



Explore **ASHEVILLE**

# Request for Proposal Destination Advertising Services

Responses are due by the close of business (5:00 PM Eastern Time) on  
Wednesday, May 26, 2021



ExploreAsheville.com

www.exploreasheville.com

April 29, 2021

Greetings to agency bidders:

The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, a quasi-governmental entity, and its 501(c) 6 not-for-profit, organizational partner, dba as Explore Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau, seek a new advertising agency-of-record that will be an ongoing collaborative strategic and creative partner.

Explore Asheville works under the oversight of the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority to execute a wide-ranging business plan which includes an extensive strategic marketing and sales program that inspires visitation and group meetings.

Visitors are returning to the Asheville area as more vaccines are administered and the desire to travel increases throughout the country. In anticipation of an uptick in visitor demand, the board and staff used the past several months to re-assess the business approach and build a new strategic framework that we believe will increase the value of our efforts to both the people who live here and those who visit.

A focus on a balanced and sustainable recovery is inherent in one of four newly established strategic pillars and sets the stage for more intentional growth into the future. Diversity, responsible travel and promotion of Asheville's creative spirit round out the strategic imperatives and serve as guideposts in future marketing, promotions, sales and development efforts.

The purpose of this Request for Proposal (RFP) is to retain a qualified creative partner and media agency that can support these efforts through creative development and paid media strategies funded by lodging tax revenue.

Attached is an RFP for those able to meet the requirements and carry out the full scope of work outlined. All proposals will be carefully reviewed based on criteria detailed within. The incumbent agency is not participating in the RFP process. The initial term begins July 1, 2021 and extends through June 2022 and is renewable annually.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Victoria Isley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "y".

Victoria (Vic) Isley  
President and CEO  
Explore Asheville CVB

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marla Tambellini". The signature is cursive and elegant, with a prominent loop on the letter "l".

Marla Tambellini  
Deputy Director/VP of Marketing  
Explore Asheville CVB



**REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL**

**Explore Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau**

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## **Executive Summary**

The Explore Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau (Explore Asheville) is commencing a process to find a new advertising agency partner. The selected agency will provide advertising services as a strategic partner to Explore Asheville as part of its annual business plan to promote Asheville, North Carolina, as a premier destination.

The scope of work includes creative and media services combined with strategic insights that will help drive overnight visitation to our community located in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the western part of the state. Explore Asheville is seeking a world-class partner that will build upon many years of consistent destination promotion and its own in-house team of public relations, web content, and social media professionals. Supported by an \$8 million investment in net media and a sizeable production budget, the selected agency is expected to drive measurable results via the visitation and spending that sustain many small businesses in the Asheville area and contribute to the community's tax base.

The ideal agency partner will have experience working with destination marketing organizations and be able to contribute breakthrough creative and bold, innovative media plans. The ability to understand key analytics and provide insights into the effectiveness of campaigns are important, as are traditional elements of an agency/client relationship, such as the timely delivery of work and responsive service. The incumbent agency of record will not be participating in the selection process.

The deadline to respond to this RFP is **May 26, 2021**. Spec creative is not requested from participating agencies as part of the process. It is anticipated that the selected agency partner will begin work early in the new fiscal year that begins July 1, 2021.

## **About Explore Asheville**

We are a passionate team of 26 professionals who are committed to creating a vibrant and sustainable tourism economy by attracting overnight visitors and expanding the customer base for local businesses. Our team works on behalf of the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) to support local tourism partners, including attractions, lodging, retail, food and beverage makers, recreation, and the arts. We value collaboration, strategic thinking based on thoughtful analysis, and partners who strive to understand the complexities and nuances of our visitors and the destination. Our staff is experienced in launching highly effective, integrated sales and marketing initiatives that drive business. The Explore Asheville team possesses many years of destination marketing experience, a deep understanding of the Asheville brand, and significant relationships in the community and with travel media, influencers, and other partners. Close collaboration with this team will be essential for mutual success.

Asheville's slate of high profile accolades can be attributed, in part, to the expansive work of our in-house public relations team, which annually generates 1,700 media placements and an editorial reach of more than 2 billion. The team works closely with our in-house Web manager and a talented staff that produces creative content and manages a robust social media effort that leverages more than 400,000 followers and capitalizes on the more than 5 million annual web sessions on our visitor website <https://www.exploreasheville.com/>.

Explore Asheville works under the oversight of a board, the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, to execute an extensive strategic marketing and sales program to generate overnight visits. The Asheville destination brand has been built through a significant and consistent investment in marketing, funded via a dedicated occupancy tax levied upon overnight stays at area hotels, bed and breakfasts, and short-term rentals.

The net media budget for the coming fiscal year (beginning July 1, 2021) is approximately \$8 million. In recent years Explore Asheville has utilized a variety

of media, including traditional, OTT, and streaming television; streaming and terrestrial radio; print; digital; social; SEM; and content partnerships. We are open to any platform that will enable us to meet our strategic business objectives. More information about Explore Asheville can be found on our industry partner website, <https://www.ashevillecvb.com/>.

### **About Asheville the Destination**

Asheville is a premier destination located amidst the highest mountain peaks in the eastern United States. Home to the Blue Ridge Parkway (America's most visited National Park Service property) and Biltmore Estate (the 8,000-acre Vanderbilt home which is the most visited historic home in America), Asheville and its surrounding communities in Buncombe County are globally known for the arts, expansive outdoor recreation opportunities, and a renowned food and beverage culture. Asheville's vibrant downtown is a success story for transitioning a historic Art Deco city center into a hip, bustling place-to-be with a distinctive style. Its locavore culinary culture is sprinkled with outdoor cafés and rooftop bars and a thriving craft beer scene. Independently-owned shops and art studios are ubiquitous, and Asheville's nearly 25-year-old drum circle, live music venues, and talented buskers are at the heart of a sound grounded in a rich music legacy.

But Asheville is also a complex destination. Its activities, attractions, and visitor attributes are located across all of Buncombe County, and some of the most meaningful visitor moments can be found in the smallest places well off the beaten path. Visitors and residents alike have a strong emotional relationship with the community, and sustainability is a vital concern. We value diversity and creativity, and view tourism as just one component of a balanced economy.

These values are reflected in our four strategic pillars:

- Deliver Balanced Recovery & Sustainable Growth
- Encourage Safe & Responsible Travel
- Engage & Invite More Diverse Audiences
- Promote & Support Asheville's Creative Spirit

Explore Asheville promotes the destination through out-of-market advertising and other marketing, public relations, and sales initiatives, resulting in approximately 4.2 million annual overnight leisure visitors and a tourism economy that was generating \$3.3 billion in annual economic impact in Buncombe County prior to the pandemic. The success of the tourism sector is a major part of the economic vitality of Asheville, fostering a strong culture of small and independent businesses of all kinds, and the recovery of these businesses from the effects of the pandemic is of paramount importance.

Asheville's accolades span the gamut from Lonely Planet calling Asheville the number one destination in the U.S. to *Rolling Stone's* recognition of our music scene, from our four-time top ranking as Beer City, USA to *Global Traveler* listing Asheville as its top Foodie Destination and *Travel + Leisure* recently including Asheville in its World's Best list.

Asheville has traditionally been a drive market, primarily attracting visitors from the Southeastern U.S. (including Florida), the Ohio Valley, the Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast. However, Asheville Regional Airport has experienced dramatic growth in recent years in both flights and non-stop destinations served. These now include New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, Denver, Dallas, Austin, Orlando, and Washington DC. The airport was one of the fastest growing in the nation in 2019, and passenger traffic is recovering quickly from the pandemic. With the recent announcement of new service from JetBlue from Boston beginning in 2022, growth is expected to continue and passengers arriving by air will be an important part of the visitor mix.

Asheville is a year-round destination, but peak months for visitation are July and October. Building off- and shoulder season visitation is a strategic business opportunity for Explore Asheville and its partners, as is encouraging longer length of stay. Buncombe County has a wide variety of accommodations available for visitors, with nearly 9,000 hotel rooms, several bed and breakfasts, and a large number of short-term rentals.

## **Our Ideal Agency Partner**

Explore Asheville is looking for a partner that will help us generate overnight visitation demand through exceptional, breakthrough advertising and new and innovative marketing tactics. The ideal agency partner will be collaborators who can marry the strategic with the creative and the data with decision-making. We love innovation and laud the power of creativity, but we also embrace strategic insight and strong analytical capabilities that lead to campaigns tied to our business needs that drive visitation and demonstrate measurable results.

Our foundational needs in a strategic partner include the following elements:

- The agency must have demonstrated experience in managing accounts with net media budgets in excess of \$8 million.
- Compensation for agency services should be based upon a retainer and net media fee structure.
- As a 501(c)6 organization operating under the supervision of a quasi-public authority funded via tax revenue, Explore Asheville operates under specific financial policies that require vendor invoices accompany agency invoices. **Agencies who participate in this process should indicate their willingness and ability to conform to our policy that only allows payment if the media vendor invoice is attached to the agency invoice for media.** This is non-negotiable. Buncombe County Finance (the local government office which provides accounting administrative services for Explore Asheville) processes invoices in real-time upon receipt. The normal processing time from receipt of the invoice to issuance of payment is typically within a week.
- The agency must have recent experience with a destination client.
- Explore Asheville has good relationships with many destinations throughout the Southeast. We appreciate the strong and convivial working relationships that abound throughout our industry and especially in this region. At the same time, we believe marketing partnerships work best when competitive destinations are not represented by the same



agency. Representation of destination marketing organizations in our competitive set, whether as an agency of record or via an ongoing history of project work, would be viewed as a conflict by Explore Asheville. Our destination competitive set includes Charleston, SC; Savannah, GA; Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Sevierville, TN; Greenville, SC; and other North Carolina mountain destinations. Explore Asheville will make the final determination of whether any competitive conflict exists.

### **Scope of the RFP For Advertising Services**

1. Strategic media and creative recommendations, including the development and presentation of a detailed annual advertising plan.
2. Research, planning, negotiation, and placement of media and related added-value programs and any related traffic.
3. Development and production of strategic, results-driven creative.
4. Management of the production of various creative concepts and delivery to media vehicles as required.
5. Development and execution of brand and promotional partnerships.
6. Deployment and reporting of appropriate analytical tools for measuring the impact of digital media strategies and tactics.
7. SEM may be considered as part of the scope of services but will be proposed separately.
8. Work collaboratively with the Explore Asheville team to integrate offline, online, website SEO, social media, and public relations strategies and tactics.

The following are not included within the scope of agency services:

- Fulfillment of inquiries and call center services
- Visitor guide creative and production
- Social media execution
- Public relations
- Sales-related collateral
- Explore Asheville websites

However, the agency partner will be expected to understand how all Explore Asheville marketing channels work together and articulate how its campaigns should be integrated with these other vehicles.

Explore Asheville executes its own regular program of market research, but the agency partner may want to recommend additional research initiatives as part of its scope of work.

### **The Selection Process**

This review is not contractually mandated, and the incumbent agency of record will not be participating. We have enjoyed working with our current agency partner and we are concluding the relationship on good terms.

But we also see this as an opportunity to reset and renew. The pandemic has provided a chance to reflect upon our strategic objectives and to refocus the promotion of Asheville as a destination. As noted in our strategic pillars, we are committed to diversifying our audiences and reflecting Asheville's dynamic creative spirit. Authenticity is essential to us—our partners, residents, and guests will all quickly see through a message that is artificial and not reflective of who we are.

We are particularly interested in relevant case studies that are aligned with our strategic objectives. We want to understand the agency's strategic thought process around great creative, exceptional data insights, and how you judge success or learn from failures. We are interested in how you effectively break through the clutter to achieve results that further your clients' goals using both creative and media, including innovative partnerships that elevated their brands.

We realize the ability to get to know you is limited within the context of an RFP response. We plan to meet agency finalists here in Asheville so we can engage with your team--specifically, the people who will work on our business and be our daily collaborators. You will have a chance to sit down with our talented and

experienced team of Explore Asheville destination marketers. We will provide an opportunity for you to present formally, but we also want to have an informal conversation about our needs and your capabilities.

We intend to finalize the selection of our agency partner by mid-June and for the selected partner to begin work at the start of our new fiscal year, in July 2021.

**The development of spec creative will not be a part of this agency selection process.** However, we desire a deep understanding of how you think as an agency and how Asheville will benefit from your insights, processes, and service.

### **Expectations of the Agency Partner**

The selected agency partner is expected to:

1. Assign a single point of contact that will collaborate directly with Explore Asheville and provide consistent, responsive service.
2. Be knowledgeable about national and regional tourism trends and understand the dynamics of the local and state tourism sector.
3. Be familiar with the key performance indicators tracked by Explore Asheville. Examples of these metrics can be found on our monthly destination dashboard at <https://www.ashevillecvb.com/monthly-indexes/>.
4. Stay abreast of consumer and trade trends that may impact the marketing of Asheville as a destination.
5. Understand the Asheville destination brand and execute strategies and tactics that are in alignment with that brand.
6. Demonstrate flexibility in planning and execution as business conditions warrant and move quickly to execute based upon new information or changes in the marketplace.
7. Learn quickly from mistakes and build upon successes.
8. Provide post-buy analyses and audits of campaigns upon request.
9. Develop plans with measurable goals and objectives in conjunction with Explore Asheville.

10. Be expert in and provide regular tracking of the effectiveness of media vehicles through related analytics and reports.
11. Evaluate and respond to unsolicited media opportunities and provide POVs on request.
12. Be proactive about researching, analyzing, and recommending new approaches to media and messaging.
13. Make advertising recommendations as part of Explore Asheville's annual planning prior to the start of each fiscal year. These recommendations should include media, creative, and the budgets required for execution.
14. Effectively utilize any available audience marketing research (whether provided by the agency or by the client) in the development of advertising initiatives.
15. Deliver all work on time and allow the client sufficient time for review and feedback.
16. Produce accurate and timely invoices, inclusive of detailed supporting documentation, for the execution of services. Invoices will be generated monthly and will carry terms of no less than thirty (30) days net. All credits for media campaigns already executed will be expected to be reported to Explore Asheville on a timely basis.
17. Provide a regular status report to Explore Asheville for all current initiatives.
18. Produce written estimates for any project authorized by Explore Asheville in advance of any work on that project.
19. Disclose all discounts and special offers provided by vendors that the agency uses to execute the approved plan of work.
20. Proactively respond to any special needs of the destination as required, including natural disasters and other events that may impact visitation.

In-person attendance at every monthly Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority board meeting is not expected, but the agency should plan on regular visits to Asheville for the purposes of destination orientation, annual planning, and board presentations.

## **Budget and Terms of Contract**

The fiscal year 2022 budget for net media is approximately \$8 million. This amount is expected to grow at a conservative rate in future years barring unforeseen circumstances. It is subject to change based upon actual occupancy tax collections which fund destination marketing and other budgetary decisions and should not be construed as guaranteed. The anticipated FY2021 budget available to the agency for creative and production will be between \$800,000 and \$1 million. The above figures do not include agency fees.

Terms of the contract between the agency partner and Explore Asheville will be negotiated annually. The contract will be valid for one year, but there will be no scheduled review during the relationship. Both parties will be required to give 90 days' written notice if either wishes to terminate the contract prior to expiration.

## **Requirements of the RFP Response**

### **A. Agency Overview**

Please provide the following information in your response:

1. The office location(s) that will be used to serve the Explore Asheville account.
2. Capitalized billings in the most recent fiscal year.
3. The number of U.S. employees of the agency.
4. Current agency of record clients and length of service to each. If your agency has multiple offices and Explore Asheville will be served primarily by one office, please list the clients that are served from that same office.
5. Describe any recent agency experience in the travel and tourism category, particularly with destination marketing organizations, regardless of the location from which it is served. Any relevant category experience should be noted as to whether it is held by the agency as an organization, or by current agency employees while employed at other firms.
6. If you will use multiple offices, describe how they will work together to serve our needs. If you are part of an agency network which you will use as a component of serving Explore Asheville, describe how you work within that network.

7. Brief biographical information for the agency employees to be assigned to Explore Asheville, including those in leadership positions other than account service.
8. Detail how Explore Asheville would be served in the event of employee leave, vacations, terminations, voluntary separations, reassignments, and other similar circumstances. How have you ensured a continued level of professional service to your other clients under these same circumstances?
9. Provide information for any significant subcontractors or other firms who will be used on the Explore Asheville account, including biographical information for key employees who would be assigned to work regularly on the business.
10. Note any pending litigation against the agency, and whether such litigation would hinder your ability to perform to Explore Asheville's expectations.
11. Three (3) references from recent clients, including name, title, telephone number, email address, and nature of the relationship. These contacts do not necessarily need to be from travel and tourism clients.

## **B. Creative Process**

While we are not requesting spec creative as a part of this process, we are interested in understanding your creative approach and how you integrate audience insights and client business objectives into your work.

1. Please provide two recent examples of creative campaigns (placed in the market and not just submitted for competitions or portfolios) of which you are particularly proud and share with us the reasons why.
2. Describe your typical strategic approach when identifying a client business challenge that merits a creative solution.
3. Provide an example of something you would consider an agency fail, and what you learned from the experience. If a client (past or present) is involved, it is not necessary to reveal their name.
4. Describe the process you would use to on-board Asheville as a new client and produce highly effective creative within the first six months of our relationship.

### **C. Digital Expertise**

Explore Asheville is interested in your agency's digital campaign expertise. Please help us understand how your agency excels in this area by providing examples of efforts that were particularly successful (including the metrics for determining success), and include the following:

1. A specific example of use of an attribution model to tie digital advertising campaigns to clients' key performance indicators. This example does not need to be category related.
2. An example demonstrating the agency's ability to drive meaningful results through a highly targeted digital campaign. It does not need to be from the travel and tourism category.
3. Describe your strategic approach and tactics used in a campaign specifically designed to drive targeted traffic to a web site (preferably a mostly non-transactional site like Explore Asheville's) and how you measured effectiveness of the campaign.

### **D. Strategy and Analytics**

Destination marketing as a category is still relatively early in learning how to measure and apply analytics. Most DMO websites are not transactional, and it can be challenging to connect marketing to actual results. Like many DMOs, Explore Asheville uses Arrivalist to provide data-based consumer behavior insights, but we believe this is just one component of a successful analytics program. Please describe:

1. Your approach to analyzing and understanding a client's business and identifying opportunities for growth, including your experience with and approach to audience targeting. Provide a demonstration of how you apply insights, learning, research, and analytics into the strategic process.
2. Describe the essential strategic, planning, and analytical tools and services that you rely upon when developing and executing strategies for your clients.

## **E. Fee Proposal**

The fee proposal should be based upon a reasonable expectation of the work required in the first year of the client relationship for the scope described above. It is understood that the first year may include one-time startup expenses related to travel and orientation. Professional fees should include all usual costs to service the account, including but not limited to travel expenses, postage and express delivery, telephone, and copying. Such regular out-of-pocket costs to service the account should not be billed separately to the client.

We request that you submit a separate fee proposal solely for SEM services.

Please include your agency's hourly blended rate in the fee proposal.

## **Additional Information about the Response**

The response to the RFP should be reasonable in length. Please resist the urge to include all the work your firm has performed in the last five years. Responses should be in a format that is easy to read and user-friendly. Those that use dim fonts and outrageously small type will be considered cruel and unusual forms of punishment. Please number pages wherever possible.

## **Questions**

Please submit any questions related to the RFP **by email only** to Marla Tambellini of Explore Asheville at [mtambellini@exploreasheville.com](mailto:mtambellini@exploreasheville.com) no later than close of business (5:00 PM ET) on **Friday, May 7, 2021**. Please use the email subject heading "Explore Asheville RFP Questions." Responses to agency questions will not be made available to other agencies.

## **Schedule**

- The RFP will be published on Wednesday, April 28, 2021.
- **Responses to the RFP are due by close of business (5:00 PM ET) on Wednesday, May 26, 2021.** Please email responses to Marla Tambellini at



[mtambellini@exploreasheville.com](mailto:mtambellini@exploreasheville.com), using a file sharing platform as needed for large files.

- Explore Asheville will evaluate agency responses and notify selected finalists no earlier than June 3.
- Finalist agencies will be requested to visit Asheville to meet with the Explore Asheville team during the week of June 21.
- Formal approval of the recommendation from the Explore Asheville team by the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority board will still be required before the selected agency can begin work but is expected at the June 30, 2021 board meeting.

### **Other Important Information**

1. Agencies will not be compensated for any costs related to their participation in the process. This includes travel to and from Asheville at any time during the selection process.
2. Lobbying of Explore Asheville staff, BCTDA board members, or other area tourism stakeholders is not encouraged and may negatively impact consideration of the firm.
3. Explore Asheville is not obligated to select the lowest cost fee proposal or an agency that is located close to Asheville.
4. Explore Asheville may choose to suspend or terminate the review process at any time for any reason, or to reject any or all proposals.
5. Explore Asheville and its communications are subject to open records laws of the State of North Carolina.
6. It is anticipated that negotiations will be conducted with the selected agency regarding fees and the terms of the contract before the award is made final.
7. Creative assets and intellectual property supplied by the selected agency will be the property of Explore Asheville. The agency will be responsible for payment of all model and talent residuals.