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Visit Baltimore's \$800,000 campaign is betting on local Black artists to help attract more tourists to the city

By JOHN-JOHN WILLIAMS IV

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Mecca Verdell, an award-winning poet, has worked with the city's tourism organization, Visit Baltimore, to name the BOP Pass, which offers discounts to restaurants, shops and attractions. Banners on City Hall feature a poem by Kondwani Fidel, also a part of the Visit Baltimore campaign. (Kim Hairston/Baltimore Sun)

Mecca Verdell, a Black poet and teacher, beams as she watches the images advertising Visit Baltimore’s newest campaign pop up on a kiosk steps away from the Inner Harbor. One image shows a tourism app that’s part of the effort. Verdell created its name, BoP Pass.

The tourism group is counting on Verdell and other local artists and influencers — most of them Black — to help bring tourists to town using a unique \$800,000 multiyear campaign that puts their faces and work out front across the region.

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“The heart of Baltimore is the people that are living in it. We basically know the ins and outs of this city better than anyone else,” Verdell said. “I’m happy I was able to do this [campaign].”

Attracting more tourists would be good news for the industry that brought 86,000 jobs and an estimated \$6 billion in economic impact to the city in 2019 but faces “challenges and uncertainty” due to COVID-19, according to Visit Baltimore’s annual report.

With Baltimore’s Black population of more than 60%, it’s about time that members of this key demographic get to promote their hometown, the artists

and marketing experts say. The effort is rare in the nation and bucks a tainted perception of the city, say backers and experts. And if it works — there are early signs of promise — the campaign could be a first step in [recovering from the pandemic's hit to local tourism](#).

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The weakness follows years of incremental growth. Visit Baltimore reports that day trips to Baltimore increased nearly 16% from 23.3 million in 2012 to 27 million in 2019, while overnight trips remained flat, around 10.6 million a year, from 2016 to 2019. For comparison, Visit Philadelphia saw the number of total domestic visitors to its metro region grow by nearly 15% from 2012 to 2019.

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Although this year may prove to be an outlier because of the long COVID-19 shutdown, Sarah Schaffer, chief marketing officer for Visit Baltimore, said she is seeing “pent-up demand” for local day trips and quick overnight visits from those traveling by car.

In February, Visit Baltimore launched the new campaign using Black “creatives” — a group of artists, makers and social media influencers that has often been ignored — and then restarted it this summer after the coronavirus pandemic sidelined their efforts. The campaign will continue through 2021. “The creative community in Baltimore is so vibrant. The creatives in Baltimore really are the storytellers and the tastemakers and the culture drivers who create the essence, the vibe, the culture of our city,” Schaffer said. “Baltimore is a majority African American city. And we wanted a campaign that was an accurate, authentic, prideful reflection of who Baltimore is.”

Making it happen

Visit Baltimore teamed with the Philadelphia-based Bellweather Agency for the campaign using a mix of state and local funds.

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The two organizations worked with more than 800 local people in focus groups and through surveys to generate the “Your People Are Here” [campaign that has included commercials aired during the Super Bowl](#) and Grammy Awards broadcasts, billboards and outreach around Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Boston and other cities.

“This was stakeholder and creative driven,” Schaffer said. “It is an accurate, true picture of what Baltimore is. We put people first.”

Previous campaigns, she said, “focused on places and things to do versus people. People are a big part of Baltimore. We want to show them with pride.”

Schaffer declined to specify the campaign's goals for visitor growth and tourism revenue.

Support for the campaign, Schaffer and many of the creatives say, is rooted in a drive to change the national perception of Baltimore. It's true Baltimore's residents struggle against near-record violence, as critics point out. Yet there are terms and imagery — such as President Donald Trump calling the 7th District “disgusting, rat and rodent infested” — many regard as racist attacks on the city. The campaign flips that script, showing the world that Baltimore's Blackness is a strength and a magnet.

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“The community has wrapped its arms around this campaign,” Schaffer said. “People were eager for this to come to life. Baltimore is misunderstood on the national stage.”

Schaffer also said Visit Baltimore made it a priority to work with Black people for this campaign as cities tend to ignore Black communities when promoting themselves.

“If you look at the advertising and the travel [promotional] space, there is a tremendous amount of similarity,” she said, pointing out the tourism narrative has been shaped by the lens of social media such as Instagram that often ignores diverse people in cities. “It all starts to blend together. There is a certain lack of humanity in those shots. The sea of sameness is crushing. We wanted to break out of that mold.”



Author Kondwani Fidel's poem "Beneath the Shell" was featured in Visit Baltimore commercials and branding throughout the city. (Karl Merton Ferron/The Baltimore Sun)

The campaign's focus on people makes it special for author and poet Kondwani Fidel. His poem "Beneath the Shell" was written for the city's rebrand and featured in Visit Baltimore's commercials and promotions around the city, including at City Hall.

The poem compares Charm City to its signature food, crabs, and the things that come with it, such as rich flavor and social bonding, according to Schaffer.

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Fidel, a 27-year-old Station North resident, admits being surprised that his city has embraced him and other Black creatives as a way to change Baltimore's narrative.

“We were here during the recession. We were here through COVID. We were here when [former President Barack] Obama called us thugs. We were here during ‘The Wire’ age,” he said. “We’ve been here. Who else will better represent the city?”

Fidel says this campaign differs from past ones in large part because of its authenticity.

“It’s always this cheesy commentary,” he said. “For me to write what I want, when I want and not have anyone critique it and monitor my voice, it gives hope to the younger generations and artists. In Baltimore, we have been getting that love because we have been sharing that love with one another.”

Fidel, who was raised in East Baltimore in an area between Patterson Park and Highlandtown he calls “down the hill,” emerged from the Freddie Gray uprising as a powerful, exciting voice. Since then, he has penned a number of impactful pieces, including the [book “The Anti-Racist: How to Start the Conversation and Take Action,”](#) released in [September](#).

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“I never thought that they would put a person like me in a position to write a campaign that would be used in the Super Bowl,” he said. “It’s the best and [most] honest representation of Baltimore. The artists don’t have an agenda other than to be themselves. We need more people like that at these tables and part of these conversations.”

A major U.S. city embracing its Black creative community to attract tourists is a rarity, according to Yvonne Pearson, founder of PinkDollhouse Marketing, a boutique agency based in Largo. Pearson formerly worked with Visit Montgomery County and National Harbor in partnership with Maryland’s Office of Tourism Development.

“I have not seen anything like it,” Pearson said. “I think it is an approach that they should have gone into a while ago. But better late than never.”

Moving the tourism needle

Early data show the “Your People Are Here” campaign is starting to build success, according to Visit Baltimore.

Web traffic from the cities where the campaign has been launched has grown since August. Total website users on [Baltimore.org](https://www.baltimore.org) are up 41% — to 155,813 — for a two-month period from Aug. 1 to Oct. 1 compared with May 26 to July 31, when the campaign was dormant because of the pandemic, according to Schaffer.

Also, since its launch, 628 people have signed up for the BoP Pass, a free app that is part of the campaign. The BoP Pass largely promotes cultural attractions with Black themes and Black-owned businesses, offering discounts to museums, attractions, restaurants and shops such as the Reginald F. Lewis Museum near Little Italy and Ida B’s Table, a downtown restaurant.

Visit Baltimore has begun to see redemptions of app discounts at merchants including The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, Next Phaze Cafe and Drama MaMa Bookshop, according to Schaffer.

“In the long term, we expect our traveler surveys and industry reports to show that the number of marketable trips — that is, trips directly influenced by our marketing efforts — will rise,” Schaffer said.

Listening to the artists

Visit Baltimore worked with a dozen Black creatives and influencers for the campaign. Each offered up ideas, and they say the experience has been positive — like “hitting the lottery.”

Verdell, a Gwynns Falls resident who teaches poetry, creative writing and performance at Western High School, coined the name BoP Pass. It plays up the Baltimore phrase for a journey and a term, Bop, invented in the 1990s by [Baltimore native Afaa Michael Weaver](#) to describe a type of competitive poetry, according to Verdell.



Tim Chin, who co-owns Pinch, a dumpling stall at Mount Vernon Marketplace, shares photos of his food in social media. His images were used in billboards and other materials for Visit Baltimore campaign. (CHIAKI KAWAJIRI / BALTIMORE SUN)

Tim Chin, who goes by the social media persona Chyno, and another influencer, Shae Li, who is Asian American, were featured as models in lifestyle photos shot by Black Baltimore-based photographer Devin Allen. They were unveiled in September in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. Chin, who co-owns Pinch, a dumpling stall at Mount Vernon Marketplace, shares photos of his food in social media. His images were used in billboards and other materials for the campaign.



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“We don’t often see our faces represented in a fully financially backed campaign like this one, so to know that our city recognizes and uplifts those voices is amazing to me,” said Chin, a 33-year-old Mount Vernon resident. “As a Black gay man finding prominence in social media realms, culture, society, is like winning the Mega Million. Something like this is ..., hitting the lottery.”

Tracey Beale, 45, a Black jewelry designer and artist who lives in the Bromo Arts District, also was part of the campaign.

Black artists, she said, are “part of what makes Baltimore so vibrant. Visit Baltimore including Black creatives in their campaign amplifies our contributions in a space where visitors to the city are often told to just go to the Inner Harbor to experience the city.”

These efforts are important for Black creatives who have not received the same recognition as white influencers, according to Pearson.

“I’m glad that we are no longer invisible on these greater platforms and we are finally getting the recognition that we deserve,” said Pearson, who is Black.

The campaign “reflects who you have in the room,” she said. “Baltimore has received such a negative lens, from a national angle, we need someone who has such a love for their city and town to talk about it.”



John-John Williams IV

CONTACT

John-John Williams IV has worked for The Baltimore Sun since 2005. He joined the paper as an education reporter covering Howard County, then Baltimore City and state and national education stories. He joined the features staff as the fashion reporter in 2011. His role in features has expanded to covering home, food, travel and popular culture.