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## PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

### Travel & Tourism

# Philly marketing agency aims to develop travel app to boost local business, track post-pandemic consumer behavior

By [Laura](#)



Wendy Verna, the owner of Bella Vista-based marketing agency Octo Design, is working to develop Rallie, a travel app that could boost traffic to local businesses and track consumer spending amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

PHILADELPHIA / RALLIE



[Smythe](#) – Reporter, Philadelphia Business Journal | Jun 11, 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many Philadelphia businesses to adapt operations on the fly, implementing creative strategies to challenges that arise during the quickly evolving public health crisis.

This is particularly true for those in the hospitality and tourism industries, which were sent to a screeching halt mid-March. Restaurants have since [embraced to-go cocktails](#) and takeout-only models, and are beginning to reopen modified outdoor dine-in service during the yellow phase of recovery. [Museums and other tourist attractions have shifted content online](#), offering digital educational resources and virtual tours.

With normal business hours and offerings still heavily skewed, the owner of South Philadelphia marketing agency Octo Design is working to develop Rallie, an app that could help people struggling to know which local businesses are open in real-time and the services they're offering.

[Wendy Verna](#), who founded the company 20 years ago, said her company was set to launch several client websites when the pandemic hit, placing the projects on hold as business' information and customer behaviors quickly changed. **Octo Design works with clients including the Philadelphia International Airport, restaurants and cultural organizations like the Independence Visitor Center and Historic Philadelphia.**



Wendy Verna, owner and president of Octo Design Group  
WENDY VERNA

Rallie would enable users to select local, daily-only tour itineraries for restaurants, entertainment and cultural sites depending on the services the businesses have available that day. Businesses registered with the app could push out notifications on real-time deals and events to help draw in clientele during the pandemic. Tourist attractions could keep users up-to-date on occupancy caps and safety requirements, while restaurants could keep guests informed on the types of service available, like takeout-only or modified outdoor dining, and offer flash deals for short time periods.

The app could also help get a pulse on consumer behavior and spending in the tourism and hospitality industries as the pandemic progresses, Verna noted. Rallie could determine the average distance people are now willing to travel and how interest in travel amid the pandemic varies depending on age.

“What Rallie will enable us to do is we can start to look at what direct links people are clicking through to buy tickets, virtual or regular,” Verna said. “We can start to see sales and reservations coming from Rallie, and also be able to calculate all the Covid-19 modifications from a global view.”

Verna and her son Robbie first conceptualized Rallie a couple years ago. The goal at the time was to provide travel plans for poor planners, those interested in spur-of-the-moment activities or people looking to fill a few blank hours. On the business side, concepts could notify users about real-time changes, including rooftop closures during inclement weather or dollar drinks to draw crowds in during a restaurant’s slow hours.

When the pandemic hit, Verna realized the nature of the app aligned well with the way businesses must rapidly pivot strategies to keep up with changing health restrictions while keeping customers engaged, she said. Many businesses and attractions additionally struggle to keep websites updated with current Covid-19 service guidelines, prompting potential customers to call to ensure a business is open, Verna added.

“What if somebody had the virus in the establishment and they want to tell people?” she said. “The reality is nothing medically has changed today than it was the day we went into quarantine, so we’re all at risk. I am all about reopening, but we all need to be informed.”

Before coronavirus, Verna envisioned a subscription model where businesses could join the platform for about \$10 per month. Given the economic toll on the tourism and hospitality sectors during the crisis, Verna hopes to work with the tech partner to offer free memberships for six months to aid local businesses.

Verna envisions Philadelphia as a test market for Rallie before expanding to other cities. Users could only access itineraries corresponding to destinations within a 30-mile radius, providing a boost to local businesses, Verna said. While Rallie is a separate entity from Octo Design, Verna noted, the agency would serve as the marketing firm behind it.

Verna was in the process of interviewing tech partners for the app when the pandemic hit, and is now seeking a partner with a development team who can accelerate the app’s debut to a six-month timeline amid the pandemic.

## PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

Travel & Tourism

# These top Greater Philadelphia tourist attractions landed at least \$150,000 in PPP



The nonprofit Independence Visitor Center Co. was approved for between \$350,000 and \$1 million in federal Paycheck Protection Program loans.  
PHOTO BY J. FUSCO FOR IVCC



By [Laura Smythe](#) – Reporter, Philadelphia Business Journal

Jul 8, 2020, 4:52pm EDT **Updated** Jul 9, 2020, 6:19pm EDT

Travel and tourism are among the sectors that have been hit hardest by the Covid-19 pandemic. The crisis forced tourist attractions, museums and other cultural venues to close their doors in mid-March for months.

While some spots, like The Franklin Institute and Philadelphia Zoo, are [beginning to reopen](#) under social distancing guidelines and capacity limits this week, many faced uncertainty for weeks. During that time, dozens of sites were approved for Paycheck Protection Program loans to help make ends meet, according to federal data released this week.

Exact loan amounts are not specified in the public records, which instead indicate five categorized ranges: \$150,000 to \$350,000; \$350,000 to \$1 million; \$1 million to \$2 million; \$2 million to \$5 million; and \$5 million to \$10 million.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art, which has yet to announce a reopening date but is anticipated to resume operations in late summer, was approved for one of the largest loans, falling within the \$5 million to \$10 million category. The cultural site, which received approval in May via



Bank of America, retained 479 jobs with the funds, according to federal data. The museum has 800,000 visitors per year, per Business Journal research, making it [the eighth-most popular tourist attraction](#) in the region.

The Philadelphia Orchestra Association, Kimmel Center Inc. (which last month [canceled its 2020 programming and projects subsequent losses](#) of \$29 million in gross revenue), [The Franklin Institute](#), [Philadelphia Zoo](#) and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society followed behind, with each approved for a loan between \$2 million and \$5 million. Due to the funds, the zoo retained 423 jobs, Kimmel Center kept 370, Franklin Institute retained 325, the orchestra association kept 183 and the horticultural nonprofit retained 110.

Several of the city's most popular tourist attractions were also approved for PPP funds. The nonprofit Independence Visitor Center Co. received approval for a loan between \$350,000 and \$1 million. Independence National Historic Park — the Old City expanse that includes landmarks like the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, Independence Visitors Center and Congress Hall — was the top tourist attraction in Philadelphia last year with more than 4.5 million visitors, according to Business Journal research. Federal data did not indicate how many jobs Independence Visitor Center Co. retained through the PPP funds, which it got approved through PNC Bank in April.

Peddler's Village, a Bucks County attraction that boasts 65 shops and six restaurants across 42 acres of gardens and brick pathways, is Greater Philadelphia's fourth top tourist destination, per Business Journal research. The site is frequented by more than 2.2 million people annually. The Lahaska-based Peddlers Village Partnership was approved for between \$150,000 and \$350,000 in PPP, while the New Hope-based Peddler Village Administration LLC was approved within the same range.

Other sites among Greater Philadelphia's top 25 tourist attractions that were approved for PPP loans include: Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site Inc. (\$350,000 to \$1 million), Walnut Street Theatre Co. (\$1 million to \$2 million), Museum of the American Revolution (\$1 million to \$2 million), The Barnes Foundation (\$1 million to \$2 million), National Constitution Center (\$1 million to \$2 million) and Philadelphia's Magic Gardens (\$150,000 to \$350,000). The Barnes Foundation plans to reopen to the public on July 25.

The Independence Seaport Museum, which will reopen July 18, was approved for between \$350,000 and \$1 million in PPP.



## COVID-19 confusion? National parks don't require face masks, even if their states do

**Curtis Tate** USA TODAY

Published 1:57 p.m. ET Aug. 25, 2020 | Updated 5:32 p.m. ET Aug. 25, 2020



Robert Cartright and his girlfriend noticed something right away when they arrived at Glacier National Park in Montana on Saturday: The park's trails were packed, yet few people wore face masks.

The park reopened in June after a nearly three-month closure during the coronavirus pandemic. The National Park Service encourages but does not require park visitors to wear masks.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends people wear them to prevent the spread of the virus, which has infected more than 5.7 million Americans and killed more than 178,000.

At national parks, which have become a welcome outdoor escape for Americans who stayed home for weeks or months, their use is far from consistent.

"We had no idea how bad it would be here; otherwise, we would have reconsidered vacationing in Glacier," said Cartright, an IT specialist who lives in Portland, Oregon. "There are no mask reminders at the trails, only at the front gate."

According to NPS data, Glacier saw nearly 50% fewer visitors last month than it did in July 2019, which may be partly because the entrances on the eastern side of the park remain closed for the season. Other national parks are seeing more visitors than they did a year ago.

Yellowstone, which reaches into Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, saw a 2% increase in July. Virginia's Shenandoah National Park, a few hours west of Washington, saw 39% more visitors in July than it did a year ago. America's most-visited national park, Great Smoky Mountains National Park on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina, saw nearly 7% more visitors last month.

Updated visitor statistics are not available for all 419 sites managed by the National Park Service because the pandemic sent many employees home on furlough, according to spokeswoman Sally Mayberry. Other sites remain closed or partially closed, particularly those that are indoors.



Great Smoky Mountains National Park reached a record-high visitation of 12.5 million people in 2019. Crowded parking lots in Cades Cove show how popular the park has become. *Courtesy Of Warren Bielenberg/Great Smoky Mountains National Park*

Some lawmakers in Washington want the Department of the Interior to require national park visitors and employees to wear masks.

Several Democrats in the House of Representatives wrote to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt this month asking for the park service to adhere to CDC and state guidelines on masks and social distancing.

"We urge you to require visitors and employees to wear masks outdoors when they cannot maintain proper social distance," wrote the lawmakers, including the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, Raul Grijalva of Arizona, and the chairwoman of the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Deb Haaland of New Mexico. "When employees and visitors are in buildings, they should be required to wear masks."

The lawmakers cited confusion over state and local guidelines that don't match the National Park Service's. For example, Independence National Historical Park – home of the Liberty Bell – is in Pennsylvania, where a statewide mandate requires face coverings in public indoor spaces.

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The Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area straddles Kentucky and Tennessee. The former has a mask requirement, and the latter does not (though some counties do).

Grand County, Utah, and the city of Springdale, Utah, approved mask requirements in July. Those requirements affect visitors to Zion, Arches and Canyonlands National Parks.

"Conflicting guidance between NPS-governed areas and localities that require masks threatens the safety of park employees, visitors and those who live closest to our public lands," the lawmakers wrote.

Once a visitor has entered a national park in a state that doesn't mandate masks, do they need to wear one?

Mayberry said the National Park Service's guidance, which encourages visitors to follow CDC and state and local guidance, is the same across all its parks.

Cartright said hikers weren't the only ones disregarding public health guidance about masks at Glacier National Park. He said the hotel where he and his girlfriend stayed was the only coronavirus-conscious place they've observed. He said employees at restaurants handled food without gloves or masks, which would violate a statewide order.

The couple changed their plans to include less popular hikes and wider trails. Instead of eating out for the remainder of their trip, the rest of their time, they bought their own groceries. And they made another decision.

"After this trip, we aren't planning on any vacations until a vaccine is in place," he said.





NBC10 News at 4PM  
Sept. 1, 2020



Visitors might want to consider a new destination. After an extended closure, the independence Visitors Center is back open. So are the amenities inside including the gift shop.

Visitors can stop by between 9:00 and 5:00, but everyone is asked to wear face masks and practice social distancing.



NBC10 News at 7 PM  
Sept.1, 2020



After an extended closure, the Independence Visitors Center is back opening. Visitors can stop in between 9:00 to 5:00. Everyone is asked to wear a face mask and practice social distancing.



WHYY-FM  
WHYY News 08:00AM

Sept. 1, 2020

**Broadcast Date:** 01 Sep 2020  
**Time:** 08:00 AM  
**Source:** WHYY-FM  
**Market:** Philadelphia, PA  
**Title:** WHYY News  
**Hit Offset:** 00:06:47  
**File Type:** MPEG-3



The Independence Visitor Center is officially reopening today since being getting closed down since mid-March. CEO Jim Cuorato said they decided to open because other tourist attractions in the area are also reopening.



6ABC Action News 12:00PM

Sept. 1, 2020



Independence Visitors Center reopens to tourists this morning. It has been shut down for months amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Visitors will be able to stop by daily between nine and 5pm. New procedures are in place to maintain a safe space. Masks are now required.



IVCC Press Clips, June – Sept. 2, 2020



6ABC Action News 6PM

Sept. 1, 2020



The Independence Visitor Center reopened today. Locals and out of town guests are invited to stop by to learn more about the area's historic landmarks and many museums.



FOX29 Good Day Philadelphia at 5 AM  
Sept. 1, 2020



Also our Independence Visitor's Center has reopened again. It has all those new procedures that everybody has, wear a mask all that kind of stuff.

So their gift shop, which also has really cool stuff, that's also back open again, and it's open every day from 9:00 a.m.



FOX29 Good Day Philadelphia at 7AM

Sept. 1, 2020



The Independence Visitor Center has officially reopened. It has some new policies and procedures in place, of course, based on CDC guidelines because they want to keep everything safe and sanitized for visitors.

The visitors must wear a face mask inside. The independence Gift Shop located in inside the Center is also open. And the independence Visitor Center will be open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.



NBC10 News Today 4AM  
Sept. 2, 2020



This morning, the Independence Visitors Center is back open after being closed for months because of COVID-19. People can visit daily between 9:00 and 5:00. Everyone is asked to wear a mask and practice social distancing.





NBC10 News Today 6AM  
Sept. 2, 2020



This morning the Independence Visitors Center is back open after being closed for months because of COVID-19. People can visit daily between 9:00 and 5:00. Everyone is asked to wear a mask and practice social distancing.

