

# Digital marketing targets Indianapolis-area tourists

## Shorter U.S. 31 travel time leads to marketing drive

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With the drive between South Bend and Indianapolis shortened by upgrades to U.S. 31, local tourism officials have begun courting travelers from central Indiana.

They're hoping the half-hour that the newly built freeway bypasses around Carmel, Kokomo, LaPaz and Lakeville shaved off the previously 2½- to 3-hour trip will create a windfall for Michiana hotels, restaurants, museums and retailers.

Visit South Bend Mishawaka, the brand name used by the Convention and Visitors Bureau of St. Joseph County, is paying Indianapolis-based digital marketing firm The Basement \$125,000 to wage a summer campaign. It launched April 18 and is set to run through August.

Visit South Bend Mishawaka secured \$5,000 contributions from the South Bend Cubs, Studebaker National Museum, The History Museum, South Bend Chocolate Co. and the Morris Inn at Notre Dame, and paid the remaining \$100,000 from hotel/motel tax revenue.

Rob DeCleene, Visit South Bend Mishawaka executive director, said the organization has been planning the campaign for a few years, ever since the highway project timelines were set.

"It gives us a chance to reintroduce our destination to a market that's been overlooked for a long time, primarily because the drive wasn't easy," DeCleene said. "That's all changed and Indy is an affordable media market with great demographics that match our visitor profile to promote all that the South Bend area has to offer."

The shorter distance between the two metro areas isn't the only factor driving the effort.

"This is a pretty transformative time in our community and we need to tell that story to potential visitors," DeCleene said. "There's a lot of activity. Downtown streets are being transformed, the Renaissance District just had a groundbreaking last week, (the Notre Dame) campus has a lot of impressive construction projects underway, and from a purely tourism perspective, there are a lot of hotel rooms coming on line in the next couple of years. The energy is palpable."

Because the campaign is all digital, the messaging can change quickly to identify current events and promotions, DeCleene said.

It also can change within the four-month campaign based on whether certain types of ads are achieving results, said Todd Bolster, vice president of client services for The Basement.

The firm is buying ads on four platforms: mobile apps, such as music streaming app Pandora; social media platforms Facebook and Instagram in the Indianapolis area; and Google's Ad Words, which uses keywords to capture Web searchers from outside Indiana.

The Basement also has retail, higher education and attraction clients, including Visit Indy, for whom it has been running digital campaigns to attract people from Chicago, South Bend, Cincinnati and Louisville, Ky. Bolster said the firm's data indicates that people from the Indianapolis area drive to smaller metro areas for recreation and vacations.

"South Bend has a lot to offer," he said, noting many Notre Dame alumni and fans live in the Indianapolis area. "Also, a lot of people live here (in Indianapolis) who grew up in the northern part of the state. There's a familiarity and nostalgia piece of it."

The campaign's effectiveness will be measured in hotel stays, traffic on Visit South Bend Mishawaka's website, sales by attractions and retailers who gather ZIP code data, and whether mobile devices that see the ads in Indianapolis are later tracked in the South Bend area, Bolster said, noting that the device data does not contain names or personal information.

Marilyn Thompson, director of marketing and community relations at The History Museum, said she is excited about the campaign. While the museum focuses on northern Indiana and southwestern Michigan history, it also has things that would appeal to people outside the area, Thompson said.

The museum's messages in the campaign will promote the Oliver Mansion, one of the nation's only historical mansions containing original furnishings, and "Dressing Downton," an exhibit of costumes worn on the first four seasons of "Downton Abby," the hit television drama aired on PBS. The museum will have that exhibit Oct. 15 to Jan. 8.

Thompson said the museum has long operated Facebook and Twitter accounts and has bought ads on Facebook, but has never tried to target users outside the South Bend metro area.

"We're going to be watching very carefully," she said, "but I would be so surprised if this doesn't turn out to be a great opportunity."