

Visit Meridian

COMMUNICATIONS & STRATEGIC PLAN



Request for Bid

Due: December 10, 2024
Anticipated Award Date: December 17, 2024
Anticipated Completion: January 2026

Visit Meridian is issuing a Request for Bid to seek formal quotes from destination experts to develop a 3-5 year strategic plan for Visit Meridian that will help guide the organization, stakeholders and the area's tourism industry. This strategic plan will provide a roadmap to Visit Meridian in how to maintain and enhance its positioning relative to competitive destination markets, as well as to identify growth markets for leisure travelers, as well as group meetings, conventions and sports travelers. The intent is to ensure long-range successful strategies that optimize the use of marketing dollars and resources while identifying gaps and opportunities for improvement in visitor experiences and marketing communications to prospective visitors.

Visit Meridian intends to contract with a qualified research firm to support its continued recovery efforts, stemmed from the negative impacts of COVID-19. This contract will be funded through federal ARPA dollars for Mississippi Recovery, II.

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

Visit Meridian wishes to employ an outside firm to execute research culminating in a 3-5 year strategic plan. The scope of services listed below is not intended to be a comprehensive list of what the firm will provide. The final scope of services will be developed in collaboration with the selected firm.

The selected firm's responsibilities will include the following:

- Identify and assess gaps in the area's tourism infrastructure which, if filled, would position Meridian as a competitive, top-tier attraction, meeting, and leisure destination market.
- Review and assess the current branding and existing marketing & communications strategy.
- Create key performance indicators to measure and track goal achievement.
- Identify potential new or enhanced tourism demand generators.
- Strategize to enhance attractions, events or assets to drive demand.
- Identify how tourism impacts the workforce and drives population growth.

In order to achieve these responsibilities, the selected firm will:

- Review the economic impact of Meridian's tourism industry and supporting data.
- Identify target markets, services areas and organizational strategies to enhance Meridian's tourism industry.
- Research various destinations that Visit Meridian can compare and benchmark itself against.

DELIVERABLES:

- A comprehensive written report presented to Visit Meridian and the Meridian Tourism Commission upon completion of the project.
- An assessment of the existing tourism product in Meridian with an analysis of strengths and future opportunities.
- An overall evaluation of Visit Meridian's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Emphasis should be placed on how the area's assets can be used to attract increased visitors.
- An assessment of the effectiveness and adequacy of the current destination marketing program and recommended strategies to improve these initiatives. Emphasis should be provided on how Visit Meridian should include recommended operating guidelines for the programs to achieve the desired communication results.

ABOUT VISIT MERIDIAN

Anecdotally, we know many choose Meridian as a hallway point between two destinations. To what degree we can get these visitors to come back once they experience Meridian once, has been up for debate, and there's the added challenge of getting them to experience more than what's on the interstate.

Post-pandemic bounce back pushed Meridian to have the second highest occupancy percentages in Mississippi, which Visit Meridian attributed to its convenient location on the interstate, a sharp decline in air travel, and the increased number of road trips combined with an influx of ARPA monies spent on advertising. In early 2023, it seemed gas prices, pandemic concerns, and the political climate impacted Meridian more than other Mississippi destinations, resulting in a softer market.

In the last three years, downtown Meridian (just 1 mile from the Interstate) has developed into a more complete destination but continues to be unknown to people passing through (e.g., interstate travelers and, to some degree, residents in areas across MS and AL who've not visited in recent years). Of late, we believe we're getting more leisure travel overnights from residents who live within a 100 to 150-mile radius. However, we have not analyzed existing data to know for sure where our current leisure customers are coming from, who our best prospects are, who we should focus on, or why they are more likely to come. Knowing this information is critical to ensuring we put the right messaging in front of the right people.

At present, we tend to lump our current prospects for individual leisure travel into two loosely defined buckets – nearby, weekend-getaway seekers, and interstate travelers passing through but stopping off for a night while in route to another destination.

Nearby drive-market, weekend-getaway seekers: Mostly couples from the surrounding area (up to 150-mile radius) looking for a quick weekend getaway. Meridian provides an approachable, meaning unintimidating/easy, and affordable option for arts and culture in an easily walkable downtown for those seeking live music, museums, southern food, craft brews, and nearby outdoor recreation. We currently attract visitors from rural east Mississippi and west Alabama, and neighboring cities/towns, including Jackson, MS DMA, Tuscaloosa, Columbus/Starkville, and Hattiesburg/Laurel. These are the markets that consistently rise to the top of attractions zip code reports and are the most engaged audiences from digital/website analytics when controlled for population size (e.g. online users from Atlanta and Dallas will have a higher engagement rate due to sheer population but actual overnights from these larger, further away markets is presumed to be low).

Based on antidotal feedback and observations, the rural residents who live closer in view Meridian as an easy "city-lite" experience that is less intimidating and affordable, while those from larger markets (e.g., Jackson, Tuscaloosa, etc.) are pleasantly surprised to experience a vibrant, walkable downtown with a full-service hotel in historic property, and high-quality arts and cultural assets and events.

Market observations and some limited zip code reporting from attractions have led us to a target demographic of 40 to 50+-year-old couples who are moderately affluent with disposable income to spend on dinner and a show plus \$125-150/night overnight.

The degree to which Meridian attracts (or can attract) younger couples with younger children for overnights is unknown, but we have a new children's museum that we know draws day trippers from a 100-mile radius and beyond, along with several other family-friendly attractions and events. The Mississippi Arts + Entertainment Experience (The MAX) also represents a unique \$50 million-dollar multipurpose museum and cultural arts center that opened in 2018 with promises of drawing 100-150k visitors annually. The facility, while impressive, never got close to those figures, peaking at roughly 55k/annually when the pandemic hit, and it's been struggling much like every other museum in the country to rebuild attendance since. New leadership has been put in place with a focus on increasing awareness and visitation among residents across MS and West AL. The degree to which Meridian can and should be drawing more visitors to its six total downtown museums is a point of discussion that Visit Meridian would like to explore to uncover how best to leverage these assets to draw more tourists.

Interstate travelers passing through on I/59/20: 1.32M cars travel through Meridian monthly. The interstate travelers who spontaneously stop in Meridian on their way to somewhere else find themselves delightfully surprised at what Meridian offers – *assuming they make it the mere 1 mile off the interstate into downtown*. Otherwise, Meridian is more often a pit stop for gas or an overnight at an interstate hotel as part of a longer road trip. For these travelers who never venture off the interstate or frontage road area, Meridian is just another interstate town devoid of character. Is this a lost opportunity to deliver a quality tourist experience? To what degree should we be focused on this interstate traveler, and how might we better identify and reach qualified prospects passing through, convincing them to come downtown, stay longer, return, and influence others (friends & friends) to visit? We have several antidotal stories we can share about interstate travelers happening into our downtown and finding themselves notably impressed by what they find. Quantifying how often that happens, whether they come back, and determining how we exponentially increase this occurrence are questions we'd like help answering.

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 RFQ. **Proposals will be accepted only from applicants who submitted a timely Notice of Intent to Quote.**

Budget: \$100,000

Proposal Requirements:

Describe your recommended approach, potential research strategies and tactics you would employ, and anticipated outcomes or deliverables with high-level timing based on budget and background information shared. Include a brief description of your team, related experience, and qualifications.

Submit to:

Laura Carmichael, Director

Visit Meridian

lcarmichael@lauderdalecounty.org