

VISITHATTIESBURG REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL: PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY SERVICES

Tourism Industry Recovery, II



Proposals are due on or before 5:00 p.m. CST on MARCH 7, 2023.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this Request for Proposal (RFP) is to seek qualified public relations agencies to support VisitHATTIESBURG's strategic communications, media relations, and public relations priorities. Qualified agencies will have a working knowledge of the tourism industry.

VisitHATTIESBURG's desired partner will have the capacity to provide strategic counsel and direction, actively share and promote the destination's message, amplify successes, and position Hattiesburg as a premier destination in the Gulf South for leisure travel at the national, regional, and local levels. As the DMO's agency, the selected firm will be responsible for assisting in the development and support of VisitHATTIESBURG's public relations and media efforts to maximize communications efforts aimed at key domestic reporters and media outlets. The agency must be able to provide strong media and public relations strategic insight and message development to assist VisitHATTIESBURG with proactive campaigns and reactive approaches related to topics including but not limited to travel news, travel trends, marketing initiatives, issues impacting travel, and more.

VisitHATTIESBURG intends to contract with a qualified agency to support its continued recovery efforts, stemmed from the negative economic impacts of COVID-19. This contract will be funded through federal ARPA dollars for Mississippi Tourism Recovery, II. As such, preference will be given to companies with offices in Mississippi or who employ Mississippi residents.

This RFP in no way commits VisitHATTIESBURG to award a contract, to pay any costs in preparation of a proposal, or to contract for the goods and/or services offered. Although it is VisitHATTIESBURG's intent to contract with the person/company that best meets the qualifications to complete the scope of work, VisitHATTIESBURG may terminate the negotiations if they are unsuccessful in reaching an agreement on all matters including the scope of work and cost.

SCOPE OF SERVICES

The selected agency's responsibilities will include the below:

- Tell the story of VisitHATTIESBURG's marketing and strategies, programs, successes and opportunities to media across the country and around the globe.
- Ensure awareness, understanding, and support of Hattiesburg's tourism economy.
- Build engagement, trust, and advocacy through strategic communications.
- Develop and maintain a targeted media list

- Proactively pursue positive stories and respond to inquiries - targeting all forms of media: broadcast, digital, podcasts, print, etc. (consumer lifestyle and travel, travel/meetings trade outlets) as appropriate for each opportunity.
- Elevate VisitHATTIESBURG executives as tourism thought leaders.
- Identify industry trends to help shape messaging.
- Enhance the organization's credibility as a source for visitors.
- Develop communications strategies to support Brand USA's programs and initiatives and promote the ways in which Brand USA promotes DMOs globally.
- Strengthen domestic public relations efforts.
- Vet VisitHATTIESBURG media calls, as needed.
- Draft news releases, messaging documents, talking points, FAQs, media Q&As, etc.
- Crisis & Issues Support
- Provide media training for executives and senior staff, as needed.
- Establish working relationships with influential media, including bloggers, travel writers, and influencers.

ABOUT VISITHATTIESBURG

VisitHATTIESBURG is a research-driven destination management organization with annual collections of approximately \$800,000, derived from the collection of a 2% lodging tax on the gross proceeds from hotel overnight room rental.

VISITHATTIESBURG'S MISSION: To actively position Hattiesburg as a year-round premier leisure and business destination in the Gulf South.

VISITHATTIESBURG'S VISION: To ignite tourism economic growth in Hattiesburg through strategic vision and collaborative leadership while enhancing local quality of life.

VISITHATTIESBURG'S FOCUS AREAS: VisitHBURG's operations strategies and activities focus on four specific core values, which are:

1. Grow tourism's economic impact in HBURG
2. Communicate and amplify the HBURG story
3. Prioritize placemaking and enhance the HBURG experience
4. Strengthen partner network and collaboration

DESTINATION WEBSITE: www.visithburg.org

DESTINATION BACKGROUND & STATE OF ECONOMY

With a \$300 million tourism economy at its height, Hattiesburg offers a variety of activities for visitors, including award-winning culinary, outdoor recreation, a vibrant live music scene, an internationally recognized art scene, breweries, festivals, and historical trails and museums. Visitors also come to Hattiesburg for corporate meetings, conventions, academia, military, medical, and sporting events, including adult, youth, and collegiate.

Hattiesburg is home to two major universities, a thriving regional healthcare cluster, the largest joint forces military training base in the U.S., an artistic downtown, a newly developed midtown district, an award-winning zoo, and approximately 3,000 hotel rooms. The Greater Hattiesburg area is Mississippi's third most visited city. Often referred to as the Hub City, Hattiesburg is centrally located less than 90 minutes from New Orleans, Mobile, the Mississippi Gulf Coast and Mississippi's capital city, Jackson.

The business disruption effects of COVID-19 had great negative economic impact on Hattiesburg's travel industry, with visitor spending totaling \$257 million in 2020, a steep decline of more than \$43 million from the previous record-breaking year. According to the U.S. Travel Association, Tourism Economics, U.S. travel is not expected to return to its pre-pandemic economic impact until 2026.

Hattiesburg competes for tourists, consumers, and available workforce talent to strengthen its numerous economic development sectors. Because of its many outdoor accommodations, ample meeting space, and VisitHATTIESBURG's strategic use of CARES Act funding, Hattiesburg ended 2021 as one of the top cities in Mississippi and the nation for recovery and visitor spending. In all, spending increased by 9% to a total of \$280 million.

VisitHATTIESBURG leveraged CARES Act funding to aggressively market, its destination. As those funds ran out, VisitHATTIESBURG invested its local tourism dollars, earned from increased visitation. Now that money is exhausted, growth has significantly slowed.

As of 2022, many restaurants, hotels, and attractions are still struggling in Hattiesburg to return to pre-pandemic figures. While some of closed their doors for good, unable to overcome the hardships, others continue fighting to remain open despite workforce issues, rising costs, and supply chain delays. In 2019, the tourism sector employed more than 4,000 Mississippians in Greater Hattiesburg, which has not been fully regained.

Hattiesburg is now witnessing a decline, once again, in visitor spending and attendance due to nationwide issues, such as inflation, public health concerns, and depleted marketing funds for recovery. VisitHATTIESBURG must inspire travel and capture its share of the market to help aid in economic recovery for the city.

VISITHATTIESBURG TARGET AUDIENCE DETAILS

Largely a drive market, Hattiesburg is a destination for travelers of all interests. Travelers to Hattiesburg include both day-trippers and overnights, those looking for a weekend getaway, a rest stop between other major destinations, or conducting business. They are typically millennials, baby boomers, or multi-generation families.

Through VisitHATTIESBURG's long-range strategic plan research in 2019-20, it was discovered that Hattiesburg's leisure audience is interested in local cuisine, breweries/craft beer, shopping, sporting events, history, outdoor recreation, art, theatre and live music. Corporate visitors in Hattiesburg come from various industry sectors but are typically from organizations and associations who meet in

Hattiesburg. Additionally, Hattiesburg’s visitor is educated, often a solo traveler or couple, and values a feeling of togetherness within a community.

Overall, VisitHATTIESBURG’s goal is to attract such travelers and increase overnight visitation to the destination.

VISITHATTIESBURG’S KEY BEHAVIOR MARKETS:



AVAILABLE FUNDS

BUDGET: VisitHATTIESBURG will fund this contract at a minimum of \$180,000 for a three year-period. This budget is based on strategy execution, account management fees, out-of-pocket expenses, and costs related to hosting media. This budget will be divided in equal phases over a three-year period, with no single year exceeding \$60,000. VisitHATTIESBURG reserves the right to adjust both the budget and related services.

BILLING: VisitHATTIESBURG limits invoicing to one invoice per quarter (three months). Each invoice should be on letterhead from the selected agency and include the month(s) for which payment is due as well as detail of work completed.

METRICS, REPORTING & EVALUATION

Monthly reports should be received by 3rd of the succeeding month. Reports should include number of pitches, pitch topics, reach, earned media value, media tracking / follow-up, contact with media, etc.

NOTICE OF INTENT TO BID

The Notice of Intent to Bid is non-binding; however, it ensures the receipt of all addenda related to this RFP. Proposals will be accepted only from applicants who submitted a timely Notice of Intent to Bid. Notice of Intent to Bid must be emailed by the deadline below with the subject line “Intent to Bid: Public Relations Agency Services” to probertson@visithburg.org.

OFFICIAL CONTACT

VisitHATTIESBURG requests the proposer designate one person to receive all communications for clarification and verification of information related to this proposal. Identify this point of contact on the Official Contact Form.

TIMELINE

This timeline may be altered at any time at the discretion of VisitHATTIESBURG and will be funded through federal ARPA dollars for Mississippi Tourism Recovery, II.

RFP/RFQs available online to agencies.	FEB. 7, 2023
Final day to submit questions.	FEB. 24, 2023 5PM CST
Questions answered on site.	FEB. 27, 2023
Notice of Intent to Bid Due.	MARCH 1, 2023 5PM CST
All proposals due.	MARCH 7, 2023 5PM CST
Proposals evaluated by RFP Committee.	MARCH 13-17, 2023
Agencies under consideration interviewed. Follow-up interviews will be conducted during this time as needed.	MARCH 20-22, 2023
Agency selected. Contract negotiations begin.	MARCH 24, 2023
Work begins for a limited duration, decided in contract.	APRIL 3, 2023

SUBMITTAL REQUIREMENTS & DELIVERABLES

Your response to this RFP must be submitted in the following format and labeled accordingly:

- A. Statement of Qualifications** – Provide a written statement of your firm’s qualifications for providing the work as described in the Scope of Work.
- B. Tourism Experience** – Provide a written statement of your involvement in the tourism industry, specifically with DMO clients, industry memberships, and resources.

C. Organization, Ownership, and Management

1. Name, address, and telephone of the entity that will be contracted with and all trade names to be used.
2. Name, address, and telephone numbers of the organization's principal officers and other owners.

D. Organization's Structure and Experience

1. An organizational chart of the company, including any subcontractors who will work with VisitHATTIESBURG.
2. The total number of employees includes full-time, part-time, and contract workers.
3. A short history of the company, especially as it relates to work in the tourism sector.
4. Summary of employees who will work on the account including their name, title, a short summary of their qualifications, and their main role in working with VisitHATTIESBURG.
5. Hours of operation that staff will be available and any satellite offices.
6. **Three** relevant case studies should be provided, including project goals with measurable KPIs and results. Creative work should be included in each case study.

E. Project Approach / Methodology:

1. Provide a narrative describing the approach/methodology proposed in providing the services.

F. Client Information

1. Current clients in declining order of size.
2. Name your two most recent past clients and the reason for termination.
3. Name any travel/tourism clients and their current status.

G. Account Gain and Loss

1. Indicate if the agency has had a contract terminated for non-performance over the last five years with either litigation determining the agency at fault or no litigation due to inaction on part of the organization.
2. List of accounts gained over the last two years and why your organization was awarded the work.
3. Three references that are current accounts with contact names, email, and phone numbers.

H. Conflict(s) of Interest – The proposer must declare and provide details of any actual, potential, or perceived conflict(s) of interest.

I. Certification Form – The certification Form must be signed and accompany all RFQ Response submissions.

J. Budget – Provide a proposed budget based upon design, development, strategy execution, account management, and estimated costs that correspond to those detailed in your proposal.

Although VisitHATTIESBURG's fiscal year begins Oct. 1 and ends Sept. 30; base your proposed budget on the 12-month period.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

1. Submittals in response to this request and respondents' participation in the process shall be at no cost or obligation to VisitHATTIESBURG. VisitHATTIESBURG reserves the right to, at any time, abandon or terminate its efforts to contract for any or all of said services without any obligation to any respondent.
2. Responses to this request and other materials submitted shall become the property of VisitHATTIESBURG and will not be returned.
3. Respondent shall not contact any VisitHATTIESBURG personnel or staff after this request has been advertised, except to ask questions to the designated staff member (Paige Robertson) specifically regarding this RFP. Such contact will be considered cause for disqualification.
4. VisitHATTIESBURG may waive any informalities or minor defects or reject any and all submittals.
5. VisitHATTIESBURG reserves the right to reject any submittal if the evidence submitted by, or investigation of, such respondent demonstrates that such respondent or its subcontractors, in VisitHATTIESBURG's opinion, is not properly qualified to carry out the obligations of the Contract or to complete the Work contemplated therein.
6. All applicable laws, ordinances, and the rules and regulations of all governmental authorities having jurisdiction shall apply to the Contract throughout.
7. This Contract is being funded through a grant provided to VisitHATTIESBURG by the State of Mississippi as part its ARPA State and Local Fiscal Relief Fund (SLFRF) allocation received from the U.S. Treasury Department. The SLFRF program places numerous obligations on recipients and subrecipients, which flow down to successful respondent. Each respondent is cautioned to carefully review the *Supplemental Terms and Conditions* which are a part of the sample contract and to ensure that all responsibilities and obligations are properly addressed.
8. By executing a signature on the submittal, respondent certifies that:
 - a. Neither the respondent, nor any of its team members, is currently debarred from submitting proposals or entering into contracts issued by any political subdivision or agency of the State of Mississippi or the Federal Government.
 - b. No Federally appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid, by or on behalf of the respondent, to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a member of Congress in connection with the awarding of any Federal contract, the making of any Federal grant, the making of any Federal loan, the entering into of any cooperative agreement, and the extension, continuation, renewal, amendment, or modification of any Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement.
 - c. If any funds other than Federally appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a member of Congress in connection with this Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement,

respondent shall complete and submit Standard Form LLL, "Disclosure Form to Report Lobbying," in accordance with its instructions.

EVALUATION & SELECTION

VisitHATTIESBURG will establish a committee to evaluate and rate all proposals based on the criteria prescribed.

SELECTION PROCESS – STEP 1

Proposals meeting all requirements of the RFP will be evaluated by a review committee and ranked based on the following selection criteria. Top agencies will be chosen for Step 2.

- **Tourism Industry Experience** [15%]
 - Evaluation will include an assessment of such items as history of your company or professional experience, as it relates to the requirements within the RFP.
- **Qualifications to Execute the Plan of Work, Including Cost of Services** [60%]
 - Evaluation will include an assessment of the qualifications and experience of your managerial team, staff, and subcontractors, as well as an assessment of whether the proposed budget is reasonable and appropriate and if the proposed services are cost effective in relation to the fees charges and value of overall project.
- **References from Past Clients** [10%]
 - Evaluation will include an assessment of past performance both through provided case studies and direct contact with previous/current client references provided by proposer.
- **Evaluation of Prior Work** [15%]
 - Evaluation will include an assessment of your past performance related to scope of work provided in the RFP.

SELECTION PROCESS – STEP 2

Top agencies will be invited to present, in person or via video conference, their suggested framework.

Presentations will be ranked by the following criteria:

- Agency's expertise in diverse but cohesive strategies for driving demand. [60%]
- Ability to illustrate return on investment for suggested strategies. [25%]
- Suggestions to address current and forecasted traveler sentiment. [15%]

SELECTION PROCESS – STEP 3

A contract will be awarded to the organization whose proposal is determined to be the most advantageous to VisitHATTIESBURG, taking into consideration the criteria set forth in this RFP. Upon completing the selection process under this RFP, VisitHATTIESBURG will notify the winning proposer and all other proposers who were not selected. VisitHATTIESBURG's evaluations of proposals are confidential and as such, VisitHATTIESBURG is unable to respond to any questions and/or requests for information as to why a company was not selected.

After awarding the contract, the schedule will include a period of collaboration between VisitHATTIESBURG and the selected agency to better define, elaborate upon, and update the agency's final Scope of Work and general Terms and Conditions. For the selected agency, an employee will be designated as your contact and will coordinate any materials needed or questions answered with all other VisitHATTIESBURG employees.

STANDARD CONTRACT

Following is a copy of VisitHATTIESBURG's standard contract template to be referenced for this proposal. By responding to this request, the respondent is asserting its intent to accept the terms and conditions contained therein unless exceptions to the contract are provided as part of the respondent's submittal.

DELIVERY REQUIREMENTS

Please submit your responses in hard copy and electronic format. All proposals should include a clear, concise narrative. Proposal format is open to presentation style but must include the aforementioned items. It is advised, but not required, to submit a printed proposal for each delegate of the RFP Scoring Committee (3).

Printed submissions must be marked "RFP: Public Relations Agency Services" and delivered to:

VisitHATTIESBURG
c/o Paige Robertson
308 Newman St.
Hattiesburg, MS 39401

Electronic submissions should be provided in PDF format and sent to probertson@visithburg.org with the subject line: "RFP: Public Relations Agency Services." Proposals may not be faxed.

Submittals received in any manner not specifically set forth above shall not be accepted or considered. Submittals received after the deadline will not be considered. It is the responsibility of the respondent to ensure that the submittal is received by the specified deadline. The delivery date and time will be recorded upon receipt. VisitHATTIESBURG will not be responsible for late or incomplete responses due to mistakes or delays of the respondent or carrier used by the respondent or weather delays. A postmark will not be considered proof of timely submission.

QUESTIONS

Note that all answers regarding questions and requests for clarification for this RFQ will be responded to publicly consistent with the published schedule to ensure that all respondents have the same information.

Email Paige Robertson, Director of Communications, with any questions by **Feb. 24, 2023, at 5:00 p.m.** CST at probertson@visithburg.org. All questions will be answered publicly on Feb. 27, 2023. No calls, please.