



VANDENBOSCH says the Turnstile Tours team digs into historical archives to unearth unknown facts.

FOCAL POINTS

NAME Turnstile Tours

FOUNDED 2012

COMPANY LEADERSHIP

Cindy VandenBosch, president;
Andrew Gustafson, vice president

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES Seven

TOUR OFFERINGS The Brooklyn Navy Yard, Walking Waterfront, Essex Market, food carts, Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Army Terminal

BY THE NUMBERS Prepandemic, the company did 471 tours per year. Now it hosts one or two in-person tours per week. It has conducted 254 virtual tours since March 2020.

REVENUE \$200,000 in 2019; \$100,000 in 2020

GROWTH STRATEGY Turnstile plans to focus on outdoor tours and virtual programs as well as expand its membership program and partnerships.

WEBSITE turnstiletours.com

Brooklyn tour company finds new life online

Virtual programming helps Turnstile Tours showcase its expertise and hold on to some business

BY BRIAN PASCUS

When the Covid-19 pandemic threatened to shut down their Brooklyn tour guide business—Turnstile Tours—husband-and-wife team Cindy VandenBosch and Andrew Gustafson had to reinvent their nine-year-old company on the fly.

Founded in 2012, Turnstile Tours' unofficial motto is "We share stories of how New York City works." By taking customers behind the scenes of different aspects of city life, especially in Brooklyn, the company aims to highlight the work of ordinary New Yorkers.

The company's mission is to improve residents' knowledge of what's going on in the area and showcase "the people who keep the city running," as VandenBosch explained it.

Although Turnstile specializes in highlighting the history of the Brooklyn Navy Yard and Brooklyn Army Terminal, it also offers tours related to public markets, street vendors (with generous food samples) and urban ecology as well as a history and landscape walk through nearby Prospect Park.

VandenBosch said the company's employees enjoy digging into historical archives and then elevating stories that previously might not have been uncovered or shared. The Brooklyn Historical Society has been a long-time partner in this work.

When Covid-19 made in-person tours out of the question—with 1,500 reservations having to be canceled or refunded—VandenBosch and Gustafson leaned on two pillars to keep their seven-person company afloat: a pivot to using technology to take their services online and their vast library of historical facts about New York.

"Our employees have this body of knowledge that they've been building of New York. There's so much content that doesn't make it

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on a tour because it's site specific," VandenBosch said. "Our idea was, what can we show people and share with them in this virtual space?"

Located in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the company began holding virtual programs in March 2020. Turnstile offered online interviews, lectures, walking tours and cooking and art demonstrations. The company conducted one program per day during the first 100 days of the pandemic and created a

monthly membership program to offset the decline in in-person business and its delay in receiving Paycheck Protection Program funding.

"We really reached out to lots of different partners we worked with in the past," Gustafson said, adding that the company looked to offer as much variety in its virtual presentations as possible. "We try to make them interactive."

The changes, though necessary, didn't come without a 50% revenue hit, however: The company went from \$200,000 in revenue in 2019 to \$100,000 in 2020.

The next phase

Looking ahead to the summer and beyond, VandenBosch and her husband believe that by facing the challenges of Covid-19, they found a sustainable model to grow their business into the future.

The couple wants to continue the company's virtual programming because it allows Turnstile Tours to connect with an audience outside of New York. It also creates a library of video content that the company has never had before.

Since the fall VandenBosch and Gustafson have noticed a surge in New Yorkers looking for activities to do outside and trying to reconnect with the city they love. In October the company began offering in-person tours

again, starting with walks through Prospect Park.

But the creation of virtual programming should sustain the shop if business slows down again.

"If we had not done virtual programs, we wouldn't have been able to bridge the gap," VandenBosch said. "The question is, how do we harness all we learned and all the unique challenges we faced this year into whatever this next phase will be?" ■