

Case Study

Cloud Brigade Helps Keep Visit Santa Cruz County in the Spotlight

www.santacruz.org



Summary

Customer Since 2018
 Located in Santa Cruz, CA
 Industry: Leisure, Travel & Tourism,
 Small Business
 Maggie Ivy, CEO
 Founded in 1988, Non-profit

Challenge

Visit Santa Cruz County needed to migrate its website and content management system to a more modern platform.

Benefits

- The new web platform allows for easy update of partner information, blog posts, calendar events and other information by internal staff- thus eliminating the need for third party content update
- Custom analytics help track paid online partner listing and elevated placements on the website
- Important new features, including event calendaring, have been added to the website
- Backend business processes significantly improved in efficiency

About Visit Santa Cruz County (VSCC)

Visit Santa Cruz County (VSCC) is a non-profit organization with a mission to stimulate the local economy by promoting Santa Cruz County as a visitor, conference/meeting, and film destination through a variety of marketing and promotional programs. These include advertising, public relations, and visitor services. VSCC's priority is to attract high-yield overnight business during the off-peak periods of the year. There are over 3 million visitor trips taken to Santa Cruz County each year. As the area's official Destination Marketing Organization, VSCC is the best resource for visitors to obtain travel-related information about the area. Including where to stay, what to see and do, and where to eat.

Background

The VSCC website is an essential platform to promote partner businesses such as hotels, motels, vacation rentals, bed and breakfast inns, restaurants, retailers, and a variety of other tourism-related businesses and activities across the county for visitors and locals. The website attracts a million visitors each year. In 2018, VSCC undertook a project to modernize the backend infrastructure of the website to enhance the user experience. Having won a competitive bid process for the revamp work, Cloud Brigade migrated the website to a more modern platform and built enhancements to support VSCC's business and technological needs.

Business Challenges Solved

- **More Streamlined Systems and Processes Were Needed**-Updating website content required coding that could not be delegated to non-technical staff members
- **Business Bottlenecks** – Website content updates were outsourced to a third party
- **Excessive Operational Costs**- Too much staff time was devoted to updating website content
- **Generic Technology** - The website and content management system were based on technology that required features to be custom-built

Why Cloud Brigade

VSCC held an open bid process and Cloud Brigade submitted a proposal. In addition to presenting VSCC with a very competitive bid, Cloud Brigade emphasized its experience with migrating complex applications such as websites and the content management systems behind them. “We seem to have found a niche in fixing websites that no longer meet their owners’ needs,” says Chris Miller, Founder and CEO of Cloud Brigade. “In VSCC’s case, the technology needed to be updated and more closely managed. We earned their trust that we could build them a much more robust website that would be simpler to use and maintain, and we would do our best to retain their search rankings.”

“Our website is the main point of contact for visitors, local businesses, partners, and stakeholders. We needed an agency who could migrate our current CMS to a more updated model without compromising search rankings and other measurables we had worked so hard to establish. We’re very fortunate to have discovered Cloud Brigade in our own backyard as working with locally owned businesses is always our preference. They established a hands-on approach early on and remained engaged in our project throughout the process.”

– Daryl Zape, Online Marketing Director, Visit Santa Cruz County

A Complex Migration of Website and Content

VSCC’s initial website was built on a platform that was not user friendly. It had been highly customized because their previous CMS lacked an ecosystem of feature plug-ins. Every time VSCC needed a new feature, it had to be created from scratch. As a result, it was a challenge to support the website and it no longer met the organization’s expanding needs. As

VSCC programs matured and became more integrated, its online presence needed to reflect an elevated image and more advanced online experience for visitors, locals, and stakeholders.

In addition, VSCC stored partner information using FileMaker, a customer relationship management (CRM) system. The website sourced data from FileMaker to present in real time. VSCC wanted to transition to Simpleview, a database tool specifically designed for destination marketing organizations. Partners were accustomed to using FileMaker to update their own information and would need to be migrated to and trained on the Simpleview platform.

Cloud Brigade proposed to migrate the VSCC website and all its content to WordPress, a modern platform chosen for its ease of use and extensibility. WordPress has many commercially-available plug-in functions, enabling the platform to be easily customized unlike DNN where plug-ins need to be created by hand.

VSCC wanted to retain the look of its original website, so Cloud Brigade replicated the design in WordPress. The more challenging aspect of the migration was bringing the web content forward. Everything had to be migrated permanently to WordPress while the partner content, now moved to Simpleview, had to be brought into WordPress in real time as determined by user searches. There is no existing integration between Simpleview and WordPress so Cloud Brigade constructed a system that accesses Simpleview’s API to look for new or changed partner listings and dynamically create, delete, or update that information in WordPress.

VSCC also generates marketing forms within Simpleview, and Cloud Brigade is dynamically generating those forms on the WordPress website. Cloud Brigade has implemented a number of marketing integrations to allow VSCC to track activities related to paid online partner listings and elevated placements.

Preserving Critically Important SEO Ranking

Search engine optimization (SEO) has been a top concern throughout the website migration. Over the years, VSCC has spent considerable time and money ensuring that its web content appears at the top of web searches. High ranking search results are a critically important way to draw more visitors to a website. Therefore, Cloud Brigade wanted to preserve the hard-earned SEO rankings as much as possible.

Building a new website and changing the content or the URL page-naming structure can play havoc with SEO. Cloud Brigade developed internal tools that enabled a comparative audit between the old and the new websites. The tool is able to find where pages, content, or the URL changed that will result in a drop-off of SEO rankings. Thus, Cloud Brigade is able to address those issues to preserve a high degree of their SEO placement.

Behind the scenes, the website and content migration process was very complex which involved a lot of moving parts. Cloud Brigade's task was akin to changing the tires on a bus while the bus is in motion—and they did it successfully.

Long Term Benefits from the New Website

Migrating the website to WordPress had many benefits. VSCC's Online Marketing Director, Daryl Zape oversaw the migration process from beginning to end. "Having a user-friendly website for our staff to access internally was very important to us," says Zape. "I know how to code but it was critical for other staff members to be able to update content on their own, so making the website functionality as easy to use as possible was important to us." Zape adds that WordPress is more SEO-friendly and internal staff members can now post their own blog content and add new events to the online calendar.

"We know we can count on Cloud Brigade's technical expertise and ability to solve complex problems as they continue to build custom integrations from our web platform into our new niche customer relationship management system and provide continued web hosting management and maintenance. Cloud Brigade is a valuable resource."
– Daryl Zape, Online Marketing Director, Visit Santa Cruz County

"Just having our people be able to access the website with little or no knowledge of coding has been very beneficial to us. We have been able to eliminate a third-party provider to update our web content, saving us time and resources" says Zape.

Zape says that Cloud Brigade offers excellent customer service. "Being able to learn from the professionals at Cloud Brigade, and learning what they are doing behind the scenes, has been so helpful. Their project manager is always on top of the projects. She's very upfront and transparent about what is going on. The developers are helpful and show me their coding behind the scenes. They explain what the issues are in terms that are easy to understand and respond to our needs in a timely manner."

Cloud Brigade chose a new cloud hosting provider for VSCC's website and content management system and set up custom caching to increase the website speed. Backups and a staging environment were used to test all upgrades before pushing them into production. Cloud Brigade continues to provide infrastructure support and maintenance.

"The collaborative effort over the last three years with Cloud Brigade has enabled us to stay competitive with our online presence," says Zape.

Technology

- **Software:** WordPress, MySQL, Simpleview
- **Programming Language:** PHP
- **PaaS:** Kinsta
- **IaaS:** AWS

Services

- **Cloud Infrastructure** - Providing ongoing support for new cloud hosting environment. Amazon EC2 (Elastic Compute Cloud), RDS (Relational Database Service), Simple Storage Service (S3)
- **Application Support:** Migrated the web content to a new platform and preserved critical SEO links
- **Software Development:** Developed a new website on a modern platform

Partners

