



2026 KENTUCKY TRAVEL INDUSTRY *Annual Conference*

NOVEMBER 11-13 | LEXINGTON

2026 KENTUCKY TRAVEL INDUSTRY ANNUAL CONFERENCE

November 11-13, 2026 | Central Bank Center | Lexington, Kentucky

SCHEDULE

All conference events will take place at the Central Bank Center unless noted otherwise in the schedule. Lexington is in the Eastern time zone.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11

7:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

REGISTRATION & HELP DESK OPEN

Main Street Lobby

8:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

VOLUNTOURISM EVENT

Lexington Rescue Mission

Join fellow attendees for a service project at The Lexington Rescue Mission, whose mission is to fulfill the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of hurting people in the greater Lexington area. They accomplish this by providing services such as meals, clothing, housing, addiction recovery, job training, and street outreach.

Participants will have the opportunity to help with various projects including meal preparation/serving, clean-up project, sorting of donated items, organizing furniture storage area, landscaping, painting, and other areas in need. A continental breakfast will be served in Main Street Lobby at the CBC prior to departing for service project. Click [here](#) to register. *(Registration is required.)*

9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

TRADESHOW SET UP

Ballroom 1

12:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

CITY TOURS

Get to know the “Horse Capital of the World” by partaking in one of two city tour options on Wednesday, November 11. The deadline to register for both is Friday, October 30.

City Tour # 1: Behind-the-Scenes Tour of Keeneland for the November Sales

VisitLEX is partnering with Keeneland and Visit Horse Country to allow guests to experience firsthand the November Horse Sales! Go behind-the-scenes at Keeneland, the only racecourse in North America that unites world-class live racing and industry-leading equine auctions. Visiting the host site for the 2026 Breeders’ Cup World Championships, attendees will learn more about the international event, explore Keeneland’s newest renovations, and hear from industry experts about the sales process and its impact on the Thoroughbred industry. The afternoon will wrap up in the iconic Sales Pavilion for a glimpse of the November Horses of Racing Age Sale. Lunch and transportation will be provided. Note that this tour is limited to 35 attendees. Click [here](#) to register. *(Registration is required.)*

City Tour # 2: Bites of the Bluegrass Tour

This walking tour through downtown Lexington is more than just a food tour — it’s a journey through the people, places, and moments that shaped the city into what it is today. As we stroll through historic streets and beautiful architecture, you’ll hear the stories that don’t make it into history books — stories of innovators, risk-takers, artists, horsemen, and the everyday people who built Lexington.

Along the way, we'll stop inside a few of our favorite downtown restaurants to enjoy a progressive meal, giving you a taste of the food scene while you experience the city's stories in a meaningful and memorable way. Guests should be prepared to leisurely walk roughly 0.7 miles. Note that this tour is limited to 30 attendees. Click [here](#) to register. *(Registration is required.)*

4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.

BOWLING FOR BOURBON

Southland Lanes

Looking for a fun way to kick off the 2026 Kentucky Travel Industry Annual Conference? Strike up some new connections at Bowling for Bourbon—where friendly competition meets great networking!

Whether you're a seasoned bowler or just in it for the laughs, this attendee-favorite event is the perfect blend of networking and Kentucky hospitality. Lace up your bowling shoes and get ready for an unforgettable evening. Spots are limited. Click [here](#) to register. *(Registration is required.)*

7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

ICEBREAKER OPENING EVENT

Manchester Music Hall

Come in your 90's country music finest (optional) and enjoy music by some of Kentucky's up and coming country artists!

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12

7:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

REGISTRATION & HELP DESK

Main Street Lobby

8:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m.

SILENT AUCTION

Ballroom Pre-Function Hall

8:00 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.

OPENING BREAKFAST

Ballrooms 2-3

SPEAKER: Renee Shaw – A Career Covering All Things Kentucky

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Bronze Traverse Award Winners, Member of the Year and Emerging Leader Award

9:30 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

TRADESHOW BREAK

Ballroom 1

10:00 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.

GENERAL SESSION

Ballrooms 2-3

THE VISITOR ECONOMY: VIBRANT COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE POWER OF TOURISM

The ultimate beneficiaries of tourism are our communities and the people who live there. That is not a new concept, but Josiah Brown, with his 22 years of destination marketing and management industry experience, will provide new ideas and examples of how in today's visitor economy the tourism industry can and should go far beyond just attracting visitors and play a critical role in the overall wellbeing of communities and their residents. Whether it's adding to quality of life, enhanced economic opportunities, attracting new residents and retaining young ones, and in other ways, there is power in tourism, and this session will help you learn what it is and how to unleash it.

SPEAKER: *JOSIAH BROWN – Founder, New York's Best Experiences® and Past Chair of the New York State Tourism Industry Association*

11:00 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Meeting Rooms 5-8

SPEAKING TOURISM IN WAYS IT GETS HEARD – REALLY HEARD

Meeting Room 5 (Second Floor)

This session is where professional speaking tips intersect with communicating tourism's story to elected officials, members of the business community and residents. Often when we talk to non-tourism professionals about tourism's importance, we fall into the trap of mainly referencing statistical points like economic impact and numbers of visitors. Those are important parts of the story, but if we don't also move the listener emotionally, we're not going to be effective in the communication. This session will help you hone those parts of your story including tips from a professional speaker on how best to say them.

SPEAKER: JOSIAH BROWN – Founder, New York's Best Experiences® and Past Chair of the New York State Tourism Industry Association

COLLABORATION: A GROUP TOUR ESSENTIAL

Meeting Room 6 (Second Floor)

Virtually every group tour that comes to Kentucky visits multiple destinations. And within every destination, multiple partners are involved in group tour marketing and services. Multiple destinations and multiple partners leads to one overwhelming conclusion: collaboration is essential to success in attracting group tours. This session explores real-world case studies, models, and strategies for regional and local teamwork. You will leave with actionable tools to build effective partnerships and grow your group tour business.

SPEAKERS:

- **EDDIE LUTZ** – Director of Attraction & Resource Sales, Ark Encounter/Creation Museum
- **JULIE PAYNE** – Founder, Attractour

UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND PUTTING IT INTO ACTION

Meeting Room 7 (Second Floor)

To some, sustainable tourism means employing strategies to protect the environment from negative impacts of tourism. It is certainly that, but it is much more. It includes accounting for current and future economic, social, and yes, environmental impacts; and it involves addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, residents, and local cultures. This session will provide a 360 view of sustainable tourism and offer actions you can take to align sustainability with tourism growth.

SPEAKERS:

- **ARIN ARNOLD-DAVIS** – Director of Destination Stewardship & Community Engagement, VisitLEX
- **PETE FINGERSON** – Executive Director, Powell County Tourism
- **ARIEL JAHN** – Senior Manager of Experience and Education, James B. Beam Distilling Company

THE BUFFALO METHOD: HOW TO REPURPOSE YOUR PROFESSIONAL MEDIA ASSETS TO MAXIMIZE USE AND VALUE

Meeting Room 8 (Second Floor)

So, you hired a professional firm to shoot great videos and photos of your destination, attraction or property. The main assets were great...but there's still a lot of gold sitting on hard drives. How do you maximize your investment to keep your feed fresh and minimize waste? Much like the Native Americans, who would use every single part of the buffalo

they've hunted to maximize its value, you have an opportunity to "buffalo" your content for maximum value. This session is an interactive and practical workshop that will provide you with a clear guide on how to audit and organize your media assets, turn them into new ones, and schedule them on social media to take their brand presence to the next level with little to no financial investment.

SPEAKER: *SAM KIRBY – Founder & Creative Director, Passage Creative*

11:45 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.

COMMISSIONER & AWARDS LUNCHEON

Ballrooms 2-3

SPEAKER: *COMMISSIONER MIKE MANGEOT – Kentucky Department of Tourism*

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Silver Traverse Award Winners, Stars of the Industry Awards and CKTP Graduation

1:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

TRADESHOW BREAK

Ballroom 1

2:00 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.

GENERAL SESSION

Ballrooms 2-3

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN TRAVELER AND INDUSTRY ADOPTION OF AI

AI has become part of how travelers discover destinations, decide where to go and plan what to do — and it's moving faster than many destinations, attractions and hotels realize. More than half of travelers (54%) have already used AI to plan a trip, and 29% say an AI recommendation changed the destination they chose. By the time a traveler reaches your website, AI may have already shaped whether you made the list.

New research from Mindtrip and its partners at Sabre and Sojern reveals the gap this opens. This session unpacks what real AI readiness takes: influencing how travelers discover you, owning the planning experience through your own channels, and turning what travelers ask into intelligence that strengthens the rest of your marketing.

SPEAKER: *ROBERT PATTERSON – Senior Vice President of Tourism Partnerships, Mindtrip*

3:00 p.m. – 3:45 p.m.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

BRINGING THE HEART TO HOSPITALITY: ATTRACTING, ENGAGING & RETAINING GREAT PEOPLE

Meeting Room 5 (Second Floor)

Kentucky's hospitality and tourism industry continues to face significant workforce challenges. Rising labor costs, competition for talent, changing employee expectations, and persistent turnover are putting pressure on both the guest experience and the bottom line. Recruiting employees is only part of the solution—the greater opportunity is creating workplaces where great people want to stay. Led by Commonwealth Hotels' Human Resources and executive leadership teams, this interactive work session will bring hotel and tourism leaders together for a practical conversation about staffing challenges, labor costs, retention, culture, and taking great care of the people who take care of our guests. Commonwealth Hotels, recognized for eight consecutive years as a Best Place to Work in Kentucky, will share lessons learned, successful practices, and real-world strategies for building stronger teams while managing the financial realities of today's labor environment.

SPEAKERS:

- **JENNIFER PORTER** – *President & CEO, Commonwealth Hotels*
- **KIM JENNINGS** – *Vice President of Human Resources, Commonwealth Hotels*
- **PAM HANSEN** – *Director Talent Acquisition, Commonwealth Hotels*

THE SCIENCE OF CREATING LASTING TRAVEL MEMORIES

Meeting Room 6 (Second Floor)

At its core, a fundamental goal of the tourism industry is to create experiences that leave visitors with lasting memories. Yet, despite the central importance of memory to what we do, we know little about the science behind how memories are formed, retained, and recalled. In many ways, our industry constantly strives to achieve outcomes without fully understanding the mechanisms that make them possible. During this session a noted UK neurologist and researcher will share the basic science underlying memory and how that can be translated to what we do and how we do it.

SPEAKERS:

- **ABBY DIXON (Moderator)** – *Executive Director, Henderson Tourism Commission*
- **DR. E. PINAR COSKUN, MD** – *Assistant Professor of Neurology/Geriatric Neurology, Department of Neurology, UK College of Medicine*

VISITOR CENTERS: SETTING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE STAGE

Meeting Room 7 (Second Floor)

Beyond setting the stage for what travelers choose to experience at a destination or attraction, the visitor center experience itself can influence how travelers ultimately think and

feel about their trip. This session showcases three distinctly different visitor centers, sharing practical operations advice and providing insights about the soft skills that will leave visitors with positive and lasting memories. This session's value is not limited just to attendees who have a visitor center. If the future operation of a visitor center is something you want to explore, this session is also for you.

SPEAKERS:

- **MICHELLE ALLEN (Moderator)** – Executive Director, Somerset- Pulaski County Tourism
- **MIKE ATTEBURY** – Director of Visitor Experiences, Louisville Tourism
- **JEFF CROWE** – Director of Kentucky Experiences, Heaven Hill Distillery

SOCIAL & EARNED MEDIA – CONNECTIONS, BASICS & BEST PRACTICES

Meeting Room 8 (Second Floor)

This session will be beneficial to all members – all sectors – who engage in social and/or earned media and will be especially valuable to those with smaller budgets. Although social media and earned media are distinct methods for messaging, they also overlap in ways that add to their effectiveness. During this session you will learn basics and current best practices about both as well as how one can impact the other.

SPEAKERS:

- **NORA BRYANT** – Partner, Digital Communications Director, State & Tell
- **LAUREN GUESS** – Partner, Public Relations Director, State & Tell

6:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

GALA RECEPTION

Ballroom Pre-Function Hall

7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

GALA DINNER

Ballrooms 2-3

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Gold, Awards of Distinction, Most Innovative and Best of Show Traverse Award Winners and Mangeot-Oaken for Distinguished Service Award

9:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m.

NIGHTCAP PARTY

Wildcat Whiskey Club (Second Floor)

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13

7:00 a.m.

REGISTRATION & HELP DESK OPEN

Main Street Lobby

8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.

NETWORKING BREAKFAST

Ballrooms 2-3

KENTUCKY MUSICAL GUEST: AcoUstiKats, University of Kentucky's premier men's a cappella group

9:15 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Ballrooms 2-3

9:45 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

GENERAL SESSION

Ballrooms 2-3

YOU BELONG HERE – A KENTUCKY LOVE LETTER

Actor and film producer Steve Zahn and chef-restaurateur Ouita Michel come together for an engaging conversation about their collaboration with the Kentucky focused docuseries, *You Belong Here*. Featured at the Tribeca Film Festival and the ATX Television Festivals the series explores farm-to-table connections, local growers, chefs and the way food unites people across a variety of Kentucky communities. Along the way Steve and Ouita will discuss how the Commonwealth has shaped their lives and careers and offer their thoughts about the people, places and culture that make Kentucky unique.

SPEAKERS:

- *MARY QUINN RAMER (Moderator) – President, VisitLEX*
- *OUITA MICHEL – Owner, Holly Hill & Co.*
- *STEVE ZAHN – Founder, Macaroni Art Productions*

10:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

TRADESHOW BREAK

Ballroom 1

11:00 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.

GENERAL SESSION

Ballrooms 2-3

TRAVEL – IT’S A FAMILY MATTER

The family travel market has always been important to Kentucky's tourism industry but never more so than right now. During this session you'll learn about real time family travel trends identified by Tripadvisor measuring feedback and behaviors from the millions of visitors to their site, including specific Kentucky examples. From there, the session will shift to strategies, initiatives and collaborations that have been used by Branson, Missouri with its evolution in becoming a nationally popular family destination. The session will address the family market in both marketing as well as service terms and will be applicable to all industry sectors.

SPEAKERS:

- *SCOTT CAUFIELD – Senior Principal Client Partner, Tripadvisor*
- *HEATHER HERMEN – SVP/Chief Marketing Officer, Explore Branson*

11:45 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

CLOSING SESSION

Ballrooms 2-3