

Santa Maria Valley

2023-2024 Marketing Plan

Introduction

When it comes to Santa Maria Valley, nothing that exists now existed six years ago. We like to sip on our Pinot Noir or Chardonnay and think about that from time to time with a very large sense of pride and appreciation for this wonderful partnership.

Since the tourism district was formed and Santa Maria Valley officially entered the scene as an undiscovered Central Coast destination, the brand has evolved exponentially: it has been at the center of several successful creative campaigns; it's made national headlines (in a good way) on several occasions; it's survived and conquered a global pandemic; it's earned its spot as a premiere (see also: accessible, affordable, not-snobby-at-all) California wine destination; it's made a name for Santa Maria Style barbecue, and so, so much more. But even with all of that, Santa Maria Valley has certainly not peaked and has a wealth of potential in its future.

The Santa Maria Valley brand was built from the ground up. Each year, we examine industry trends, we analyze and distill the data to understand what works, and we find ways to make it work harder. Each piece of the marketing puzzle has its own job to do and its own way of contributing to the larger marketing goal. What we've learned, though, is that each of those efforts – public relations, social media, creative strategy, website content, email marketing and influencer marketing – are better when their forces combine, when the lines blur just a bit, and when they are united under a focused strategy to deliver the right messages to the right people, where they are.

We're ready to take this next year by storm.

Industry Research: Travel Planning

As we determine where our marketing strategy is headed next, we also need to understand where the industry is headed. Not because we need to do what everyone else is doing, but because we need to understand what consumers are doing and how they're thinking. How are people deciding where to go on that next getaway? Who and what do they trust? What do they expect from a destination and what kinds of things do they want to do when they get there? Once we knew the answers to these questions, we developed an approach that is informed and that lends itself to the pillars of our brand and core offerings of Santa Maria Valley that align with what we're hearing from potential travelers.

How are people choosing their destinations?

- Social media is coming to the forefront as a leader for vacation inspiration.
 - But it is no longer social media—it's **just media**. It's no longer just a social platform, but an integral piece of our overall content strategy. And, it's no longer separate from paid social media. We like to think of the two as one and the same, as the assets we create for the medium are serving both organic and paid efforts, with paid media dollars providing a lift to and broadening the reach of those assets and messages in-platform.
- Influencers have been responsible for making a huge number of previously little-visited destinations popular.
- Search engines remain a top choice for discovering things to do.
- Google and Meta are still the major players, but DMOs should not put all of their eggs in those two baskets.
 - DMOs need to look to grow their presence in other channels to meet younger travelers where they are.
- Artificial Intelligence is here. But only behind the scenes, for now.
 - Currently, it's creating some efficiencies, helping with ideation and inspiration, and even generating custom graphics.

What are travelers looking for in a destination/itinerary?

- 89% plan to add personal vacation time to their business travel this year—many of whom will bring family and friends along.
 - There's no longer a distinct line between business travelers during the week and leisure travelers on the weekend. The best hospitality companies serve all types of customers throughout the week and are prepared to provide tailored service and recommendations, no matter the day.
- Multi-generational travel continues to grow in popularity
- Authentic, immersive, slow travel versus tourism
- Indigenous travel
- Family trips focused on human versus digital connection
- Road trips
- 54% of domestic travelers want to visit beaches
- 53% of domestic travelers want to visit small towns
- Price is still the biggest factor when planning a trip (esp. when flying)
- 50% of travelers prefer to stay in a hotel (versus camping, AirBnb, hostel, etc.)

Overall Marketing Goal

Increase overall awareness of Santa Maria Valley, its offerings, events and local flavor in an effort to attract overnight visitors.

Overall Marketing Objectives

- Increase total website sessions by 9% year-over-year
- Increase total hotel referrals by 50% year-over-year
- Earn 40 total media stories/articles over the course of the year

Marketing + Content Strategy

Our marketing strategy is fueled by our content strategy. The way we've collected and used content has evolved over the years, and we're now in a place to be able to leverage the robust content library we've developed to amplify the Santa Maria Valley brand.



What's more is that our definition of content has and needs to continue to evolve. "Content" previously meant website copy, emails and social media posts. Now, we mean anything and everything that contributes to the storytelling of our brand.



The legwork we've done in the past six years means we can:

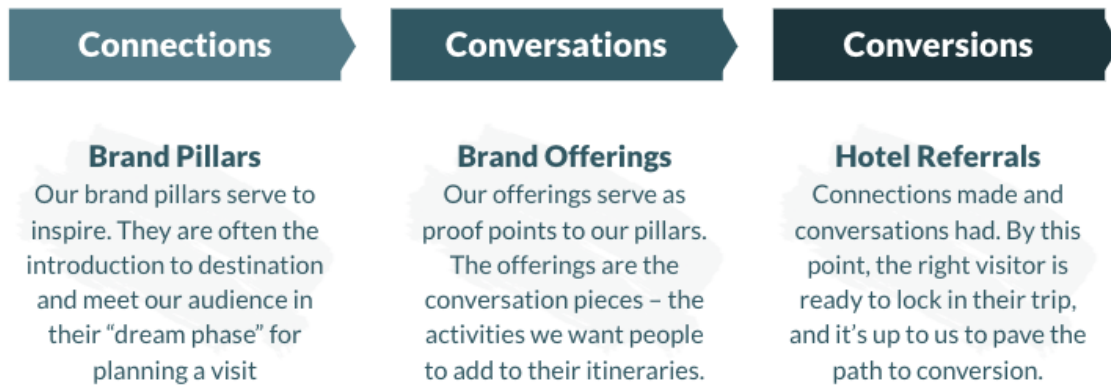
- Create more content in less time
- Increase and maximize our paid media budget for greater reach

Santa Maria Valley's brand pillars will continue to guide our marketing strategy:

- Unique wine experiences
- Barbecue culture
- Ideal home base
- Real value
- Naturally unconstrained
- Genuine heritage

What makes this strategy powerful is that we have the data to prioritize our pillars and our content based on the value it brings to our audience and how they're consuming it.

Brand Touchpoints



Audience Insights

The majority of our paid media efforts happen in the digital marketing space, as has been the case for the past several years. Digital media is the most trackable advertising medium, but also allows us to be the most nimble and deliberate with our spending, offering the ability to shift dollars from one digital medium to another (i.e., paid search, paid social media, remarketing) and between campaigns, based on performance.

We’ve taken a look back at historical audience data from our campaigns—who we’re reaching, what’s driving website engagement, and where/how they’re converting. While the insights we’ve uncovered won’t necessarily lead to a major shift in our digital marketing efforts, we’ve highlighted a few key takeaways that will help us hone our audiences (and potentially, our messaging) in the coming year:

- Our ads are reaching a primarily female audience
- We need to keep our middle age/older travelers in mind
- We should consider excluding the 18-24 age group on paid search

Paid Social – Facebook & Instagram:

- 65% of followers are women
- 35-54 is the primary age group on Facebook
- 25-54 is the primary age group on Instagram

Google Ads (Paid Search)*:

- 55-65-year-olds have the highest conversion rates
- 18-34-year-olds have the lowest conversion rates
- Generally, women have a higher conversion rate than men (but more of the audience is women, too)

There are a multitude of changes currently taking place in the industry, between how Google Analytics is measuring website visit and engagement metrics with its transition from Universal Analytics to Google Analytics 4 (GA4); as well as tightening privacy policies across the board that are ultimately going to make first-party data more important than ever. As we look ahead to the future of our marketing programs, we continue to anticipate these changes and adapt our strategies accordingly.

Website:

- Website visits and engagement do not skew female the way our social and paid search platforms do—it's closer to a 50/50 breakdown.
- Visitors are 25-54, with 35-44 being the largest age group
- 35-44-year-olds also bring in the most hotel referrals, followed by 25-34-year-olds
- 56% of hotel referrals are from women

Marketing Plan: Areas of Focus

Digital Advertising

Digital Advertising Strategy

This past year, one of our primary objectives was to leverage and test organic social media assets for advertising. This approach has proven extremely successful in generating not only on-platform engagement, but hotel referrals. We will continue with this approach in the coming fiscal year, applying our learnings from 2022-2023 to increase results and bring down cost metrics even further.

This year, we will invest 38% of our total marketing budget in paid advertising, with the majority of that dedicated to digital media channels including social media advertising, paid search (SEM), remarketing, and influencer marketing. Our primary objectives are consistent with the past year:

- Generate awareness among our target audiences
- Increase email subscriptions
- Increase hotel referrals

Digital Advertising Goals

- Maintain a minimum 3% hotel referral conversion rate, with a goal of increasing it to 4%
- Increase email signup conversion rate to 1%
- Search ad engagements:
 - 10%+ CTR
 - 7% conversion rate
- Social ad engagements:
 - 1.25%+ CTR
 - Sub \$18 cost per post share
 - Sub \$1 CPC

Paid Advertising Placement Budget: \$235,000 (38% of our budget)

- Paid Search (SEM): \$85,000
- Social Media Advertising: \$56,500
- Mini Campaign Promotion: \$30,000
- Remarketing: \$22,500
- Native/content opportunities: \$20,000
- Influencer Fees: \$15,000
- Influencer Ads: \$6,000

Upon approval of this marketing plan, KPS3 will prepare a detailed paid media plan reflective of the above.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

SEO Strategy

We've made significant progress over the last few years in the wine and Central Coast search space. While there's still more work to do in these areas, the progress we've made allows us to set our sights on new organic search frontiers. Our recommendation is to add California Trip Planning as a new core SEO focus. It is a natural extension of the wine and Central Coast categories we've been working in, giving us a leg up. Because we have been bidding on this category as part of our SEM work, we know that these visitors have high conversion rates and they engage with our site.

This is a highly competitive space that will require time and dedication but it has the ability to drive heads in beds, and will help us continue to raise the profile of Santa Maria Valley among our target audiences and competing destinations.

Here is a sampling of target keywords for which we'll be creating and optimizing content on the website in order to make strides in gaining related search rankings:

- Central coast road trip: 30
- California road trip: 2900
- California coast road trip: 1000
- Weekend trips in california: 880
- Family trips in california: 480
- California coast trip: 210
- California trip ideas: 320
- Anniversary trip ideas in california: 90

California trip planning as a category has a ton of overlap with countless other trip-planning and vacation inspiration topics, which means we can double-dip relative to building out our website content—specifically blogs and itineraries. California trip planning can include road trips, weekend trips, anniversary trips and other “type of trip” categories as suggested above, but it can also incorporate so many of Santa Maria Valley's offerings when it comes to outdoor recreation, wine, barbecue, hidden gems—the list goes on.

SEO Goals

- Increase website visits generated by organic search by 10%
- Maintain #1 rankings for branded searches (including wine and barbecue)
- Continue to maintain and/or improve rankings for key Santa Barbara and Central Coast wine terms
- Develop a target keyword list and begin to gain new rankings for our new SEO category, California Trip Planning
 - After identifying and prioritizing our target keywords, we will develop a plan for the year and include ranking goals by keyword within the plan.

Website Content

This year's website content strategy will serve the primary purpose of supporting the new SEO category: California trip planning. Because it's such a competitive category, it is going to require a significant amount of net new content over time, as well as updates to content we already have on the website.

This is a long-game strategy. We recommend an aggressive approach to content optimization this year so we can start making headway in the space.

Because the category overlaps with many of Santa Maria Valley's offerings, the work we do on website content for SEO will naturally allow us to incorporate new and updated content around our brand pillars. New and updated content is inclusive of:

- Page content
- Itineraries
- Blog posts
- Santa Maria Valley 'In the News'

Santa Maria Valley will continue to handle the addition and maintenance of events and attraction listings on the website.

Social Media and Asset Curation

Our social media followers are some of the most high-value members of our overall audience. These are people who have opted into following us on their own accord, and who are interested in regularly receiving content from Santa Maria Valley. Social media has become a pillar of our content strategy and it's the place where people are talking about the destination and its offerings.

Social Media Goals

- Maintain a 3%+ engagement rate on Instagram
- Maintain a 5%+ amplification rate on Instagram
- Reach 10,000 Instagram followers
- Increase average engagement rate from 4.48% to 6%

Social Media Strategy

- Prioritize platforms and nurture growth
 - Instagram is the priority platform for social media because it is where we see the most engagement and incremental growth. It's also the most conducive to trip inspiration and conversation.
 - Facebook will focus on posts that drive web traffic. Post frequency will be kept to about four times per month.
 - Twitter will not be eliminated, but we will not be posting regularly. We will continue posting media placements and tagging the source on an as-necessary basis.
 - Eliminate Fave 5 posts that drive little engagement and are more targeted toward a local crowd.
- Leverage "in-the-moment" trends so we can stay nimble with our social media content and capitalize on what we know is performing.
- Lean on local partners for more engagement, collaboration and content collection.
- Use historical organic social media performance to inform recommendations for our mini-campaign social content. We'll collaborate with the creative team to build content around a concept to ensure these campaigns are tied together by a creative strategy that supports one or more brand pillars.

- Continue daily monitoring and engagement to ensure we stay apprised of the social media conversations taking place relative to Santa Maria Valley
- Continue regular engagement—interacting with people who are commenting on and sharing our content, as well as interacting with other social media accounts in the space

Asset Creation

A large portion of the social media budget is dedicated to the creation of the assets for our social media calendar—primarily Instagram and vertical video. This is inclusive of image and video selects, editing, and copywriting for captions and text overlays.

In-Market Content Curator

While we have a large bank of assets that we can use for creation of social media content, we will also continue to work with an in-market content curator to help us keep assets fresh and inclusive of all lodging properties, businesses and events in the region. Our in-marketing content curator will be assigned three locations per month to visit and capture video assets. Locations selected each month will include large events that are happening in the region, upcoming features for the content calendar that require new assets, new or renovated attractions/restaurants/wineries, or anywhere we may have a gap in our existing content bank.

Public Relations

Public Relations Goal

- 40 stories
 - Stretch goal: 45 stories
- \$1.2 million+ in overall publicity value
- 20% of stories placed by KPS3 will include at least one backlink to the Santa Maria Valley website
- Six to eight qualified journalists/media FAMS brought into the region (these may include collaborations with Visit California and CCTC).

Public Relations Strategy

- Southern California, specifically Los Angeles, and the entire Bay Area are considered key national media markets, and are key target markets for Santa Maria Valley. We will continue to focus media outreach efforts on building media relationships in both markets, securing key quality media coverage.
- The Central Valley, inclusive of both Fresno and Bakersfield, remains a focus for Santa Maria Valley given the drive-market audience and will also be represented within our target media lists this year.
- In addition to a continued focus pitching Santa Maria Valley's brand pillars, we will branch to niche media outlets which will include an added focus on expanding the destination's reputation as it relates to car show culture and motorcycle travel.

Creative Development

The classic model of a campaign is evolving. Travelers are actively seeking out destinations via social media through new, exciting content. With the fast pace of social and digital media, taking three or four months to develop one creative campaign execution every year or two is no longer the most strategic model.

Creative's strategic ace in the hole is knowing the brand, building up its equity and recognizing what motivates Santa Maria Valley's audiences. Our work over the next year will focus on fortifying our brand with multiple creative executions ranging from larger, non-traditional "mini-campaigns" that build awareness and recognition, to developing multiple series of "creative branded content" that has the power to stop people in their scroll and remember Santa Maria Valley the next time they are planning a trip. The long game with this approach is to develop relationships and awareness with our potential visitors and nurture relationships with our existing following.

We know that we can be quicker and more nimble in developing mini campaigns that are built around priority content pillars and core offerings, and which will allow us to get in front of our audiences with fresh messaging more often. And in

doing that, we have an opportunity to leverage the large volume of content in the bank we've built for the past several years.

Embrace the Non-traditional - Mini campaigns

The purpose of our mini campaigns is to leverage the core marketing channels that promote both building connections and start/encourage conversations: public relations and social/digital media.

Santa Maria Valley has already been trending toward this shift with our investment in social and digital media, and by staying away from the high costs associated with traditional media plans. We are doubling down on developing integrated mini campaigns that write their own PR headlines and keep social media at the forefront to carry the conversation. Mini campaigns are targeted campaigns that are creative-led, public relations-driven, social/digital-media minded, and backed by data. Think: the Stimulus campaign or the Beat Inflation Vacation campaign.

Frequency

We know that lightning doesn't always strike twice and we can never guarantee that something will go viral. We can, however, bottle up some of the buzz we know our brand is capable of creating and dedicate our team to three strong mini-campaigns this year. These can be timed to hit during a shoulder season or around an exciting event. Or, we can carve our own path as we've done many times before (\$100 Visa gift card, anyone?).

KPS3 will concept and develop three mini-campaigns annually that will each run for 8-10 weeks at a time, spaced evenly throughout the year.

Deliverables

While the deliverables may vary based on the nature of the campaign, we see every mini campaign including these core tactics:

- Campaign concept
- Key messaging
- Social media content (primarily video)
- Press release (including a Newswire send and targeted pitches)
- Website integration (landing page, interactive experience, etc.)

- Email marketing

Creative Branded Content

While the mini campaigns will allow us to develop fresh concepts three times a year, we'll still want to maintain the drumbeat for paid and organic social to serve up unique branded content with a consistent cadence. While the social team is cranking out timely and trending content, we'll be working alongside them to strengthen the brand point of view and leverage data and insights that connects with a larger audience and motivates our niche audiences.

This will allow us to deliver the right message to the right people in a way that complements the social strategy and allows us to go out further on a limb to incorporate our brand pillars. The assets will be a bit experimental, scroll-stopping and perfect for telling the brand story in new and different ways. While social platforms (with emphasis on video) will be our primary focus for the creative branded content, these efforts may dip into relevant website content, emails and anything else we're cooking up.

What's the difference between creative branded content and organic social media content?

Creative Branded Content	Organic Social Media Content
Brand-focused	Attraction / Trend / Event / Itinerary-focused
A content series we'll support with paid media in between mini campaigns	Multiple, individual posts per week
Creative-led; social media-minded	Social media-led; creative supported
Brand and awareness building	Community building
Spans beyond social media (website, email, etc.)	Lives only social media platforms (organic and paid)

Frequency

In order to create and maintain momentum, creative branded content will be developed in between our mini campaigns and worked into the overall content strategy.

Deliverables

While the deliverables may vary based on the nature of the content, we see every creative branded content series including these tactics:

- A small set of social media content (primarily video) based on at least one brand pillar
- An additional asset such as blog, email, downloadable, etc.

Fall Mid-week Campaign

Using the budget surplus from FY23, we will be developing an integrated campaign to run in the first half of FY24 focused specifically on boosting midweek hotel occupancy. While planning is still in progress and the strategy hasn't been finalized, we know that our core audiences for this campaign will likely be remote workers, retiree road-trippers and 'bleisure' travelers—folks that are in SMV for business and looking to add leisure activities to their itinerary. From a demographic standpoint, we hope to be able to develop audiences based on historical data provided by the lodging properties relative to where business travelers are already coming from and what industries they're in.

Similar to our mini-campaigns, we'll lean into digital/social media and public relations as our primary channels. We'll also have an opportunity to potentially leverage influencer marketing and to develop new website content and an itinerary(ies) specific to this effort.

Our key performance indicator for this campaign will be both hotel referrals that we can track through our website, and redemption of a unique booking code that the lodging properties will use to be able to track bookings that are a direct result of this campaign. Ideally, we'll also be able to offer a hotel/travel package or another incentive to drive bookings.

Email Marketing

Email Marketing Goals

- Maintain an open rate of 50%+
- Maintain a CTR of 2%+
- Achieve an email signup conversion rate of 0.63% from all channels
- Decrease our unsubscribe rate to 2% by the end of the year

Email Marketing Strategy

Santa Maria Valley is already killing it when it comes to email engagement metrics – over the past few years, we’ve grown our open rate to nearly 60%, and our click-through rate to more than 2%. What this means for us is we’re holding the attention of our active subscriber base, enough for the majority of them to want to open our emails every two weeks. And, compared to industry benchmarks, an above-average number of them are clicking on the email content to find themselves on our website.

This year, we aim to grow our subscriber base so that those engagement metrics can work even harder for us in driving awareness of Santa Maria Valley and its offerings as a destination. But, we want more than subscribers, we want active subscribers—not the ones that are going to subscribe, open one or two emails, and then either unsubscribe or stop engaging with us. In order to attract an actively engaged group, we need to:

Grow our list organically

We don’t plan to purchase email lists, but we do plan to implement paid strategies to cast a broader net for our ask to sign up. We’ll look at lookalike audiences similar to our current email subscribers, and those we know are currently visiting/engaging with/converting on the website. In doing so, we can push out gated content, special offers and/or exclusive incentives that provide value to a new subscriber.

Deliver on our promise beyond the initial signup

Growing our email subscriber database is one thing, but we also need to give them a reason to subscribe and make them want to continue to open our emails. A bi-weekly roundup of website content and upcoming events is no longer meeting their expectations of a tourism brand and how we communicate with them on a regular basis. The greatest value our email subscribers currently provide is the opportunity to reach them elsewhere (i.e., as a paid search/paid social audience). As we map out our email content strategy for the coming year, we need to ask ourselves:

- What can we offer our subscribers that they can't get elsewhere?
- Where can we find opportunities to reward our loyal subscribers with an incentive to not only stay subscribed and engaged, but to inspire them to book a trip to Santa Maria Valley?
 - Lodging/experience offers with unique booking codes
 - Exclusive itineraries
 - Exclusive offers

As it stands, our email marketing efforts do convert at a higher rate than our other channels. However, email accounts for such a small piece of the pie that even doubling our subscribers and maintaining our engagement rates would mean that email still only accounts for 4% of website visits and 7% of total hotel referrals. This isn't to say that we shouldn't invest time in growing our subscriber base, but that we should instead lean into the opportunity to provide them a direct engagement opportunity, whether that be a content download or a booking.

Reporting

KPS3 will continue to provide reporting monthly on performance of all marketing areas, inclusive of an executive summary. Santa Maria Valley will receive a mid-year report in January that will be an aggregate of performance KPIs and goal pacing for July - December, as well as a year-end report in July 2024 that encompasses performance for the entire fiscal year. The mid-year and year-end reports will take the place of the monthly reporting for December 2023 and June 2024.



Market Visits

- KPS3 will make four in-person visits in conjunction with bi-monthly Advisory Committee meetings
 - We'll attend the other two via Zoom
- Two KPS3'ers will visit the market for each of the four trips
- KPS3 will continue to cover all travel expenses associated with these trips

Budget Breakdown

Account Management	\$35,000
Creative Development	\$56,000
Digital Marketing and SEO	\$69,000
Paid Media Placement	\$235,000
Social Media + Asset Creation	\$95,400
Public Relations + Media Events	\$71,500
Email Marketing	\$13,100
Influencer Marketing	\$8,000
Website Marketing	\$18,600
Hard Costs: Content/PR Tools	\$4,200
In-market Content Curator Fees	\$7,200
Fall Mid-week Campaign	\$75,000
FY24 Marketing Plan	\$5,000
TOTAL	\$693,000

Conclusion

This year's marketing plan leans into a content strategy that harnesses the power of awareness, storytelling and engagement, balanced with intent-based and conversion-driven tactics that convert further down the funnel and ultimately result in heads in beds. Each year, we continue to build upon the data, content and brand foundation we've been working to establish from day one, and this year is no exception.

We look forward to another year of success and the opportunity to share more of this incredible destination with the world!

Appendix

Industry Research

- [The State of Travel in 2023 - Going.com](#)
- [How to connect with consumers at every stage of the travel purchase journey - GWI Blog](#)
- [Generational Travel Trends You Need to Know About in 2022 - Tickets](#)
- [What Is Bleisure Travel, And How Is It Transforming The Hospitality Industry? - Forbes](#)
- [15 travel trends that will define 2023 - The Union Democrat](#)
- [From Sustainable Tourism to Workcations: The Hottest Travel Trends of 2023 - Houst](#)
- [These Trends Will Define How We Travel in 2023 - AFAR](#)
- [2023 Destination Marketing Predictions - Madden](#)
- [Visit California - Research Dashboard](#)