

National media are finally feeling the #Buffalove, and it's all thanks to one man

Brian Hayden had only a few stolen hours to sell a travel writer on Buffalo. But as the invisible hand behind the city's recent surge of media coverage, he knew how to best convert an iffy visitor.

First they sped south to Canalside in Hayden's Toyota Corolla. Then they drove north to the Darwin Martin House. In between, Hayden regaled the journalist, Jennifer Fernandez, with a pro-Buffalo spiel he has perfected in thousands of pitch emails and hundreds of writer visits over five years.

Such quiet maneuvering is common in travel media, where cities, states and other destinations jockey behind the scenes for writers' attention. But a year of record press for Buffalo has thrown a sudden spotlight on Hayden, the sole communications manager for Visit Buffalo Niagara and the city's little-seen hype man.

From his office on the sixth floor of the Brisbane Building – and, often, from a bar stool or the front seat of his car – the 30-year-old former journalist has rebranded Buffalo as a destination even the New York Times and Wall Street Journal want to cover.

In the process, local business groups say, he has drawn new tourists to the region, buoyed civic pride in a city unaccustomed to good press, and led the organization to its best-ever media year, with more than 200 stories featuring Buffalo in out-of-town outlets from Lonely Planet to the Times of London.

“Honestly, Brian is Buffalo's greatest asset,” said Fernandez, who wrote the September [Wall Street Journal piece](#). Its strident first line: “Only knuckleheads – and the obstinately unenlightened – write off Buffalo, N.Y., as nothing more than a winter icebox and the birthplace of a certain sports-bar delicacy.”

But knuckleheads are legion when it comes to Buffalo, and improving the city's dreary national image has become Hayden's vocation. An earnest, effusive North Buffalo native, rarely seen without a Public coffee or a plaid collared shirt, he has significantly scaled up the media reach of Visit Buffalo Niagara, a county-funded marketing organization.

Hayden tracks freelance writers and editors in other cities who he thinks might like Buffalo. He and other VBN staff also scout the city for cafes, restaurants and attractions likely to appeal to upscale out-of-towners.

Most importantly, Hayden plans dozens of elaborate and often complimentary trips for bloggers, journalists and social media “influencers” who say they might like to write about the region. In 2018, he hosted a record 50 visitors, writing for outlets such as Thrillist, the Times of London, the Toronto Sun, the Globe and Mail, Travelocity, Lonely Planet and Architectural Digest.

Over 48- or 72-hour jaunts, designed to show off the best of the city, Hayden chauffeurs writers to area restaurants, bars, museums, parks and hotels, sometimes packing as many as nine or 10 stops into a day's itinerary. The organization does not always pick up writers' tabs, according to the policies at their publications. But it spent \$20,000 on media airfare, meals and hotels in 2018, VBN President Patrick Kaler said.

Payoff comes in the form of headlines: The Times of London dubbed Buffalo "America's coolest summer city" this year, and [Thrillist pronounced it](#) the "most underrated city to spend a weekend." Mentions of Buffalo in the travel press have doubled since 2014, according to VBN.

"I hate talking about [publicists], because it sounds so manufactured – but I think Buffalo has a really good PR team," said Julia Buckley, who wrote the Times of London piece. "They're not just trying to sell you the story they think is interesting. They love their place. They love their city."

For Hayden, that love long predates the VBN job he took in 2014. His parents, who still live off Hertel Avenue, raised him to be proud of Buffalo, he said. Both his sisters remained in the area after college. And while Hayden himself left for stints upstate at a newspaper and university, he watched Buffalo's job listings from across the state.

"I was trying to come home, but it had to be the right opportunity," he said. "And the opportunity to tell the story of the city I love – that was my dream job, basically."

But Hayden's job isn't merely to tell Buffalo's story: He must convince writers at some of the country's largest outlets to tell that story, as well. And as he explained in a recent presentation to fellow publicists, that involves playing up the characteristics that make Buffalo unique among "second-tier" travel destinations.

[Buffalo goes from a 'shrug' to something special: Our Q&A with New York Times super-traveler Jada Yuan](#)

The differentiating factors include Buffalo's industrial past, which left it with both an abundance of grand, turn-of-the-century homes and a glut of grain elevators and warehouses. Media trips now often involve forays to Riverworks and Elevator Alley, as well as Millionaire's Row and the Richardson complex.

The organization also renewed its emphasis on the chicken wing this year, recruiting a dozen writers to cover the launch of a new "wing trail" in April. And Hayden encourages writers to meet with local "characters" who "really embody Buffalo."

His regular roster includes Silo City's Rick Smith and "Swannie" Jim Watkins, the Colored Musicians' Club's George Scott, and Larkin Square's Leslie Zemsky, who serves as the head of VBN's marketing board. When the New York Times' Jada Yuan posted on Facebook that she planned to visit Buffalo in May, Hayden asked Zemsky to reach out to her. Zemsky's daughter Kayla did.

"Thus began my totally unexpected, completely wonderful two days of being an honorary member of the Zemsky family," Yuan later wrote in [her travelogue](#), titled "From Refugees to a Reunion, Buffalo Lives Up to Its Welcoming Reputation."

Hayden helped get Buffalo on the Times' coveted "[52 Places to Go in 2018](#)" list, too. The list is derived from nominations by the paper's travel correspondents, one of whom spoke to Hayden last fall about the city's new attractions.

Hayden talked up the Curtiss Hotel and the new grain silo ziplines at Riverworks. He counts the Outer Harbor and Delaware Park among his favorite city spots.

"To have that job in any city, you have to love it," said Matt Meltzer, a travel writer who visited Buffalo on two VBN-sponsored trips in the past year. "But in Buffalo, they really have that passion. That guy Brian – he loves Buffalo, man."

Hayden has had help spreading the Buffalove, of course. The opening of distinctive hotels, restaurants and attractions, from InnBuffalo to Las Puertas to the Barrel Factory, made it easier to hook writers, he said. Other VBN staff and tourism industry representatives sometimes wine and dine visitors, as well.

And travel editors do stumble upon Buffalo without Hayden's help. The city landed on [a Washington Post list of best budget destinations](#), for instance, after writer John Briley heard a coworker from Buffalo talking up the city's transformation. But Hayden later helped him flesh the story out with details about the West Side Bazaar – another favored VBN destination.

"We've seen a lot of people coming in from places like New York City and saying they read about us," said Bob Doyle, who manages the bazaar. "It's really helped us get on the tourism radar."

'Buffalo is so much more than snow and wings'

Business and tourism officials say Hayden's efforts have boosted the tourism industry county-wide. The sector now employs 13.4 percent more people and generates 20 percent more spending than it did in 2011, according to the Western New York Regional Economic Development Council. Advertising played a role in that jump, said VBN's Kaler, but most visitors consider travel stories "more credible."

Press accolades have also boosted the city in other ways, appearing everywhere from the walls of the Buffalo Niagara International Airport to the keynotes of the 43North competition. Invest Buffalo Niagara, a regional economic development group, liberally quotes recent press in its business attraction and relocation brochures.

"People are beginning to realize that Buffalo is so much more than snow and wings," said Dottie Gallagher, the president and CEO of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership. "And that realization is such a boon to our economy."

For Hayden, however, there's always another story to write and another writer to pitch. On a snowy weekday morning in December, he makes plans to call some Canadian journalists about the new Labatt Brew House and the Canalside bumper cars: "New options for hockey fans in Buffalo," he spins it.

Longer term, Hayden wants to land Buffalo a feature in one of the country's premier travel magazines. When he started at VBN almost five years ago, a story in Conde Nast Traveler or Afar seemed like a pipe dream.

But every few months, Hayden traipses downstate to meet with travel writers and editors in Manhattan. And today, more than ever, they seem intrigued by his talk of grain silos and chicken wings and Rust Belt reinvention.

"We're talking to these people in a way we weren't even a few years ago," he said. "Eventually the buzz and the mentions and the coverage reached a point where the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal couldn't ignore us."