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Q&A: Kristen Reynolds on how Chicago continues to captivate travelers and global visitors

Choose Chicago's CEO shares how the city is reimagining tourism, enhancing visitor experiences, and gearing up for major events in the year ahead.

7 min read

By [Angie Giroux](#) 10/23/25

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Since taking the helm at [Choose Chicago](#), Kristen Reynolds has continued to showcase why the city is a global destination for travelers and major events alike. From world-class hospitality to innovative cultural experiences, Chicago leverages its neighborhoods, institutions, and residents to create authentic, memorable moments. Even with highlights like [IPW 2025](#) behind us, the city's "Never Done. Never Outdone." ethos drives ongoing growth, international interest, and a renewed sense of civic pride. In the following Q&A, Reynolds shares insights on how Chicago's brand, campaigns, and strategies are shaping the city's tourism future.

You took the helm at Choose Chicago just weeks before U.S. Travel's IPW conference brought the world's travel industry to the city. What did that experience show you

about Chicago's global brand and its ability to host major international events?

[IPW 2025](#) was an opportunity to showcase Chicago hospitality, ingenuity, and work ethic to our colleagues in the global tourism industry—and we over-delivered. From seamless airport arrivals to walkable, world-class venues and hospitality, the city reminded everyone that big, complex events are our comfort zone.

What stood out most was the partnership muscle: the City, our airports, hotels, cultural institutions, and our neighborhoods all pulled in the same direction, in close partnership with the U.S. Travel Association. That civic alignment is a strategic advantage for Chicago that we'll continue to lean into. The outcome wasn't just great press; it was a pipeline for future visitation. We left IPW with expanded interest from international buyers and content creators that we're going to convert into visits and coverage for years to come.

You've emphasized the importance of countering negative narratives about Chicago with authentic stories from residents and visitors. How do you measure success in campaigns like All for the Love of Chicago?

We start with participation: number of individuals contributing stories, and the share of organic content coming from everyday Chicagoans and visitors—not just official

channels. We track sentiment through social listening on campaign hashtags and monitor brand favorability shifts in key origin markets.

But the real success for me is when our stakeholders and residents take the time to share with me how much they love and appreciate the campaign – which happens often!

Ultimately, this campaign is about providing a platform for people who love this city to tell our story as only we can—through sharing authentic testimonials and experiences. And we’ve intentionally built “All for the Love of Chicago” as a movement, not a one-off, so we’re looking for sustained momentum above all.

Your new brand platform “Never Done. Never Outdone.” positions Chicago as constantly evolving. How do you see that message resonating both with locals and with international travelers who may only know Chicago through headlines?

“Never Done. Never Outdone.” rings true to Chicagoans. We pressure tested it with key industry stakeholder groups as well as residents and previous and potential visitors before we launched. Our creative energy, neighborhood culture, and dining scene are always evolving. The campaign gives residents—and our partners—language to own the pride we all feel for this incredible city that has reinvented itself time and again throughout its history.

“Never Done” reframes Chicago beyond the clichés and spotlights new reasons to visit now—arts, architecture, sports, music scenes that always have something new to offer and can rival any global city. “Never Outdone” is about competing and dominating; Chicagoans will outwork, out hustle, and out do the competition at every turn. Strategically, this campaign works for both leisure and meetings, for sports and culture. The consistency increases media efficiency and encourages broad adoption of campaign language locally.



Reynolds

Inbound international travel has been slower to recover than domestic. What strategies are you prioritizing to grow markets like Canada and Latin America while also capturing U.S. travelers staying closer to home?

Chicago is seeing strong momentum on the drive market and in terms of inbound domestic visitation in general. On the international front, our entire team is working

hard to ensure travel trade decision makers, media, and individuals around the world know that we remain the most welcoming, friendliest city in America, and we can't wait for them to experience all Chicago has to offer.

We're also being strategic about where we put additional resources. We're investing more in key emerging markets like South America and India, where we've seen a significant uptick in inbound travel to Chicago and overall increased international outbound travel. Those massive markets hold enormous potential for continued growth.

Finally, we're staying nimble: we're watching booking curves and geopolitical developments so we can quickly scale what's working.

Chicago will play a central role in major milestones ahead, from the Obama Presidential Center's opening to the Route 66 centennial in 2026. How are you weaving those events into your long-term tourism strategy?

The Obama Presidential Center and Route 66 centennial are multi-year storylines that have led us to program fresh itineraries, develop new neighborhood tours, and create heritage travel content that keeps Chicago top-of-mind for regional and global travelers alike. We're pairing these milestone moments with access messaging—O'Hare, Midway,

Amtrak, the drive market—so consumers feel confident about acting on inspiration.

We're especially excited about both the Obama Presidential Center and Route 66 because these tentpoles will draw visitors into the South and West Sides of Chicago, supporting local businesses and cultural institutions through partnerships and wayfinding.

You've led destination marketing organizations in Arizona, Long Island, and now Chicago. What lessons from those experiences are most relevant to your role today in such a large and complex city?

Whether the DMO is representing a state, a region, or a massive city like Chicago, outcomes improve when the community is engaged and residents are prioritized. Chicago is a great example of a destination that does this effectively as we experienced during IPW and as we embody with our Never Done, Never Outdone and All for the Love of Chicago campaigns.

When a DMO can instill and ignite community pride, that authenticity resonates with the visitor and creates not only the increased desire to visit that destination, but the enhanced experience during the visit.

When residents understand the value of the visitor economy, they are more likely to welcome and appreciate visitors. And visitors, in turn, experience the genuine love that the residents have for the place they call home.

This model of prioritizing the residents for the ultimate visitor benefit creates a cycle of authentic and positive experiences that supports and sustains the delicate balance of inviting global visitors while enhancing the resident's quality of life.

Why do you think travel is essential?

Practically, from a civic and government perspective, it's a jobs engine, it alleviates the tax burden for residents, and it enhances civic pride by reinforcing the positive aspects of a destination's identity. In those respects, it is critical.

From a more personal, human perspective, travel expands empathy and understanding. It's one of the best ways people can experience diversity and find commonalities with people that are different from them. I think that the world always needs more of that. Maybe now more than ever.

Looking ahead, what do you see as the biggest opportunity—and the biggest challenge—for Chicago's tourism industry over the next five years?

Converting everything that makes our "Never Done. Never Outdone." ethos ring so true locally into a globally recognized brand identity is a huge opportunity. We want to showcase everything that makes Chicagoans proud of their city—the innovation that happens across our culinary and events sectors, our iconic sports teams, world-class venues and hotels, and our beautiful, diverse

neighborhoods. We're leveraging these assets to drive repeat visitation and international growth while increasing economic impact across Chicago neighborhoods.

The greatest challenge in the near term: volatility—in politics, perception, currency shifts. We need to stay data-led and nimble, diversify our audiences, and keep investing in the authentic stories that make Chicago irresistible. I'm looking forward to the future.

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