



2024 Annual Report

Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office

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Letter from the Executive Director

I am excited to share our second Annual Report for the Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office (VSBMO) covering January – December 2024. The year presented a litany of new opportunities to highlight the exciting work of distilleries across the commonwealth and to continue to raise the profile of the Virginia Spirits industry with consumers, our partners in bars and restaurants across the state and even in international markets.

In early 2024, we completed our first Economic Impact Study in partnership with a leading alcohol beverage analytics firm, [Economic Forensics and Analytics](#) out of Sonoma, California. The study used data from calendar year 2022 and was gathered from surveys, Virginia ABC and the federal government. The study provided great insight into the impact of the distilled spirits industry across the commonwealth. From the grains grown by local farmers to the bottles procured to hold Virginia's finest, plus the barrels made in the southwest corner of the state to the contribution of tourists visiting our distilleries, Virginia's distilled spirits industry is responsible for more than **\$1.2 billion in annual economic impact**.

While 2024 afforded us the advantage of not so many "firsts," where everything we did in Year One was for the first time, we continued to launch successful new programs and campaigns. We maintained significant consumer-focused programs and put a great deal of time and resources into developing awareness and relationships within the on-premise community.

The Virginia Cocktail Games, a statewide bartending competition, proved to be one of our most successful initiatives to date. We received more than 80 applications from every region of the state, had participation from more than 9,000 consumers and the five finalists continue to be evangelists for Virginia-made products in their bars and across social media channels. Our BarPro professional development conference for bartenders brought mixology professionals from around the state for two days of networking, professional development and opportunities to learn more about Virginia's distilling heritage.

This Annual Report provides insight into the activities of the VSBMO's second year of operations. Our Annual Report covers the period from January 1 – December 31, 2024. A budget proposal will be presented to the Board for FY 25/26 in spring 2025.

The entire Marketing Office team is incredibly gratified to work with Virginia's distilling community. On behalf of the team and all of our colleagues at The Hodges Partnership, thank you for allowing us to work with you again this year. We look forward to even more success for Virginia's distilling community in 2025 and beyond!

Cheers!

Jack W. Gorman

Who We Are

Virginia Spirits Board

The Virginia Spirits Board was established in 2020 by enactment of the Virginia General Assembly. It was created to provide resources for promotion of the Virginia spirits industry by several means approved by an administrative board appointed by the Governor. The purpose of the Board is to foster the development of the Virginia spirits industry by expanding spirits research, increasing education, and promoting the production of ingredients necessary for alcohol distillation and the production of spirits in the Commonwealth.

The Board is one of 17 commodity boards under the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) and comprises eleven members, three of whom are coopers or maltsters and six of whom are owners or operators of a distillery in the Commonwealth. The remaining two members are the Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Chief Executive Officer of the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority, and they serve ex officio without voting privileges.

Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office

The Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office was established in February 2023 through a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process conducted by VDACS on behalf of the Board. The Hodges Partnership, a strategic communications firm based in Richmond, Va., was awarded the contract. The initial 17-month contract period began in February 2023 and concluded on June 30, 2024. A one-year extension was approved by the Board in 2024 and three possible additional extensions will be evaluated on a year-by-year basis.

The primary purpose of the VSBMO is to develop a long-term strategic marketing program to promote and grow the Virginia spirits industry. For 2024 the team began to focus on developing relationships with the alcoholic beverage hospitality industry: restaurant and bar workers and owners. On premise outlets provide a tremendous opportunity for local producers to increase sales revenue.

Economic Impact Update

At the time of publication for our 2023 Annual Report, the results for the Virginia Spirits Economic Impact Study were preliminary. The report was finalized in April 2024.

Key findings from the report include:

- Approximately **81** licensed and revenue-generating distilleries were operating in Virginia in 2022.
- Virginia's distillery industry created economic impacts estimated to be over **\$1.1 billion** in 2022.
- This industry supported approximately **3,081** jobs in Virginia, paying workers more than **\$139 million in wages**.
- Jobs beyond distilleries span industries as diverse as grain farming, restaurants, hotels, trucking, glass manufacturing, printing, marketing services, and Virginia ABC retail store employment.
- Distilleries generated over **\$275.9 million in revenues** across all channels and activities, hiring workers across the estimated 81 employers in 2022;
- Using official and survey data on Virginia distilleries, assuming a wholesale price of \$180 per 9-liter equivalent case (\$15 per 750ml on average):
 - Virginia distilleries sold approximately **1.84 million 9L equivalent cases** in 2022 (22,714 9L equivalents per distillery);
 - Virginia produced approximately **4.374 million gallons** of bottled, distilled products in 2022.
 - Virginia's farmers generated **\$10.3 million in revenues** from Virginia's distilleries purchasing their harvests;
- Sales at Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority (VABC) points-of-sale generate excise tax revenues, mark-up revenues, and sales tax revenues for state and local governments;
 - These sales generated over **\$18 million in government revenue** through those points of sales alone from Virginia-produced distilled spirits;
- Tourism to wineries adds product sales and event revenue to a distillery's portfolio of customers and acts as another marketing asset. We estimate that approximately **228,500 people** visited Virginia's distilleries in 2022.
- Visitors to Virginia's distilleries spent another **\$63.5 million** beyond distillery spending on tourism related products and services such as hotels, meals, shopping, etc.

Sales of Virginia Spirits in the Commonwealth

Since reporting sales figures in our FY 2023 Annual Report, we learned of a miscommunication between the VSBMO and Virginia ABC; therefore, the numbers we received from Virginia ABC did not fully reflect total sales for the year, leaving out sales in distillery bottle shops. The numbers below reflect updated reporting, combining sales of Virginia Spirits in all 400+ Virginia ABC outlets and sales in distillery bottle shops. Sales of Virginia-made spirits across all Virginia ABC retail outlets, which include 400 retail stores and dozens of distiller bottle shops, showed a slight decrease in 2024 over 2023 of approximately 2.13% year over year.

- 2023 Total **\$37,343,451.89**
- 2024 Total **\$36,547,344.97**

This data similar for sales numbers for Virginia Spirits Month in September with a 3.8% decrease year over year:

- September 2023: **\$2,266,826.44**
- September 2024: **\$1,938,390.92**

While 2024 numbers did not exceed sales figures from 2023, given declining sales in the spirits category, both nationally and at the state levels, coupled with the significant increases in overall sales we saw in 2023 over 2022, we find these results to be on par with expectations and current market conditions. The larger decrease for Virginia Spirits Month may be attributed to a large number of national brands also on sale in September, coupled with the loss of potential sales in a number of Virginia ABC and distillery stores over the final weekend of the month when severe storms hit the region.

Awards Received

The VSBMO is operated by The Hodges Partnership, a strategic communications firm located in Richmond, VA, under contract with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). The Hodges Partnership is an active, well-known and respected player within Virginia's professional public relations, marketing and communications communities. In 2024, The Hodges Partnership submitted applications for award recognition as part of the Richmond Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America's annual awards contest. Hodges was awarded an Award of Excellence (the highest award available in each category) for each of the five VSBMO projects for which we submitted:

- **Brochures:** *"Introducing the Virginia Spirits Guide"*
- **Newsletters:** *"Virginia Spirits Industry Newsletter"*
- **Websites:** *"The New and Improved [VirginiaSpirits.org](https://virginiaspirts.org)"*
- **Marketing Consumer Products/Services:** *"Raising a Glass to Virginia Spirits: The Launch of the Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office"*
- **Extended Events and Observances:** *"Celebrating Virginia Spirits Month"*

2024 Strategy

The VSBMO strives to support the efforts of the Virginia Spirits Board in promoting the production of ingredients necessary for alcohol distillation and the production of spirits in the Commonwealth. The office does so by implementing programs and initiatives that raise the profile of Virginia-made spirits particularly within two major audiences: spirits consumers and the food and beverage industry. The strategies used to accomplish this goal focus on media relations, digital programs, and consumer awareness coupled with engagement and promotion within the on-premise hospitality community (bars and restaurants). To support our strategic direction we employ a variety of tactics to reach our targeted audiences:

- **Digital Engagement:** Website, social media, blogs, search engine optimization, geofencing, advertising and more
- **Media Engagement:** Press releases, story pitching, media events, influencer engagement
- **Consumer Engagement:** Brand awareness, advertising, marketing, event participation, sponsorships, passport program
- **Trade/Industry Engagement:** Sponsorships, educational programming, tasting events, memberships

Digital Engagement

Website

In 2024, we focused on leveraging the major user experience and functionality updates made to VirginiaSpirits.org in 2023 to drive user engagement and maximize the impact of the prior year's work. We continued our partnership with [Convoy](#), a Charlottesville, Va.-based graphic design and web development agency, to execute these initiatives.

2024 Website Performance

- Traffic: **92,000** vs. 19,008 in 2023
- Engagement Rate: **47.6%** vs. 49.19% in 2023
- Average Session Duration: **2m 32s** vs. 1m 12s in 2023

Website Development Projects

- Built a flexible landing page template, streamlining the creation of new pages and enhancing consistency across the site.
- Redesigned the home page to clearly communicate our story, highlight current campaigns or initiatives and offer compelling call-to-actions that keeps users engaged.
- Refreshed distillery profile layout to better communicate each distillery's offerings, hours and brand story.
- Added new filtering and search functionality to the blog, making it much easier for users to browse our growing collection of blog posts.
- Built a consumer voting form for the first-annual Virginia Cocktail Games, which our audience used to vote for their favorite cocktails daily over a 2-week voting period set around the 2024 Summer Olympics. See page X for more details on the project and overarching campaign.

SEO (Search Engine Optimization)

To support major fixes made to the site in 2023, we focused on improving search engine optimization (SEO) to boost our visibility in organic search results. We partnered with Addison Clark, a Richmond-based marketing agency, to analyze the site's SEO performance and develop strategies for improving our search rankings. The team at Addison Clark identified five search terms with the most opportunity for VirginiaSpirits.org: distillery tours, whiskey distillery, bourbon tasting, gin distillery and moonshine distillery. Together, we optimized on- and off-page SEO and are already seeing great results, each term climbing positions in the rankings — except for distillery tours, which has maintained its number one spot.

Term	July SEO Ranking	November SEO Ranking
Distillery tours	1	1
Whiskey distillery	6	5
Bourbon tasting	5	2
Gin distillery	12	4
Moonshine distillery	8	6

Please note that these terms were selected based on high search volume and opportunity for VirginiaSpirits.org to improve its search visibility and rankings. These terms are not indicative of a specific marketing focus or spirit priority.

Social Media

At the start of the year, we analyzed content performance across all social media channels to identify high-performing content types to leverage in 2024. Based on our findings, we developed four content buckets to guide our monthly content calendars. We prioritized short-form video content to engage non-followers and produced both carousel and single image posts that highlighted Virginia's craft distilleries and inspired our audience to experience #VaSpirits through distillery visits, events, cocktails and more.

Content Buckets

- History (Birthplace of American Spirits)
- Distillery features
- Spirits education
- Lifestyle: Cocktails, food pairing/cooking, passport, events

Reach

- Instagram: 152.4K (+149.2% over 2023)
- Facebook: 705.1K (+81.2% over 2023)

Followers

- Instagram: 5,183 (+32% over 2023)
- Facebook: 4,604 (+7% over 2023)

Average Engagement Rate

- Instagram: 6.34%
- Facebook: 6.8%

Giveaways

Social media giveaways proved to be exceptionally successful ways to generate engagement and build our audience. We ran two giveaways in March and December of 2024, the first yielding 800+ newsletter sign-ups and the second increasing our Instagram follower count by nearly 200 accounts in just 7 days.

Social Media Toolkits

In 2023, we developed user-friendly digital toolkits for distilleries. These resources helped distillers amplify the VSBMO's campaigns and key messages. Each toolkit included customizable social media graphics, sample captions, and valuable guidance. We created toolkits for events including Virginia Spirits Month, Virginia ABC's Sale-A-Bration and Virginia Distilled. We also created a toolkit for The Virginia Cocktail Games contestants to post during the first, digital round as Virginia Spirits fans voted for their favorite cocktails.

Digital campaigns

Throughout 2024, we implemented digital campaigns that supported our annual campaigns and targeted both Virginia residents and residents in neighboring states. Major digital campaigns promoted Virginia Spirits Month, Virginia ABC's Sale-A-Bration and the holidays. Micro campaigns promoted ways to celebrate Valentine's Day with Virginia Spirits, the Virginia Spirits Passport, Virginia Distilled and the Virginia Spirits BarPro Conference. This mix of campaigns helped us achieve a variety of objectives: build awareness, drive website traffic, grow passport sign-ups and gather key data about Virginia ABC store traffic.

Choose Virginia-Made, Virginia Spirits Month

Our partner, Micheal Hagan at Dovetail Picture + Post, produced a 30 second commercial that celebrated Virginia Spirits Month and encouraged consumers to choose Virginia-made spirits. The commercial was originally produced for traditional and connected tv but was also optimized for paid social (Meta).

- 244,048 impressions
- 206,932 reach

Virginia ABC's Sale-A-Bration

Geofencing

We worked with Propellant Media, a geofencing and programmatic display solutions partner, to build a geofencing campaign targeting foot traffic (customers) in the 32 top-selling Virginia ABC stores. The geofencing technology used customers' device IDs to serve ads via mobile apps and were served up to 30 days, even after the customer had left the store.

We chose to implement a geofencing campaign so that we could directly target people who regularly purchase and enjoy spirits but may not be aware of Virginia-made spirits. The results of this campaign also gave us key insights into which Virginia ABC stores to prioritize for future in-store marketing initiatives.

- 258,212 impressions
- Top five performing stores: Store 320 - Williamsburg, Store 169 - Richmond, Store 119 - Alexandria, Store 253 - Charlottesville, Store 331 - Short Pump

Meta and Google

Our Meta and Google campaigns promoted the Sale-A-Bration with the objective to drive traffic to our Sale-A-Bration landing page, which offered quick links and details about where to shop.

- 4,970 clicks
- 203,035 impressions

Find Holiday Cheer with Virginia Spirits, 2024 Holiday Guide

The holiday campaign promoted our Virginia Spirits Holiday Guide, a round-up of festive distillery events, gift sets, new limited release bottles and how to build your home bar for the season.

- 3,748 clicks
- 240,339 impressions

Blog Promotion, Search Engine Marketing (Google Ads)

In an effort to increase regular monthly traffic to our blog posts, we built search engine marketing campaigns on Google Ads for our Whiskey 101 and Moonshine 101 blogs. Using insights from our SEO partner, Addison Clark, we built campaigns around two of the top searched spirit types.

- 13,210 clicks

Blog

The Virginia Spirits Blog hit its stride in 2024, reaching our goal of 24 blogs (two per month) and hitting 13,683 views with more than 12,300 readers. We finished our travel guide series, giving a comprehensive look at distilleries in each region along with recommendations for where to stay, eat and enjoy local activities. We tailored blogs to larger holiday campaigns like Valentine's Day, Women's History Month and Fourth of July. We also launched and nearly completed a 101 series on each of the major spirits categories, which includes a basic guide on how to make the spirit, what makes it special in the commonwealth, how to shop for Virginia products, how to store it and how to best enjoy it in cocktails and with food. Here are the umbrella blog topics produced in 2024:

- Spirits 101 (6)
- Travel Guides (5)
- Major Campaigns (3)
- People/Spotlights (3)
- History (3)
- Cocktail Inspiration (2)
- Holiday/Seasonal (2)

Blog strategy

The blog is a resource for spirits lovers, industry members and curious readers alike. It provides an opportunity to host a breadth and depth of Virginia spirits topics on the website, while allowing us to elaborate and highlight campaigns throughout the year. The blog strengthens other channels like social media and email marketing as it offers another clickable resource and opportunity for lengthened engagement.

In 2024, we utilized relationships with distilleries and industry writers to provide insider and third-party perspectives, while enhancing the blog's overall expertise and authority. More than two dozen distilleries were contacted to contribute to the blog. Patrick Evans-Hylton, Johnson & Wales-trained chef, food historian and award-winning food journalist, contributed three full-length blogs and consulted on nearly 10 others. We continue to leverage relationships to ensure the blog is educational, interesting and relevant to our readers.

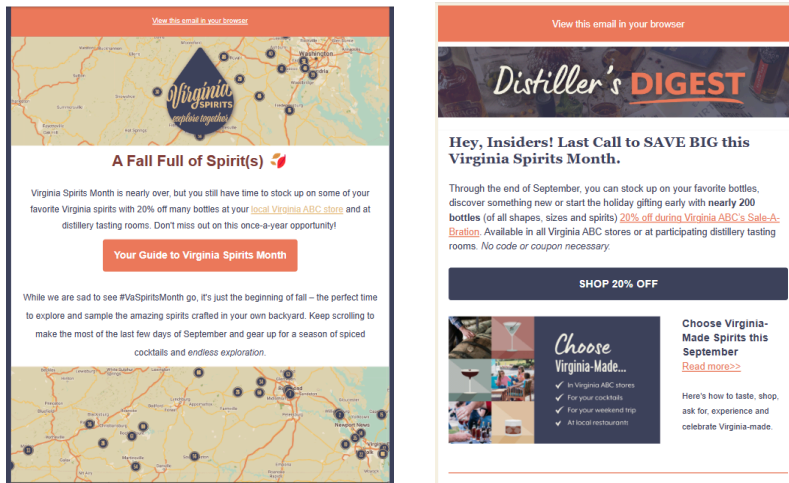
Consumer Newsletter

In 2024, our biggest goal for the monthly consumer newsletter was to grow our audience. Initially setting out for a 30% increase (which would have resulted in approximately 1,000 new contacts), we added nearly 6,000 new contacts. We utilized a variety of strategies to get there:

1. Promote the Virginia Spirits Passport – All new users who enable the toggle for more communication are added to the audience.
2. Add an email component to a large campaign – By requiring an email to vote in The Virginia Cocktail Games, we doubled our audience in a matter of weeks. While this did increase the number of undeliverable emails, Mailchimp is able to clean the audience list from bounced recipients over time.
3. Give the sign-up higher billing on the website.
4. Advertise the sign up through a paid social campaign.

The primary strategy for the consumer newsletter is presenting digestible content that links out to the website, local distillery information and additional resources. Prior to Virginia Spirits Month, we rebranded the newsletter to the “Distiller’s Digest.” The new design utilized the talents of The Hodges Partnership’s creative services team and offered a more cohesive, modern reflection of the Virginia Spirits brand. The new template also features two to three gifs in any given campaign, allowing for more eye-catching, dynamic content. [After launching in September](#), the average open rate jumped from 35% (previous three months) to 37.9% (Q4). The newsletter continues to highlight one new distillery per month through the “Meet the Makers” section.

Before (left) and After (right): Rebranding the newsletter to “Distiller’s Digest”



Consumer Newsletter Performance

- 1500+ unique clicks
 - June – December YoY 508 → 1230 unique clicks (2.4x increase)
- 5,800+ new contacts
 - 3,280 → 8985 (2.7x increase)

Open Rate

2024	2023	Industry Benchmark
37.54%	43.2%	36.4%

Click Rate

2024	2023	Industry Benchmark
2.27%	2.29%	3.7%

Consumer Engagement

Virginia Spirits Map and Guide

The [Virginia Spirits Map & Guide](#), first introduced in September 2023, remains a cornerstone for promoting Virginia's thriving distilling industry. Highlighting distillery tasting rooms across the commonwealth and showcasing Virginia's rich distilling heritage, this resource has become an essential consumer travel guide.

In 2024, the VSBMO enhanced its tourism outreach by distributing the Map and Guide to more than 50 destination marketing organizations across the state. Additionally, ongoing collaborations with Virginia ABC and distilleries ensured the guide reached spirits enthusiasts statewide.

- ~ 5K mailed to over 50 DMOs
- 60+ mailed via direct request from virginiaspirits.org
- Over 11K distributed to all northern VA Virginia ABC stores
- ~ 2K distributed to Virginia distilleries

Virginia Spirits Passport Program

The Virginia Spirits Passport continues to be an engaging tool for connecting consumers with Virginia's rich distilling scene. First launched in September 2023, the program now has 37 participating distilleries. By combining gamification with travel incentives, passholders are encouraged to explore Virginia distilleries while earning points they redeem for exclusive prizes. The primary goal of the Passport remains to inspire users to engage with Virginia distilleries and take advantage of the discounts within the app.

How it Works

Each year, the Passport is refreshed as part of Virginia Spirits Month in September. Unlike the original plan, this update does not expire points or close accounts, allowing users to continue their journey seamlessly. The refresh introduces new prizes, exciting promotions and an updated list of participating distilleries, ensuring the experience remains fresh and engaging for Passport users.

- Passholders:
 - Since Jan. 2024: 2,129
 - Total Since Launch: 2,982
- Prize Redemptions: 62 prize redemptions in 2024
- Check-ins:
 - Since Jan. 2024: 955
 - Total Since Launch: 1,268

Virginia Distilled

For its third consecutive year, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture (VMHC) hosted Virginia Distilled, celebrating the commonwealth's rich distilling heritage. For 2024, Virginia Spirits was the presenting sponsor of Virginia Distilled and our goal with this sponsorship was to elevate and expand the event. We envision continuing to partner with the VMHC to make Virginia Distilled a signature Virginia Spirits Month event.

In addition to the recognition resulting from the financial sponsorship, the VSBMO worked closely with the VMHC staff on programming and execution, adding new activations, educational opportunities and higher quality food offerings. The VSBMO solicited participation by 12 distilleries, added three educational sessions presented by local historians and spirits experts, concierge services and a VIP experience with expanded access to the event and a complimentary VIP lounge. The evening was punctuated with guests having the opportunity to taste and vote on the top five finalist entries for the Virginia Cocktail Games with the competition winner announced at the conclusion of the evening.

The Virginia Spirits booth served as a site for information, bottle concierge service and a Passport check-in location. With more than 350 attendees, Virginia Distilled successfully bridged the gap between distillers and bartenders in an engaging, consumer-focused setting.

Sponsor and Exhibitor Events

In 2024, Virginia Spirits proudly sponsored and participated in more than 15 events and regional restaurant weeks, providing direct brand exposure to tens of thousands of Virginians and visitors.

Restaurant Weeks

Virginia Spirits worked with local organizers across the state to sponsor local restaurant weeks. In each sponsorship we worked with the organizers to encourage participating bars and restaurants to feature cocktails made with Virginia Spirits alongside their restaurant week offerings. Sponsorships included: Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Arlington — with Virginia Beach, Richmond and Roanoke scheduled for early 2025.

Other sponsored events included:

- Virginia Agribusiness Council Annual Banquet
- Presenting sponsor during Style Weekly's "Best New Restaurants" program campaign and dinner
- Taste of Virginia at the Virginia State Fair benefiting Agriculture in the Classroom
- Richmond Triangle Players 2024/25 Season
- Urbanna Oyster Festival
- VA1 Governor's Tourism Summit
- Virginia Food and Beverage Expo
- DC Cocktail Festival

The VSBMO also works to raise awareness and position Virginia's distilling industry within the larger adult beverage industry by representing the Board at industry conferences and other events. In 2024 these included:

- Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of America Annual Conference and Trade Show
- American Craft Spirits Association Annual Conference
- Distilled Spirits Council of the US Annual Conference
- American Distilling Institute Annual Conference
- Charleston Wine + Food
- Virginia Bourbon Invitational
- Taste of NOVA presented by Northern Virginia Magazine
- US Bartenders Guild Annual Summit

Advertising

The landscape for traditional advertising channels (print, radio, television) continues to evolve and requires strategic placement of resources to be most effective.

In 2024, our advertising spending was primarily in the digital space, but we also utilized more traditional channels at times throughout the year around the state. These included the following placements:

Print

- Virginia ABC's Spirited Virginia Magazine
- Style Weekly
- Virginia Living
- Northern Virginia Magazine
- Lynchburg Living
- Coastal Living

Television

On the television front, we worked with Comcast to develop a strategic placement plan to reach areas of the state that are more difficult to touch through other channels due to scarcity of publications or expense (Northern Virginia, specifically).

We developed a 30-second television commercial using previously collected assets and ran the spot to promote Virginia Spirits Month in September. We targeted higher income locations in Northern Virginia along with regional placements in western and southwestern parts of the state. We utilized a mix of live broadcast and streaming channels to reach the greatest populations with limited resources.

Western and Southwestern Virginia Placements – Cable Networks in Roanoke, Lynchburg, Harrisonburg and Staunton markets

- High Profile Networks during Prime Time on History
- Discovery
- ESPN
- ESPN2
- Food
- USA
- Comedy
- CNN
- Fox Cable New

Northern Virginia Placements – Streaming/OTT Programming

Targeting included men 35+, Thriving Boomers and Flourishing Families.

- Investigation Discovery
- Travel
- Food
- Discovery
- TUBI
- News

- Sport
- ACC Network
- SEC Network
- ESPN3
- ESPN
- SyFy
- History
- CNBC

All high-profile, brand-safe, long-format programming (using first party data and IP addresses for the most accurate delivery). Impressions reached Loudoun County, Fredericksburg, Woodbridge, Alexandria, Manassas and more.

In total, we saw great success in reaching our target demographic:

- 221,150 Impressions delivered within premium content
- 1,797 hours interacting with videos
- 97% of video impressions were viewed in full

Radio

As part of our relationship with Virginia Public Media, we periodically purchase leads in spots for digital programming. These spots are played when a consumer streams live and pre-recorded content through the VPM website or through a smart speaker or other device. We ran campaigns leading up to and during Virginia Spirits Month and then again in November and December with holiday messaging.

Prior to cancellation of the Virginia Spirits Road Show, we began running spots across six radio stations covering northern North Carolina and southern Virginia. After the cancellation the spots were converted to general Virginia Spirits Month promotion.

Media Engagement

Press Releases/Media Pitches

Statewide and Regional Focus

This year, we continued to focus on Virginia media and select trade outlets, as we continued to educate Virginians on their local distilleries. As we look to 2025, we see more opportunities to reach trade and national media through opportunities such as the First Landing Cup and the Virginia Heritage Grain Project.

Press Releases + Pitches

- Virginia Cocktail Games / Virginia Distilled
 - Announcement / Call for Applications
 - Public Voting Open
 - Regional Winners Announced
 - Winner Announced
- Virginia Spirits Month
- Economic Impact Report
- Virginia Heritage Grain Project
- Pitching for holiday roundups throughout the year

[SEE 2024 PRESS COVERAGE](#)

Media Dinner

Charlottesville Media Dinner

To engage media and influencers during Virginia Spirits Month, the VSBMO hosted a media dinner in Charlottesville. The dinner took place at Broadcloth restaurant with a pairing dinner highlighting local spirits. This dinner aimed to educate Charlottesville media on what is happening in their market and ultimately get them excited about Virginia spirits. The dinner highlighted spirits from Spirit Lab Distilling, Vitae Spirits and Ragged Branch Distillery.

Media/influencers that participated:

- Freelance Writer - Lydia Mansel
- Freelance Writer - Larry Bleiberg
- [Black Women Who Wine](#) - Tasha Durrett
- [Cville Foodie](#) - Rachel and Nick Buccola

- [Kath Eats](#) - Kath Younger
- [VA Foodie](#) - Liz Thompson

Influencer Partnerships: A Statewide and Regional Focus

In addition to traditional media outreach, the VSBMO focused on partnerships with Virginia influencers to create content that focused on Virginia spirits and resonated with their respective audiences.

Key Influencer Partnerships

[Hello Roanoke](#)

- [Post highlighting Virginia Spirits Month + Sidecar in Roanoke](#); including cocktails with spirits from Brady's Distillery, Copper Fox Distillery, Cirrus Vodka and Orkney Springs Distillery
 - 298 Likes
 - 14 Comments
 - 53 Shares
 - 15.2k views
- [Post highlighting Roosters Rise-N-Shine Distillery](#)
 - 241 Likes
 - 8 Comments
 - 96 Shares
 - 16.5k views

[DMV Foodie](#)

- [Post highlighting KO Distilling](#)
 - 406 Likes
 - 17 Comments
 - 252 Shares
 - 35.2k Views

[Ja'Mia Brooks](#)

- [TikTok post highlighting MurLarkey Distilled Spirits](#)
 - 86 Likes
 - 1 Comment
 - 45 Saves
 - 45 Shares
- [Instagram post highlighting MurLarkey Distilled Spirits](#)
 - 1,252 Likes
 - 8 Comments
 - 123 Shares
 - 11.4k Views

Trade Engagement

Virginia ABC

Our single largest industry partner continues to be Virginia ABC. While the agency experienced significant budget cuts and staff changes in 2024, the commitment to work with and assist the VSBMO in our efforts to promote and highlight the Virginia spirits industry remained high.

Our main partnership with Virginia ABC has been in September during Virginia Spirits Month. Once again in 2024 the agency worked with us to distribute bottle tags to highlight the bottles participating in the 2024 Sale-A-Bration. ABC regional managers accepted the shipments of bottle tags for their region and then distributed them to their respective stores. Store personnel then affixed the bottle tags to the participating bottles and replenished until supplies were exhausted. This effort by Virginia ABC store personnel and management helped to highlight Virginia-made spirits on sale during a month where many other producers also ran sales of their own, which could have drowned out our voice and messaging in Virginia ABC stores. And, by allowing us to ship the tags to regional managers and having store personnel affix the tags the agency saved VSBMO countless resources in both time and dollars.

We were also grateful to work with Virginia ABC to help promote the Virginia Cocktail Games and the Bar Pro conference with store personnel including VSBMO-supplied fliers in orders picked up by licensees around the state.

Virginia Restaurant, Lodging and Tourism Association

In 2024 the VSBMO became a Gold Level sponsor with the Virginia Restaurant, Lodging and Tourism Association. The partnership provided us with the opportunity to directly engage with licensees around the state on a macro and micro level. Through our sponsorship we were able to:

- Send out two organization-wide e-blasts: One informed licensees on various programs in which they could get involved and the second promoted the September Sale-A-Bration
- Conduct a webinar to provide details on various programs we offer for licensees. VRLTA staff indicated our webinar was one of the most widely attended of any held last year with 40+ attendees
- Speak at each of the ten regional VRLTA meetings held across the state during Q2 in 2024
- Exhibit at the VRLTA Annual Conference and Membership Meeting
- Exhibit at VA1 The Governor's Tourism Conference

BarPro Professional Development Conference

Continuing our efforts to engage with trade and the bartending community, we worked with the Richmond chapter of the US Bartenders Guild to organize and conduct a two-day professional development conference for Virginia's bartending professionals. The event took place Oct 7-8, 2024 to

coincide with USBG’s National Education Week and all spirits-related sessions only used Virginia-made products.

The event was offered free of charge to bartenders actively working at an ABC licensee and we worked with local professionals to identify topic areas of interest to the target audience. We identified qualified local experts and flew in nationally recognized figures to conduct the sessions.

Session Topics			
Using liquid nitrogen behind the bar	Making homemade infusions	How to be successful in bartending competitions	Food and spirits pairing

The Keynote, “The Lost Spirits: The History of Distilling and Brewing in Virginia Focusing on the Legacy of African American Brewers and Distillers and the Impact they have made in Virginia and Across the United States”, was presented by noted historian, writer and podcaster, [Debra Freeman](#). Roger Beaudin, Founder and CEO of [Restaurant Rockstars](#) - a national restaurant and bar consulting firm - presented a second general session, “Building a Profitable and Efficient Bar Program”

We ended the day with dinner and a walk around spirits tasting with nine participating distilleries.

While almost 90 people registered to attend, we saw a final number of 38 professionals from around the state join us for the day. Overall feedback from those that attended was very positive with specific kudos for the quality of the sessions presented, the ability to network and build community and the level of respect shown to the professionals who work in this space.

VinExpo Explorer

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services took advantage of a rare and significant opportunity to host the fifth [VinExpo Explorer](#). An offshoot of the renowned VinExpo wine and spirits show that takes place in Europe each year, VinExpo Explorer provides an opportunity for smaller, lesser known regions to host alcohol buyers and media from around the world in order to learn more about the products produced in that region.

The VSBMO both helped to sponsor the event and played a significant role in facilitating curated experiences for attendees. With the Boar’s Head Resort in Charlottesville as the home base for the event, producers took attendees to numerous distilleries and wineries in Charlottesville, Richmond and coastal regions. The VSBMO also facilitated a morning panel discussion around the history and future of distilling in the commonwealth.

Distillery Engagement

Distillery engagement continues to be a significant challenge for our marketing efforts. Since the beginning of the VSBMO, we've received overwhelming support and enthusiasm from distillers and owners in conversations. Leveraging our partnership with the Virginia Distillers Association (VDA) has been key to furthering our connection with the distilling community. By actively participating in board meetings and maintaining open communication, we ensure that VSBMO activities are well-aligned with industry priorities and that leadership stays informed about our ongoing efforts.

VSBMO Content Webinar

In May 2024, we hosted a [content webinar](#) to educate distillers about curating content marketing. We shared simple ways to collect content (narrative, photo and video), how to repurpose across channels and how to engage with the VSBMO, so that we can help amplify their message.

Industry Newsletter

In its second year, the monthly newsletter to industry partners and, largely, distilleries maintained an above average open and click rate. The audience list grew slightly (from 183 to 210 contacts) as we continue to ensure that everyone is represented and that multiple people (from management to marketing) have the access they need to our resources.

The monthly communication provides information on current and upcoming industry happenings, VSB, Virginia ABC and VDA announcements, marketing best practices, opportunities to submit content and participate in campaigns or events and more. One week prior to the newsletter going out, a handful of industry leaders are notified and given the opportunity to share updates or announcements for consideration.

The newsletter has proven to be one of the most successful avenues for sharing information and soliciting engagement through key campaigns. Occasional one-off emails were sent but were only limited to timely, important updates.

- Open Rate
 - VSB Average: 55.85%
 - Industry Benchmark: 42.8%
- Click Rate
 - VSB Average: 8.75%
 - Industry Benchmark: 6.8%
- 39 New Contacts

Monthly Tips & Tricks Topics

- Tailoring to Gen-Z

- Marketing Trends
- Keys to Content
- Industry Webinar/Conference Takeaways
- Hosting & Promoting Events
- Using AI
- Brand Authenticity
- Influencer Marketing

Trade Newsletter

Prior to Virginia Spirits Month and Virginia Spirits BarPro, we sent out our first trade newsletter. The audience was built from personal connections and trade accounts we've worked with in the past and the VRLTA membership list (a perk of our Gold Sponsorship).

As a majority of the 974 contacts came from the membership list, we sent out an initial opt-out email to introduce the VSBMO and outline what the newsletter would entail – also as a best practice to give the audience an opportunity to unsubscribe. Only 20 unsubscribed (2.3%) and 87 bounced (8.9%), leaving more than 850 successful deliveries for the [first full edition](#). The newsletter launched with an **average open rate of 33.65%** and **average click rate of 4.8%**, both only slightly below average.

The newsletter serves many purposes: engage on a consistent basis with trade partners; share news and promotions from the local distilling community; feature distilleries from across regions; and solicit participation in tasting and educational events. In 2025, the goal is to improve and grow our audience list and begin sending communications at a more regular cadence.

Major Campaigns

The VSBMO achieves our goals through a sustained series of activities and marketing campaigns throughout the year. Each activity, program or campaign likely includes components of each of the strategies outlined in this report. Each year, we anticipate two campaigns will play a dominant role and will span all engagement touch points: Virginia Spirits Month in September and The First Landing Cup Spirits Competition. In 2024, we added a third major campaign, The Virginia Cocktail Games, which engages trade through a cocktail competition featuring local bartender contestants.

The Virginia Cocktail Games

In an effort to engage trade and build stronger relationships between bartenders, licensees and Virginia distilleries, the VSBMO hosted the first-annual Virginia Cocktail Games and worked closely with Eric Kozlik – spirits judge, educator, podcast host and principal consultant at Direct Fire Consulting – to design a bartending competition where 25 local bartenders went head-to-head for the title of 2024 Virginia Cocktail of the Year.

To ensure equal representation from all areas of the commonwealth, we selected five bartenders from five regions through a competitive application process. The 25 competitors each crafted a unique cocktail that featured a spirit produced in their region and embodied Olympics Greatness. Leveraging several digital channels, the VSBMO launched the first, digital round of the competition and asked spirits enthusiasts to vote for their favorite cocktails daily over a 2-week period. We provided the bartenders with tools and guidance to promote the competition on their own social media profiles as well. At the end of round 1, the bartender with the most votes in their region advanced to the final, live round at Virginia Distilled, our featured Virginia Spirits Month event at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture.

At Virginia Distilled, our five finalists competed before a panel of esteemed judges and Virginia spirits enthusiasts to achieve a weighted final score. The professional judging panel consisted of a member of the bartending community, a local distiller and an experienced spirits judge and member of the media. Spirits enthusiasts attending Virginia Distilled cast votes for their favorite cocktail, providing a consumer element that added weight to the judges scores. Each finalist was charged with presenting a cocktail that embodies why they “Choose Virginia.”

After a busy day presenting to the judges, batching cocktails and pouring samples for attendees of Virginia Distilled, the votes were in: Henry Hill Jr., bartender from Hotel Roanoke, took home gold with his cocktail called “No Place Like Home.”

Overall, the Games proved to be a huge success, increasing awareness and engagement with bartenders from around the state, significantly increasing awareness and engagement with consumers who know

and follow their favorite bartenders and providing a platform to highlight licensees that carry Virginia-made spirits.

Highlights of The Inaugural Virginia Cocktail Games					
83 applications from local bartenders	25 regional contenders, five from each of the 5 regions	19,139 sessions on the voting page	65.04% engagement rate on the voting page	9,104 votes during the first, digital round	6,000+ new email subscribers

Virginia Spirits Month

Virginia Spirits Month, the industry’s flagship celebration held in September, is our largest annual campaign. This year, we promoted Virginia Spirits Month across all engagement touchpoints, from statewide advertising to crowning the winner of our first-annual Virginia Cocktail Games at Virginia Distilled. These activities showcased the commonwealth's vibrant spirits industry and inspired spirits lovers to choose local.

Here is a list of the specific activities in support of Virginia Spirits Month, which have been discussed in greater detail previously in the Annual Report:

- Active participation and presenting sponsorship at Virginia Distilled, the signature Virginia Spirits Month held at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture.
- Advertising that included radio, a connected and traditional TV commercial, television appearances, statewide and regional print publications and digital ad placements across multiple platforms.
- Hosted a media dinner in Charlottesville, Virginia.
- Distribution of 75,000 bottle tags to all Virginia ABC stores.
- Close coordination with Virginia ABC to highlight the agency’s Sale-A-Bration.

The First Landing Cup Spirits Competition

The inaugural First Landing Cup was postponed in 2024 as a result of budget mix ups with VSB funding in the General Assembly. It was rescheduled for 2025.

The Virginia Spirits Board Marketing Office, operated by [The Hodges Partnership](#)

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