



During its 42nd Annual Conference, the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals (NCBMP) held a Day of Service with the Feed The Folks program, an initiative of the Urban League of Portland committed to tackling food insecurity. The conference was November 19 – 22 in Portland, Oregon. Photo by On The Run Images LLC

Sheri Dunn Explores “Competency Checking” During NCBMP Keynote

By Todd McElwee

Qualified, Sheri Dunn’s November 20 morning keynote during the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals’ (NCBMP) Annual Conference opened up a discussion on the false narrative that diversity equals a lack of qualifications. Delving into her book, “Qualified: How Competency Checking and Race Collide at Work,” she also presented strategies and practices so that Black professionals, and other people of color, receive opportunities commensurate to their qualifications.

Dunn’s address centered around the concept of “competency checking” — a practice that unjustly scrutinizes Black people and other people of color, forcing them to repeatedly prove their worth, intelligence, and even their right to be in the workplace. Presenting data, quotes and personal anecdotes to reinforce the perception that Black individuals must work twice as hard to be deemed competent and successful, she added that her motivations for

writing included letting her audience know they’re not alone nor losing their minds when facing competency checking.

Dunn detests imposter syndrome and noted what gets labeled as such in the Black community, and for other people of color, is a misrepresentation. The misnomer is actually a normal reaction to an environment that is constantly competency checking someone. Recognizing the bias and building coalitions are two keys in rectifying the problem.

Breaking the mindset of pitting minority groups against one another is critical. Offering grace but pushing back when Black success is treated as an anomaly are steps in which individuals can engage.

Organizationally, Dunn said to “audit, adjust and monitor.” Methods include identifying who is successful and who is not, and why. Detecting goal-based stereotyping (white equals smart, black equals lucky) and limiting referral-based hiring, which she compared to legacy admissions at colleges, were recommended.

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Following the address, Dunn and Hilina D. Ajakaiye, CDME, Chief Strategy Officer, NCBMP, sat down and expanded the conversation. Ajakaiye asked when an issue needs addressed how does Dunn go about doing so. Dunn replied she comes from a place of positivity and used an example from when she was a news anchor.

During meetings a Black female coworker would make suggestions that another colleague would then just repeat, ignoring the previous comment. When it was her turn to

speak Dunn would revisit her female coworker’s idea in a positive manner for the entire room.

Dunn urged the audience to be intentional and consistent.

A Portland resident, Dunn got a laugh when she said, “yes there are Black people here.” She then shared examples of local Black culture and history including the story of York, an enslaved man who was the only African-American member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and is celebrated in Portland.



Hilina D. Ajakaiye, CDME, Chief Strategy Officer, NCBMP; and Shari Dunn, Executive Consultant, Author, Speaker ITBOM Training & Consulting, held a discussion during the opening session of NCBMP’s 42nd Annual Conference on November 20 at the Hilton Portland. Photo by On The Run Images LLC

NEWS

USAEExchange: Cleo Battle, President & CEO, Louisville Tourism



Louisville is counting down the days until it hosts the 2026 edition of NCBMP's Annual Conference. Connecting

with USAE during this year's edition in Portland, Battle provided a preview of next year's event, shared how the bureau is leading local diversity efforts and looked ahead to 2026 in Bourbon City.

USAE: What does bringing NCBMP to town mean to Louisville Tourism?

Battle: Hosting this prestigious conference in 2026 is a significant milestone for Louisville Tourism and reaffirms Louisville as a welcoming and inclusive destination. Beyond the economic impact, it amplifies our voice in promoting equity within the industry and cre-

ates opportunities for local minority-owned businesses to engage with national leaders.

USAE: Please share a glimpse of what attendees can expect in Louisville in 2026.

Battle: Attendees will experience Louisville's signature hospitality and Southern culture. Expect to visit iconic attractions like the Muhammad Ali Center, the only museum in the world paying homage to Louisville's hometown hero. The Ali Center celebrates the life, legacy and core principles of the legendary boxer with interactive galleries showcasing his humanitarian work and civil rights advocacy. Other popular attractions unique to Louisville include legendary Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby Museum, Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory and Roots 101 African American Museum.

As attendees explore Louisville, we know they'll enjoy the city's walkable downtown, waterfront park and

lively neighborhoods. And of course, Bourbon City also offers immersive bourbon experiences paired with world-class culinary offerings. Louisville Tourism is planning curated experiences that showcase our authentic Southern charm and innovative 'spirit,' ensuring attendees leave with lasting memories and a desire to return.

USAE: What are you excited for this year in Portland?

Battle: We're thrilled about the opportunity to connect and engage with industry leaders, strengthening relationships with African American meeting planners and association executives. This opportunity allows us to share Louisville's story, build strategic

partnerships and learn best practices that will enhance our destination marketing efforts. It's a chance to spotlight Louisville's growth and innovation

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My Louisville: Michelle Clark, National Sales Manager, Louisville Tourism

USAE: When I need coffee my first stop is?

Clark: Wiltshire Pantry Bakery & Café Downtown is perfect. It's a café and bakery hidden gem specializing in fresh and local ingredients. Pro tip: breakfast is served all day!

USAE: I cannot resist this desert at?

Clark: Derby-Pie at The Brown Hotel. This historic hotel is famous for the Hot Brown, but its dessert menu also features Kern's Derby-Pie. Enjoy a slice in the elegant J. Graham's Café or the Lobby Bar for a true Louisville experience.

USAE: The most peaceful spot in Louisville is where?

Clark: Cave Hill Cemetery, a serene 296-acre arboretum with thousands of trees and plants, including rare species. The final resting place of Muhammad Ali, it draws visitors from around the world to pay respects to the boxing legend and humanitarian. Another famous Kentuckian and founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken, Colonel Harland Sanders, is also buried in Cave Hill—his memorial is a popular stop for history buffs and foodies alike.

USAE: Nothing in Louisville is more exciting than?

Clark: The "Run for the Roses," Louisville's crown jewel. It's not just a horse race; it's a full cultural experience that blends tradition, fashion, and festivals over two weeks (for a two-minute horse race). First run in

1875, the Kentucky Derby is the longest continuously held sporting event in the U.S., with 15 of the first 28 Derby winners ridden by Black jockeys. And the very first winner of the Kentucky Derby in 1875 was Oliver Lewis, a Black jockey.

USAE: Who has the best menu of bourbon in Bourbon City?

Clark: Bourbons Bistro was one of the first restaurants to make bourbon the centerpiece of its concept—long before the current bourbon boom. With a collection that exceeds 130 bourbons, including rare and antique expressions, it's widely recognized as a pioneer of Louisville's Urban Bourbon Trail. Named Global Bar of the Year by *Whisky Magazine* in 2023 and featured on national TV and listed among Imbibe's Top 100 Places to Drink in the South, it's a must-visit.

USAE: If I have 30 minutes for lunch this is my spot.

Clark: Jack Fry's — it's a Louisville classic, well-known for delivering Southern staples, fine-dining and attentive service in their cozy spot amid Louisville's famed Restaurant Row in the Highlands neighborhood. Ask to sit at Table 17, the very spot where Muhammad Ali frequently dined.

USAE: What museum should someone not miss?

Clark: Roots 101 African American museum, a *USA Today* 10Best Readers' Choice Best New Attraction Award winner in 2021. This hands-on



museum promotes understanding and inspires appreciation of African American achievements, contributions and experiences through exhibits, programs, and activities that illuminate the depth and richness of history, culture, and art.

USAE: Make sure to ask a local

about what?

Clark: Please and Thank You chocolate chip cookies. Voted the 'Best Across America' by *USA Today*. Runner up: The Tok-sel Lima beans at Mayan Café, serving up authentic Mayan cuisine. They'll knock your socks off even if you don't favor lima beans!

HOTS

Portland has a bunch of nicknames including Rose City. Rip City. Stumptown and Beervana. For HOTS however Portland will forever be known as Bikeland. During a beautiful November afternoon HOTS grabbed a bike and took off onto the Tilikum Crossing Bridge. After crossing the Willamette River, HOTS cruised around Southeast Portland, catching a glimpse of Mount Hood every now and again. The best part is wherever HOTS rode there was a bike lane. And where did the ride end, but none other than Grand Fir Brewing, a wonderful suggestion by Travel Portland.

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Islandia on Long Island now requires complaints be submitted in-person at the village’s government offices as officials say they’ve been besieged by online grievances that have turned out to be unfounded. AP reports the policy, which was adopted last month, even prevents residents from using its online portal for complaints, though a village spokesperson told Newsday it will accept complaints sent via certified or registered mail. HOTS also won’t be accepting complaints from Islandia residents, especially those about the complaint submission process.

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Cleo Battle

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while reinforcing our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in the meetings industry.

USAE: How does the CVB position itself as a DEI leader within the community?

Battle: Louisville Tourism leads with action through initiatives like:

Organizational DEI Audit: Completed in 2020 to identify areas for improvement in hiring, culture and vendor diversity.

Black Tourism Advisory Council (BTAC): Louisville Tourism’s panel of community leaders who review the destination’s leisure tourism, marketing and business opportunities to ensure authentic representation.

Industry-Wide DEI Training: Provide ongoing complimentary sessions to hospitality partners to create equitable workplaces. These efforts reflect the DMO’s mission to make Louisville a truly inclusive destination for visitors and residents alike.

USAE: In 2026, what’s on tap for Louisville?

Battle: Louisville is preparing for an exciting year of growth. In addition to hosting major events like the NCBMP Annual Conference, the city will unveil several new developments designed to elevate visitor experiences. Bourbon City is one of the few destinations opening new attractions with Louisville’s spirits industry constantly expanding. Prior to 2013, Louisville did not have any bourbon distillery or tasting rooms—and now there are over two dozen, with more on the way! Newer Bourbon attractions NCBMP attendees should look to experience are Green River Distilling Tasting Room, Chicken Cock, two Pursuit Spirits locations, Uncle Boogie’s Distilling Company, Binder’s Stash, Nashville Barrel Whiskey Company, Von Payne Spirits and WhistlePig’s The Vault.



Cleo Battle, President & CEO, Louisville Tourism; and Courtney Eison, Hilton Worldwide, NCBMP Board Member, attend the opening reception of NCBMP’s 42nd Annual Conference at the Porsche Studio. Travel Portland sponsored the November 19 reception.

2026 marks the 100th birthday of Louisville’s iconic Hot Brown sandwich, created at The Brown Hotel in 1926. Louisville will offer special menus, culinary events and citywide promotions to honor this legendary dish. Not to be missed while in for NCBMP!

Scheduled to open in 2026, the American Printing House for the Blind will unveil The Dot Experience, a highly accessible museum inviting visitors to “please touch,” making it one of the

most inclusive cultural attractions in the country.

Just off Whiskey Row, you’ll find our newest hotel property, the six-story Hotel Bourre Bonne, featuring the signature Bourre Bonne Steakhouse, rooftop pool and indoor bar with cityscape views.

We hope NCBMP attendees agree that Louisville is one of the “Best Places to Travel To,” as designated by Travel +Leisure. We are ready to welcome NCBMP to Louisville next December!



Dr. Natalie Nixon, author, keynote speaker, *Figure 8 Thinking*, looked at how imagination drives business success during her keynote at NCBMP’s 42nd Annual Conference. The event is November 19 – 22 in Portland, Oregon.

Scene At The NCBMP 42nd Annual Conference



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