**Guide**

Five Rivers MetroParks Website
Dayton, Ohio

Public Engagement

Web Design

For more than 50 years, Five Rivers MetroParks has been focused on one primary goal: connecting people to nature. In a world where natural areas and resources are often taken for granted, Five Rivers protects nearly 16,000 acres of lands, trails and waterways for the ongoing benefit of both residents and visitors of the Dayton metropolitan area. With vast conservatories, lush wildlife and a variety of activities, the regional park system has something for everyone to explore.

Objective
Develop a visually-engaging, mobile-friendly online destination that would position Five Rivers as conservation trailblazers, while also opening up virtual streams for revenue generation and community support.
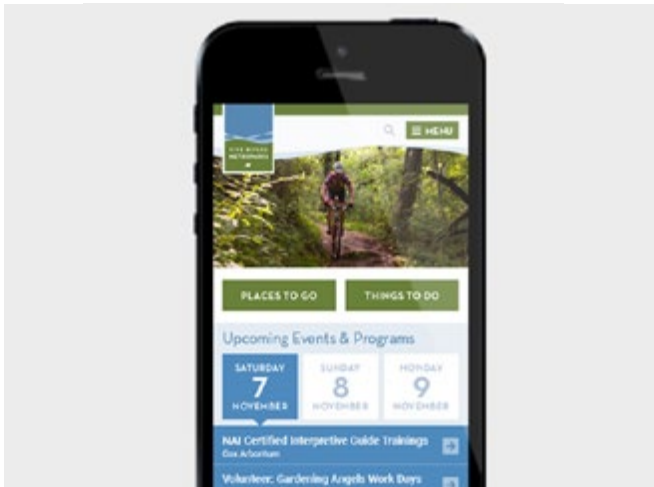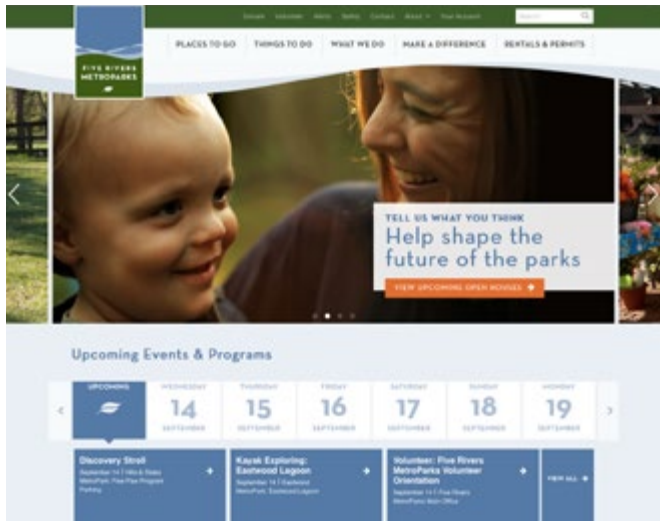
Results

⇧ **73%**
Increase in
Park Rentals &
Reservations

⇧ **33%**
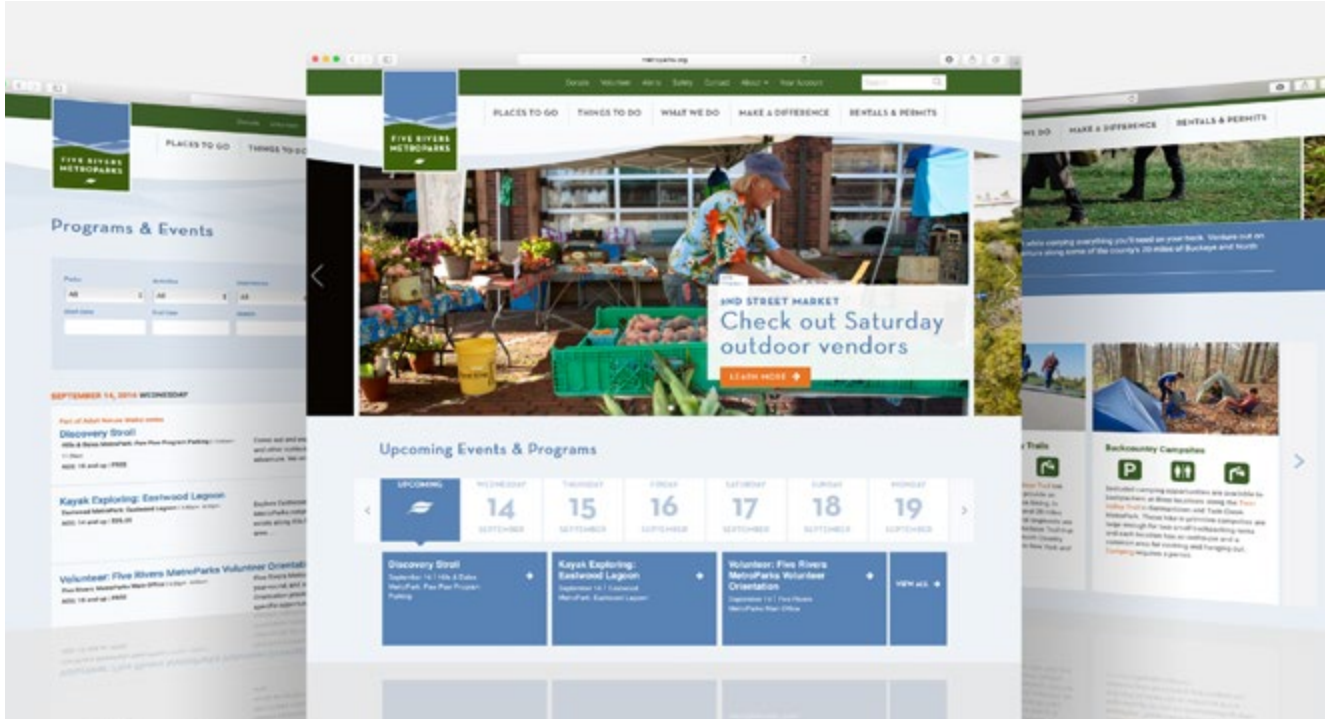Increase in
E-newsletter
Subscribers

⇧ **19%**
Increase in
Mobile Traffic

"We have reimagined our online navigation to better serve visitors' needs, as well as our own business needs. I'm confident that we are delivering a better experience for our visitors."

Amy Forsthoefel, Five Rivers MetroParks

Challenge

Five Rivers MetroParks hasn't let a moment or precious piece of land go to waste. Over the years, the organization has preserved Dayton's natural heritage and created an abundance of outdoor experiences that inspire people to take advantage of all that Mother Nature has to offer, including manicured metropolitan parks, natural forests, camp sites, water and hiking trails and more.

While Five Rivers has made the Dayton area synonymous with outdoor recreation, it lacked a virtual experience that reflected all of the beauty and adventure the park system had to offer the community. The website – originally built in 2008, was cluttered with lengthy text and had poor navigation that could lose even the most sophisticated user. In reviewing online metrics, park leaders saw that 55 percent of traffic was coming in through mobile devices. As a result, they wanted to develop a visually-engaging, mobile-friendly online destination that would position Five Rivers as conservation trailblazers, while also opening up virtual streams for revenue generation and community support.

"We wanted to build website that was clean and easy-to-navigate, especially for visitors who were looking at it from inside the park on their mobile devices," said Amy Forsthoefel, Marketing Project Manager for Fiver Rivers. "And our mission of conservation needed to be the golden thread, tying every page together. To do that, we needed to rethink every single page without disrupting our high approval ratings."

With big revenue goals to help counter five years of budget cuts, Five Rivers required a design team that could deliver quality work on a tight timeline and budget. Despite not being familiar with Guide Studio prior to receiving the firm's Request for Qualifications (RFQ), Forsthoefel valued the firm's background in helping place-based brands connect their physical and virtual experiences together across all stages of the User Continuum (Before, During and After).

Solution

Guide Studio led the overall design strategy for the project and worked with two other firms – Insivia for web development and Emerge Inc. for

backend ecommerce to manage and track online signups, rentals and reservations.

"We trusted the combined experience of all three firms," said Forsthoefel. "They all had proven track records of working on community-based projects that require 'cattle-herding' to gain buy-in from all levels of the organization."

The integrated team kicked off the project with a two-day discovery session that consisted of guided park tours and breakout sessions with various stakeholders, including the development and business services departments, to ensure they created a virtual strategy that harmonized with Five Rivers' personality and cross-functional goals. While many internal departments often deal with competing interests, Guide Studio identified common themes for the desired web experience, including: user-friendly, concise, captivating, visual, intuitive, informative and inspiring.

With an understanding of the client's current challenges and objectives, Guide Studio provided Five Rivers with comprehensive services to recreate the website:

User Persona Development: A meaningful, results-oriented website cannot be constructed without the audience in mind. Before making decisions on design and functionality, the client and development teams immersed themselves in the mindset of their visitors and created user persona categories – generalized representations of customers – to describe different segments of Five Rivers' visitor base, including: Family-Fun Seeker, Corporate Citizen, Active Outdoors Person, Nature Enthusiast and Educator. With five broad categories in place, the team discussed each visitor group's goals, motivations, attitudes and behaviors as they filled out detailed persona descriptor profiles, which could be utilized for this project or anytime the organization wants to do something related to visitor acquisition and retention.

Affinity Mapping: While user personas were complete, another question needed to be

explored: How do we create a website that appeals to all of them? Together with the client, Guide Studio created affinity maps – an exercise that helped expose visitors' shared interests and prioritize the most in-demand information. For example, because each persona group was interested in events and timely news, an interactive calendar needed to appear right on the homepage. Additionally, the conservation theme resonated among every group, even if it wasn't always top-of-mind. Therefore, conservation-based messaging needed to weave through all pages on the website, rather than limited to one section.

Content Marketing Matrix: Between their limited budget and a team of passionate in-house park experts, Five Rivers decided to write the web copy themselves. In support, Guide Studio provided the organization with a content marketing matrix that delivered high-level guidelines and templates for the language, images and calls-to-action that should appear on key pages of the site, including "Places to Go," "Things to Do" and "What We Do," to maximize their impact.

Not only did the matrix establish consistent messaging about conservation across every page of the site, but it guided Five Rivers on how to

While some of the original content was recycled for the new website, it was updated and designed in a way that didn't force the user to dig through several pages, which was also more conducive for the mobile experience.

structure content to illustrate the personality of the organization's people, parks and activities. For example, each individual park page was to feature a unique positioning statement, a large slider image of the destination, an Activities and Amenities section, an interactive map and cross-reference links to other activities and programs. Essentially, people should get a precise taste for what their in-park experience will be like, before they even get there, helping the organization set accurate expectations and favorable impressions.
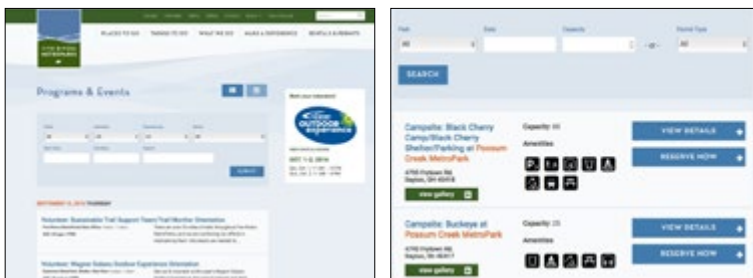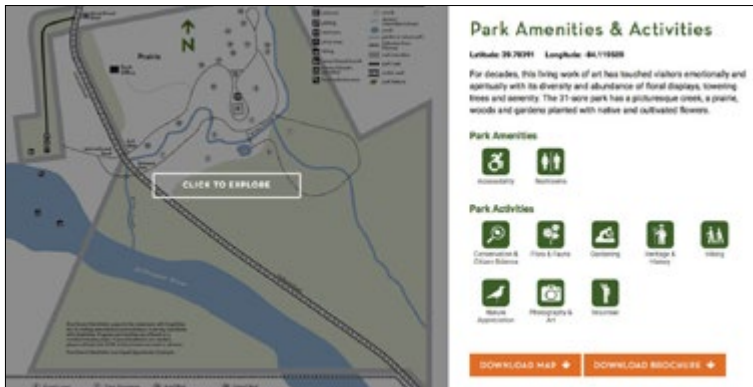
The matrix also encouraged Five Rivers to promote key engagement and revenue generating opportunities. For instance, Guide Studio recommended creating a dedicated page for donations, simply titled "Make a Gift." The messaging across the page is clear, speaking to the connection between the park system and the success of the community.

Pannable Maps

L: Pannable Maps   R: Ecommerce Engine

Website Design and Implementation: When it came time to redesign the website, the team decided that the best approach was to create a semi-flat site architecture (versus a deep architecture) to ensure content was discoverable and visitors could get what they needed without being overloaded with information. This approach meant downsizing the site from more than 1,000 pages to 150 pages – a much-needed change to eliminate a host of redundant or irrelevant information.

Beyond cutting down various layers, the new website contained a mega-menu that allowed visitors to dig in to areas of interest. With a great wayfinding experience inside the parks, it was important to recreate that experience online with simple website navigation. "Wayfinding at a park and on a park's website really should not be that different," said Forsthoefel. "If they can find the information they need online, they'll be more confident about getting around during their actual visit."

Additional highlights of the new design include pannable maps, a revamped events calendar that makes it easy to find and filter programs, an ecommerce engine that allowed visitors to make transactions for rentals and activities online, and refocused content, including larger images and descriptive copy, that connects the website with the park experience. The website's editorial management system was also updated so multiple contacts across different departments could log in to manage their own pages, while one lead editor could monitor the site and ensure proper brand standards were being executed.

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▶ RESULTS HIGHLIGHTS

73% PARK RENTALS AND RESERVATIONS

33% E-NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS

122% ▲ GENERAL INQUIRIES

19% MOBILE TRAFFIC

SECOND STREET MARKET VENDOR APPLICATIONS

INCREASE FROM **4** TO **47**

VISITORS SPEND **41%** MORE TIME ON NEW SITE VS OLD SITE

100% INCREASE IN VOLUNTEER APPLICATIONS

A CLOSER LOOK AT
INCREASED USERSHIP
IN FIVE RIVERS METROPARKS

*These figures are based on reporting following three months of the new website going live.

Results

Five Rivers' revamped website made its official debut in May of 2016 — right on time for the organization's summer magazine to drop into community members' mailboxes. If readers flipped through the print pages and decided to visit the website, they were met with a new and improved virtual experience.

"Almost immediately, we received a lot of positive feedback from visitors saying how impressed they were with the new site and how easy it was to navigate across any device," said Forsthoefel. "We made a major jump forward in usability, design and delivery of information."

The optimistic sentiments were quickly followed by impressive numbers. Within three months, Five Rivers witnessed just how much of a difference a compelling, brand-aligned website can make. Park rentals and reservations, which are big revenue sources for the park system, increased by 73 percent and there was a 100 percent increase in online volunteer applications. Additionally, Five Rivers' e-newsletter subscriber base went up by 33 percent and general inquiries increased 122 percent. The mobile-friendly design also contributed to a 19 percent increase in mobile traffic, and visitors are more engaged in the content, spending 41% more time on the new website compared to the old one.

"Using Guide Studio's proven wayfinding methodologies, we have reimagined our online navigation to better serve visitors' needs, as well as our own business needs," said Forsthoefel.

"I'm confident that we are delivering a better experience across every single interaction our visitors and supporters have with us."

Further explore ideas on how to create a compelling virtual experience for your destination in our position paper *Bringing Your Place-Based Brand to Life on the Web.*