

CLEVELAND STATE MAGAZINE



Never Flashy. Never Trendy. Always Cleveland.

How David Gilbert is raising Cleveland's nationwide profile

Each year, millions of people visit Cleveland for the first time. David Gilbert (MBA '94) likens these experiences to millions of first dates that he hopes will blossom into full-fledged relationships.

Gilbert is president and chief executive officer of both Destination Cleveland and the Greater Cleveland Sports Commission. In both roles, he works to attract events and visitors—and revenue—to the city.

As a result of his work, Cleveland has become one of the top event cities in America for the past 15 years, hosting Major League Baseball's All-Star Game in 2019, the

Republican National Convention in 2016, the Gay Games in 2014, the National Senior Games in 2013, the NCAA Women's Final Four in 2007 and the International Children's Games in 2004.

Next up: the 86th NFL Draft in spring 2021.

"It's one of the largest sporting events in America, and it's not even a competition," said Gilbert. "It's become a sort of pilgrimage for NFL fans."

Plans also are underway to host the NBA All-Star Game in 2022.

"When we have these events that attract thousands, tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people or more, they are enormous opportunities to change people's minds and hearts about Cleveland," said Gilbert. "When their minds are changed, they help change other minds."

For nine straight years, Cleveland's increase in visitors has outpaced the national visitation growth rate. In 2019, Cleveland saw a record-breaking 19.6 million visitors to the city for leisure and business travel, representing a 2.1 percent increase from 2018 and a 31.5 percent increase since 2011. Destination Cleveland hopes to one day achieve 20 million annual visitors.

It's the sort of growth that generates billions of dollars for the local economy.

Though Cleveland faces stiff competition when bidding for the opportunity to bring large-scale events to the city, Gilbert believes his team's track record of delivering first-rate experiences continues to win over event organizers.

"Our goal every time is that these events are better and more successful when held in Cleveland than anywhere else," he said.

Gilbert's marketing message is unashamedly purposeful, anchoring itself to Cleveland's resilience – some might say doggedness – remarkable history, rough edges and unmistakable charm.

"Never flashy. Never trendy. Always Cleveland," reads the Destination Cleveland home page.

They like to call it sophisticated grit.

"For several decades, we were mocked as a city in decline; but even through that, we had a lot to be proud of and hold our heads high. We have an incredibly rich heritage of innovation and of being a heart and soul of America and what grew America. We were one of the wealthiest and most innovative cities in America for decades. We have the resiliency to fight back from decline. We don't need to pretend to be someone else."

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