

VISIT OXFORD REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS:

PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY SERVICES

Tourism Industry Recovery, II

Proposals due on or before 5:00 p.m. CDT on April 20, 2023



OBJECTIVE

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

Visit Oxford'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 Oxford as a premier destination in the 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 Visit Oxford'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 Visit Oxford 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.

Visit Oxford 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.

This RFP in no way commits Visit Oxford 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 Visit Oxford's intent to contract with the person/company that best meets the qualifications to complete the scope of work, Visit Oxford 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 following:

- Generate national press coverage for Oxford by leveraging media relationships and integrated content strategies.
- Tell the story of Visit Oxford's marketing and strategies, programs, successes and opportunities to media across the country and around the globe.
- Ensure awareness, understanding, and support of Oxford'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 Visit Oxford executives as leaders in the tourism industry.
- 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 Visit Oxford media inquiries, 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.
- Host press room for high resolution images and videos through Visit Oxford website.

ABOUT VISIT OXFORD

Visit Oxford is a research-driven destination management and marketing organization with annual collections of approximately \$1M, derived from the collection of a 2% lodging tax on the gross proceeds from hotel overnight room rental, as well as a portion of a 2% food and beverage tax on the gross proceeds of prepared food and beverage within the city of Oxford.

Visit Oxford’s mission is to bring visitors to Oxford for the economic impact on the community. Touted as the “Cultural Mecca of the South,” creativity abounds in Oxford as musicians, artists and writers alike find inspiration in its rich history, small town charm and creative community. Over the years, Oxford has become known for offering exceptional culinary experiences, as well as for being home of the University of Mississippi and was recently dubbed as “America’s Best College Town.”

DESTINATION WEBSITE

www.VisitOxfordMS.com

DESTINATION BACKGROUND & STATE OF ECONOMY

Oxford is geographically located in the northern part of Mississippi. Its population is approximately 28,000, which swells to nearly 50,000 when the University of Mississippi is in full session. Annual visitor spending for FY21 was \$172.6 million, generating \$16.2 million in state and local taxes and supported 2000 jobs, nearly 8% of Oxford’s employment base.

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant disruption to businesses in the hospitality sector including hotels, restaurants and small businesses. Additionally, many tourism attractions experienced sharp declines in revenues and visitation. FY19 showed visitor spending at an all-time high of \$177.3 million with attributed taxes corresponding at a staggering \$16.2 million. With the on-set of COVID-19, visitation and spending dropped dramatically. FY20 spending dropped to \$145.9 million, a drop of over \$30 million, with attributed taxes coming in at \$13.2 million, numbers that the Oxford economy had not seen since FY15. Local 2% lodging tax collections dropped 34%, from \$447,380 in FY19 to \$294,178 in FY20 due to the COVID pandemic. Similarly, 2% food and beverage tax collections dropped 15% overall, from \$3,397,834 in FY19 to \$2,890,519 in FY20.

In Fall 2020, Visit Oxford received funding through the CARES Act Funding and Tourism Recovery Funds. With the money that was immediately put into market, Visit Oxford was able to recover more quickly than other tourism destinations throughout the country. By the end of Fiscal Year 2021, Oxford saw increases in total visitor

spending, as well as state/local taxes attributed to tourism, climbing back to \$172.6 million and \$16.2 million, respectively. Food and beverage tax revenue was up 26% from the previous fiscal year and lodging tax revenue was up 41% for the same period.

TARGET AUDIENCE DETAILS

A visitor travel profile was done in 2016-2017 that indicated that overnight leisure travel parties consist of middle-aged adults or families with children who are well educated and/or retired professionals. These visitors travel from a 3–6-hour drive radius among contiguous states, with the exception of Atlanta, Dallas and Houston, which are top feeder markets for the University. Top primary markets include Memphis, TN; Birmingham, AL; Atlanta, GA; Jackson, MS; Nashville, TN; Little Rock, AR; Dallas, TX; St. Louis, MO; Houston, TX. Visit Oxford will remain focused on the leisure drive market in primary markets and will continue to focus on small group travel around themed campaigns such as girlfriend getaways, foodie enthusiasts and collegiate sports travel. Visit Oxford will continue its strong partnerships with local sports facilities to continue recruiting youth sports tournaments, as well as enhancing incoming Ole Miss fan experiences and retarget those visitors for a non-athletic related repeat visit. For meetings and conventions, Visit Oxford will focus on specific publications targeted to the meeting planner markets to increase Sunday-Thursday overnight business. Finally, Visit Oxford will engage more heavily in international markets now that travel has returned for those markets post-pandemic.

AVAILABLE FUNDS

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

BILLING: Visit Oxford 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 the 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 (Addendum) 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 kinney@visitoxfordms.com and nadia@visitoxfordms.com.

OFFICIAL CONTACT

Visit Oxford requests the proposer designate one person to receive all communications for clarification and verification of information related to this proposal. Please identify this point of contact on the Notice of Intent to Bid Form (Addendum).

TIMELINE

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

RFP available to agencies.	MAR. 24, 2023
Final day to submit questions regarding this RFP.	APR. 3, 2023, by 5:00 p.m. CDT
Final day to submit Notice of Intent to Bid.	APR. 10, 2023 by 5:00 p.m. CDT
Questions answered	APR.10, 2023 by 5:00 p.m. CDT
Proposals due by 5:00 p.m. CDT.	APR. 20, 2023 by 5:00 p.m. CDT
Proposals evaluated by RFP committee.	MAY 1-3, 2023
Agencies under consideration will be interviewed. Follow-up interviews will be conducted during this time frame as needed.	MAY 8-10, 2023
Agency selected, and contract negotiations begin.	MAY 15, 2023
Work begins for a limited duration, decided in contract negotiations.	JUNE 5, 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
 - a. Name, address and telephone of the entity that will be contracted with and all trade names to be used.
 - b. Name, address and telephone numbers of the organization’s principal officers and other owners.
- D. Organization’s Structure and Experience
 - a. Organizational chart of company, including any subcontractors who will work with Visit Oxford.
 - b. Total number of employees including full time, part time and contract workers.
 - c. Short history of the company, especially as it relates to work in the tourism sector.
 - d. 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 Visit Oxford.
 - e. Hours of operation that staff will be available and any satellite offices.
 - f. **Three** relevant case studies should be provided, including project goals with measurable KPIs and results. Creative work should be included for each case study.
- E. Project Approach/Methodology:
 - a. Provide a narrative describing the approach/methodology proposed in providing the services.
- F. Client Information
 - a. Current clients in declining order of size.
 - b. Name your two most recent past clients and reason for termination.
 - c. Name any travel/tourism clients and their current status.
- G. Account Gain and Loss
 - a. 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.

- b. List of accounts gained over the last two years and why your organization was awarded the work.
 - c. 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 – Certification Form (Addendum) must be signed and accompany all RFP Response submissions.
- J. Budget - Please provide a proposed budget based on a full year of activities, strategy execution, account management, out-of-pocket expenses, and estimated costs related to hosting media that correspond to those detailed in your proposal. Note: Although Visit Oxford’s fiscal year begins Oct. 1 and ends Sept. 30; please 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 Visit Oxford. Visit Oxford 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 Visit Oxford and will not be returned.
3. Respondent shall not contact any Visit Oxford personnel or staff after this request has been advertised, except to ask questions as specified below under "Respondent Questions." Such contact will be considered cause for disqualification.
4. Visit Oxford may waive any informalities or minor defects or reject any and all submittals.
5. Visit Oxford 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 Visit Oxford’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 Visit Oxford 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.

SMALL, MINORITY & WOMEN-OWNED BUSINESSES:

In compliance with federal and state statutes, Visit Oxford encourages small, minority and women-owned businesses to respond to the RFP. As such, this RFP will also be placed on MS PTAP as the time of publication to ensure equal opportunity for all to respond.

EVALUATION & SELECTION

Visit Oxford 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 [25%]
- Qualifications to execute the plan of work, including costs of services [50%]
- References from past clients [10%]
- Evaluation of prior work [15%]

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 tourism 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 Visit Oxford, taking into consideration the criteria set forth in this RFP. Upon completing the selection process under this RFP, Visit Oxford will notify the winning proposer and all other proposers who were not selected. Visit Oxford’s evaluations of proposals are confidential and as such, Visit Oxford’s 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 Visit Oxford 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 of Visit Oxford will be designated as your contact and will coordinate any materials needed or questions answered with all other Visit Oxford employees.

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 five printed proposals (5).

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

Visit Oxford
c/o Kinney Ferris
1013 Jackson Ave. East
Oxford, MS 38655

Electronic submissions should be provided in PDF format and sent to kinney@visitoxfordms.com and nadia@visitoxfordms.com with the subject line: "RFP: Public Relations Agency." 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. Visit Oxford 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 request for clarification for this RFP will be responded to publicly consistent with the schedule above to ensure that all respondents have the same information.

Email Kinney Ferris and Nadia Thornton with any questions by April 3, 2023 at 5:00 p.m. CDT at kinney@visitoxfordms.com and nadia@visitoxfordms.com. No calls, please.