



PRSA Hampton Roads Chapter

2018 Pinnacle Awards Nomination

Special Events Category

LanternAsia: Art by Day, Magic by Night!

Norfolk Botanical Garden (NBG) hosted *LanternAsia: Art by Day, Magic by Night!* from March 8 through June 8, 2018. This exclusive coastal Virginia exhibition featured one-of-a-kind, large-scale, Asian-style lanterns. The international company, Tianyu Culture Communication, Inc., (www.tianyuculture.com) created this lantern exhibition for specific locations throughout NBG. NBG utilized various themes in the design of the lantern exhibition's programs to showcase the link between cultures, water, Asia, and the Americas while expanding the possibilities for partnerships with other area cultural attractions. This outdoor exhibition consisted of over 35 life-sized or larger displays lit from inside with LED lights. During the weeks the exhibition was on display, NBG scheduled multiple activities to include educational programs and lectures, hands-on art activities, and vendors.

NBG attracts over 390,000 visitors annually. The goal of *LanternAsia* was to attract more visitors to NBG. These visitors include tour groups, school groups, individuals, couples, and families. Coastal Virginia boasts a large population of military families and international residents who are stationed in the area as part of NATO's North American headquarters in Norfolk. NBG actively markets to these groups. Additionally, more money was spent on out-of-state marketing for *LanternAsia* than is usually budgeted for events. This additional marketing specifically targeted the 25-54 age group which includes young families, couples, and "empty-nesters" who are more likely to travel to out-of-area destinations for exhibitions like this. All marketing materials, both local and out-of-area, highlighted that this was a unique exhibition in Virginia.

While popular in some European countries, the Missouri Botanical Garden was the first in the United States to host this type of lantern exhibition in 2012. It was immensely popular. Since then other locations—Tampa, Spokane, Columbus, and Charlotte, for example—have hosted this type of exhibition and enjoyed great success. In 2015, representatives from NBG's staff and board of directors toured the exhibition at the Tampa Zoo and discussed the planning and logistics for such a huge endeavor with the zoo's director and personnel. Further analysis of research from the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) supported the hosting of a lantern exhibit in Norfolk. VTC defines the best target markets for out-of-state visits as Washington D.C., North Carolina, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. The metropolitan areas that show the most return on investment for coastal Virginia travel include Washington, DC, Raleigh-Durham (Fayetteville), Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore among others. A zip code survey of NBG visitors for fiscal year 2016-17 confirms that most out-of-market visitors to NBG come from the metropolitan areas of Washington D.C., Raleigh-Durham, Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia.

NBG zip code data also shows that over 53% of out-of-state visitors come from the following six states: North Carolina, Maryland, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Furthermore, many repeat visitors come from eastern North Carolina and the Outer Banks. NBG targeted its marketing campaign on Washington D.C., New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, in addition to coastal Virginia's 1.6 million residents and eastern North Carolina. According to information from the VTC's research data and the

Virginia is for Lovers 2015 Marketing Plan, visitors to Virginia are looking for experiences that will help them to create great memories. Most visitors are also looking for shorter trips that allow them to participate in a variety of experiences and provide them with a good value for their time and resource expenditures. NBG is in an ideal location to capitalize on these trends and research data from VisitNorfolk further supports the target market.

The *Virginia is for Lovers* 2015 Marketing Plan further emphasizes the importance of the internet in travel planning. It states that “more than 90% of consumers use the internet when planning and gathering information for travel.” NBG utilizes its website and social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) to promote its events and help attract these value-conscious visitors to Norfolk. Social media were key to attracting these visitors. NBG’s website data show an increase in online visitors compared to the same period in 2017 (by 37%). Facebook followers also increased (3%). VTC research data also corresponds to NBG’s visitor data which shows that many visitors look for experiences they can share with family and friends. Young families with children and grandparents with grandchildren make up a large portion of our visitors. Specifically, the number of families and children visiting NBG has increased dramatically in the past decade.

LanternAsia was scheduled to coincide with NBG’s 80th Anniversary in 2018. It was originally planned to open March 9, 2018 and last through mid-May. The unusually cold rainy weather this spring resulted in reduced visitation numbers and negatively impacted revenue expectations. Fortunately, Tianyu Culture Communication, Inc. agreed to extend the exhibition through June 8. The company also brought performers from China to entertain visitors every evening—contortionists, plate-spinners, and yo-yo artists—which added tremendously to the appeal for visitors. Another factor that impacted revenue and visitation numbers resulted from NBG extending the hours during the day when members could enter for free without having to purchase a separate ticket (until 4pm initially and then extended gradually to 6pm as the days grew longer). This decision boosted member visitation during the day while decreasing the amount of revenue that could be collected from them. Given that NBG’s membership base is the strongest source of support for word-of-mouth advertising for events, this move allowed members to still take part in their normal routine on-site (jogging, walking, exploring the gardens, etc.) while also allowing them to bring out-of-town guests to enjoy *LanternAsia* during the evening with all participants buying tickets—members at the member price and visitors at full price.

Overall the exhibition was successful and allowed NBG to reach a wider audience. NBG established the following performance measures to determine success: increase in total number of visitors by 5% (actual 19%); increase in tourism tax receipts by 5% (actual 4.8%); increase in paid memberships by 9% (actual 11%); increase in Facebook followers by 2% (actual 3%); and increase in unique website visitors by 38% (actual 37%). The number of performances, educational programs, and positive feedback from visitors confirms that NBG and its partners were able to provide coastal Virginia with a wonderful experience not available anywhere near here. NBG spent over \$160,000 to market *LanternAsia* to both local and out-of-area markets. While over 85% of visitors during the exhibition were from Virginia (from all across the state, not just local), zip code data collected show that they came from all 50 US states, Puerto Rico, Guam, the US Virgin Islands, and several foreign countries. The percentage of visitation from out-of-area markets stayed consistent with prior year numbers with approximately 53% of out-of-state visitors coming from the states of North Carolina, Maryland, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Except for Florida, these states were the primary target areas for the out-of-market advertising campaign.

LanternAsia Links:

<http://nbg.visualharbor.com/lanternasia-returns-2018/>

<https://norfolkbotanicalgarden.org/>

<http://previewmyvideo.com/partners/99/99/video/?v=7574415830>

<https://www.facebook.com/13NewsNow/videos/lanternasia-at-norfolk-botanical-garden/10156154639318630/>

https://pilotonline.com/entertainment/arts/exhibits/article_90f2df26-65c1-5421-885d-38be30e4ad21.html