Hospitality and Tourism, Stockton University School of Business (LIGHT) to conduct two studies. The first “Lifestyle” survey was conducted in September 2021 (report October 2021) and sought to gauge the perceptions and motivations of Atlantic City visitors, the second, this “Stakeholder” survey, sought feedback from the city’s industry and community leaders.

Methodology

An anonymous link was sent to a mailing list of Atlantic City stakeholders. These stakeholders were asked to answer a series of questions regarding their perception of Atlantic City its strengths, weaknesses, external threats and opportunities. The 13-question survey was administered online via Qualtrics from October 1st through October 22nd, 2021. The mailing list, provided by Masterpiece Advertising, was comprised of individuals who had a professional or personal connection to Atlantic City, and a vested interest in its future as a destination.

While a total 68 responses were collected, not all respondents answered every question. The following analysis is based on total responses to each individual question.

Executive Summary

Atlantic City’s stakeholders have a clear and shared understanding of the resort’s strengths, weaknesses and external threats. Respondents agreed that current marketing of the resort is inadequate and unequal to the task of promoting a revitalized tourism product and reimagining of Atlantic City as a resort destination.

As far as opportunities for developing future tourism offerings there are multiple viewpoints with most in agreement that the city needs to diversify its activities and amenities beyond casino gaming and seek out as yet untapped audience segments beyond the ‘traditional’ visitor profile.

Key Findings

- Stakeholders cited condition of the city and its public reputation as weaknesses of the resort
- Quality of life issues and limited public transportation options were also identified as weaknesses.
- Stakeholders cited the city’s casinos, beach and boardwalk as strengths of the resort as well as its proximity to major population centers
- The city’s art, music, culture, entertainment and dining offerings were also seen as important strengths.

- Respondents wanted to see a more diversified, multi-cultural and multi-generational tourism product for Atlantic City.
- Regional competition, gaming and non-gaming, was seen as a threat to the resort, in addition to the resort's weaknesses.
- 73.3% of respondents Strongly Agree that the city's marketing resources are insufficient.
- 54.8% of respondents Strongly Agree that Atlantic City needs a compellingly vibrant (i.e. "reimagined") brand image.

Results

Vision for the Future

"If you had the power and authority to do three (3) things to reimagine Atlantic City's tourism future, what three things would you do?"

Respondents were encouraged to consider how they would like to see Atlantic City reimaged; they were asked to list three things they would do to bring this about. Consistent with current public discussion on the topic, responses called out the city's struggles with poverty, blight, negative perception/reputation, and poor infrastructure, and called for resolution to these challenges. Respondents also wished to see development or optimization of existing tourism amenities and experiences beyond those offered by the city's nine casino resorts, city-wide collaboration and sense of unity, and a focus on the city's diverse population. Several wished to see more offerings for families.

A selection of responses are included below as is a word cloud showing the frequency of occurrence of certain words within responses:

"Make it safe, Make it clean, Make it attractive"

"Revitalize downtown, Attract new businesses, Add family friendly attractions"

"Cleaner streets and neighborhoods, more cultural and community events, improved reputation on public safety"

"Focus on diversity. That means both a diversity in offerings, as well as highlighting our diverse population and how we welcome a diverse population."

"Transform blighted buildings with paint, and transform empty lots into parks and playgrounds, even if temporary. The visual landscape is a turn off to tourists. Things are happening little by little and that is good, but there needs to be more "AC Pride of Place" programs and efforts to get the community engaged in making our town look a LOT better."

"Utilize the local talent pool to develop a robust casino entertainment scene that supports area artists and subsequently the local economy. Much like the collective belief that Nashville begets great musicians, Atlantic City has the potential to create a reputation that it develops and supports home-grown performers and fine artists."

“FOOD - There are a lot of options here for a town this size, Beach - it's always there. It's fun. Combined with other A.C. assets, A.C. SHOULD be an unstoppable force., Driving convenience”

Word cloud:



Weaknesses

What are Atlantic City’s three (3) greatest tourism weaknesses? Why?

Responses regarding the city’s weaknesses were consistent with those to the prior question of how the city might be reimagined for the future. The condition of the city and its public reputation featured prominently as did a lack of variety in activities and amenities beyond the casino experience and outside of the peak summer tourism season. Some respondents also cited incidence of homelessness/panhandling, quality of life issues for residents and visitors, limited public transportation options, and lack of a unified marketing message.

A selection of responses are included below as is a word cloud showing the frequency of occurrence of certain words within responses:

“Infrastructure, Safety, Its perception”

“Cleanliness, Perception of danger, Mixed messages”

“Unsightly parts of the city, No train from NYC, Homeless”

“Doesn't feel clean or safe, Parking is a hassle and can be expensive at times, diverse attractions; we keep hearing about making it more family friendly, but it has yet to truly happen.”

“In your face prostitutes and drug addicts, Low quality stores with aged facades on the boardwalk, Lack of market rate and I had housing inventory for second home buyers that lead to year-round business”

Word cloud:



External Threats

What are the three (3) greatest external threats to the future of tourism in Atlantic City?

Regional and online casino gaming expansion featured prominently in responses regarding the future of tourism in Atlantic City. Given the city’s strong connection to the casino industry in the form of its nine casino resorts, this was not a surprise. Respondents also noted competition from neighboring tourism destinations, persistent challenges related to the city’s previously stated weaknesses, global threats like those of climate change and possible future pandemics, and lack of a clear vision and united message for the city.

A selection of responses are included below as is a word cloud showing the frequency of occurrence of certain words within responses:

“Competition, Climate change, Influx of those in need of social services”

“Organizations continuing to work in silos, Political influence, Climate change”

“Expansion of gaming, Its weakness as a resort, Lack of an aggressive plan to improve the area”

“More Gaming outside AC, Increasing over regulation of business by state government, Failure to improve condition of quality of life issues, i.e. homeless population, safety, infrastructure”

“Other online and area gambling markets., Reputation of gang activity and crime. I’ve heard tourists call the Atlantic City that they have to drive through to get to their casino of choice a “slum”., High taxes making it all but impossible for good people to afford to live here.”

Word cloud:



Marketing

Atlantic City’s Message

In ten words or fewer, state Atlantic City’s current tourism marketing message.

Respondents were asked to summarize in a few words what they believed was the current marketing message of the city. Many cited the city’s “Do AC” campaign:

“Do AC a place to play, work and live”

“Do AC America’s Favorite Playground”

“Besides Do AC? Nothing that jumps out”

others had difficulty defining the message:

“Uninspired, unrealistic, and virtually non-existent”

“There is no one clear message, too many messages”

“I can’t because I don’t know what the message is”

and some shared other thoughts focusing on the city’s identified strengths:

“Great entertainment, dining, nightlife”

“Come stay and play at the casinos and beaches”

“AC is open for business.”

“Come Back!!!”

Key Demographic Groups

Describe the key demographic group(s) to which Atlantic City must appeal, if it is to be a successful tourism destination.

In their responses stakeholders included a broad range of key demographic groups encompassing segments already well represented among Atlantic City visitors (as captured in the October 2021 Lifestyle survey) and those not as well represented.

A selection of responses included:

“Married Couples in their mid 40's.”

“LGTBQ+”

“Ethnically Diverse”

“City Dwellers”

“25-35 year olds”

“Families”

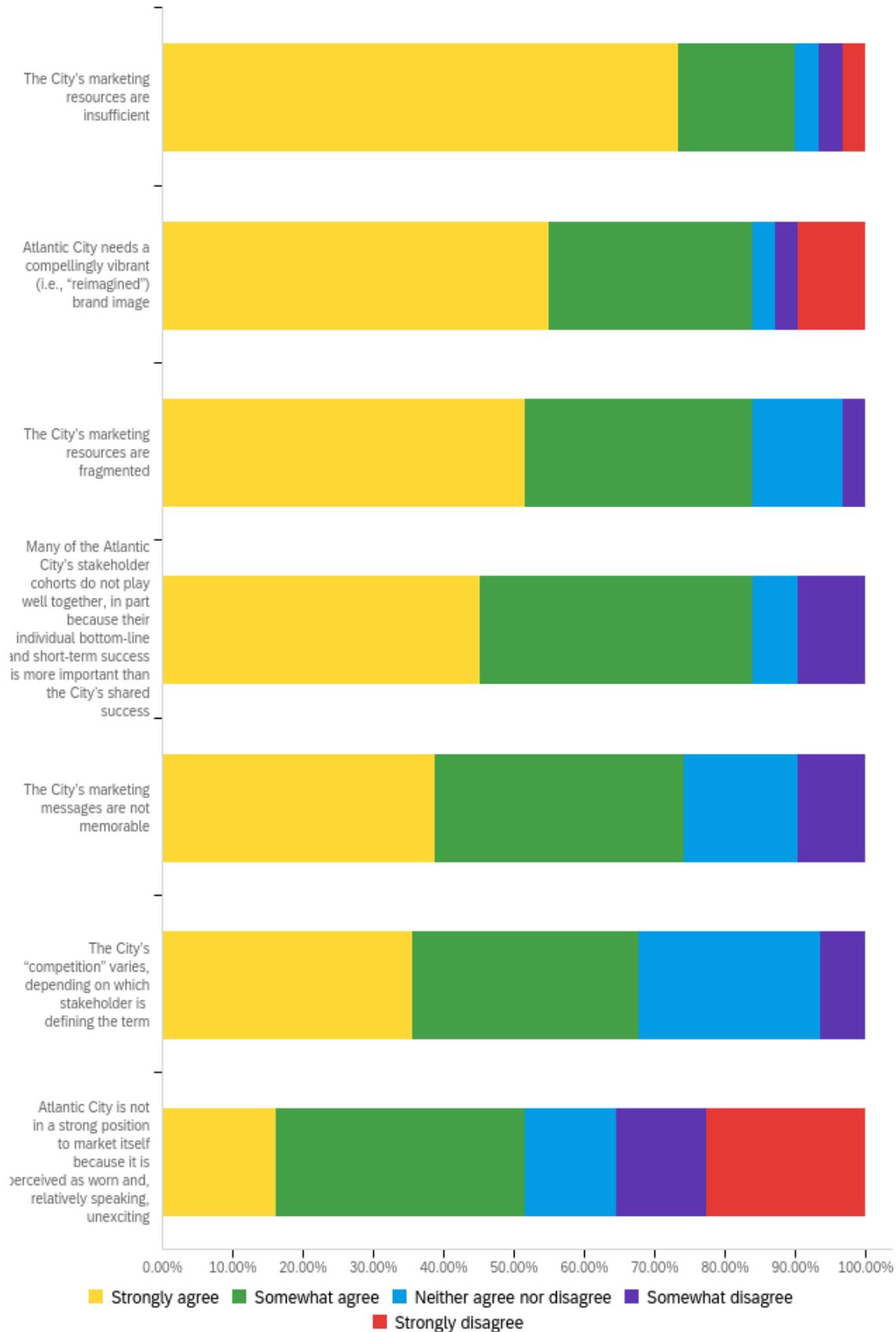
“Second home buyers”

“age 30 - 45 professionals”

Resources

Stakeholders were asked to respond to a series of statements mostly focusing on the city's marketing efforts and resources.

- 73.3% of respondents Strongly Agree that the city's marketing resources are insufficient.
- 54.8% of respondents Strongly Agree that Atlantic City needs a compellingly vibrant (i.e. “reimagined”) brand image.
- 51.6% of respondents Strongly Agree that the City's marketing resources are fragmented



Interests

Which of the following interests do you or members of your travel group most identify with? Please use the sliders to rank your ten (10) most significant/highest interests from 1 (highest interest) to 10 (lower interest). Leave the slider at 0 for any interest that does not apply to you or your travel group.

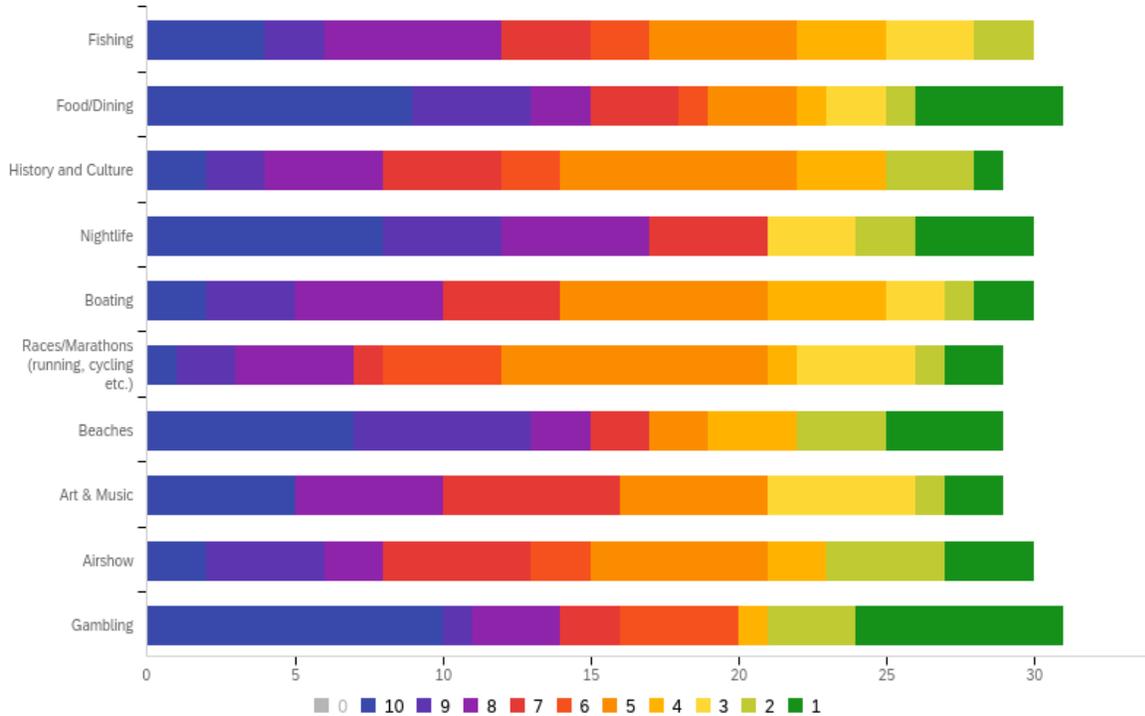
Respondents were also asked to react to and rank a series of interests (31 total) with the aim of exploring how these align with the city's strengths and current offerings and suggesting areas that the resort could focus on developing.

Respondents to this question expressed interest in nearly every area with Hiking (5 responses), Sports Events – Participant (2 responses) and Cycling (2 responses) having the most “0” responses corresponding to an answer of “not applicable.” Architecture, Agritourism, Amusement Rides, Beaches, Breweries/Distilleries, Camping, Cannabis, Car Shows, Golf, Nature/Outdoors, Photography, Shopping, Sports Events – Spectator, Waterparks and Wineries each earned one “0” response.

The top six interests (interests ranked “1” by respondents were Gaming (7 responses), Food/Dining (5 responses), Architecture (5 responses), Sports Events -Participant (4 responses), Beaches (4 responses) and Nightlife (4 responses).

We suspect that the responses to this question, and to the same question in the lifestyle study may be flawed. Respondents may have been confused by the presentation of the question and its scale of “1” highest “10” lowest.

As far as overall interest, respondents most often expressed some level of interest for Gambling (31 responses), Food/Dining (31 responses), Fishing (30 responses), Airshow (30 responses), Boating (30 responses), Nightlife (30 responses), Beaches (29 responses), Races/Marathons (29 responses), Art & Music (29 responses), History and Culture (29 responses). A graphic representation of the ranking of these 10 interests is included below.



Unasked Questions

What question(s) should have been included in this survey, but were not?

Lastly, respondents were asked to suggest questions that they would have liked to have seen included in the survey. A sample of these responses is included below:

How can we all work together for the highest good for all? How can we clean up this town? How pleased are you with local government in Atlantic City? Would you be willing to participate in regular meetings to aid others in achieving their goals?

How many years have you lived or worked in Atlantic City? What marketing event or slogan stands out as the best?

What outlets/platforms can we use to promote positivity and change in Atlantic City—locally and statewide?

Please identify city's that you believe have demonstrated effective strategic marketing initiatives/campaigns to attract tourists?

These unasked questions perhaps represent opportunities for further inquiry and represent additional approaches to achieving the city's expressed goal of developing a new marketing campaign and a strategic plan for promoting the tourism product.

Discussion

Respondents were asked what they would do if given the power to reimagine Atlantic City, overwhelmingly their responses focused on a transformation of the city both in terms of its physical attributes and reputation. The words “safe” and “clean” featured prominently in descriptions of city streets, parking, and the boardwalk. Stakeholders wished to see aesthetic and infrastructural improvements within and beyond the tourism district as well as a meaningful shift in perceptions of the city, its safety and offerings.

Another theme that emerged from the data was that of diversification both of the city’s offerings and its target audience. Respondents emphasized the need for amenities and activities beyond casino gaming. Year-round, multi-generational, and “out-of-the-box” amenities, which create experiences appealing to a greater variety of visitors. Visitors drawn from an increasingly diverse population across the ethnic, economic and age spectrum.

In weighing the city’s weaknesses and strengths the views of visitors (as captured in the October 2021 Atlantic City Lifestyle Survey), and stakeholders were in alignment. Both groups agreed that the city’s current poverty, and related social and infrastructural, challenges were weaknesses that have a negative impact on the visitor experience.

As for the city’s strengths, casino gaming, the beach and boardwalk were top of mind for both visitors and stakeholders. Beyond this, both groups identified the city’s emerging dining, music and entertainment scene, its diverse cultural heritage and local talent, the growing meetings and conventions business, and the city’s proximity to major population centers as strengths.

With regard to threats, given the prominence of the city’s casino gaming offerings, it was not surprising that the expansion of casino gaming, to neighboring states as well as online, was a concern for respondents. In addition to competition from the gaming sector, stakeholders also listed competition from neighboring tourism destinations, negative representation of the city in media, quality of life issues for city residents, challenges with city-wide collaboration, strategic planning and leadership, the current and possible future pandemics, and climate change/severe weather as threats.

Whatever the marketing message, whatever the target demographic audience, stakeholders agreed that the city needs a united, comprehensive approach to communicating a consistent image of the city and its value to visitors. Respondents wanted to see resources dedicated to leverage the city’s assets, grow new business opportunities, and raise awareness of the city as a distinctive resort destination with unique, value added experiences for every visitor segment.