

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

LAST UPDATED: 3/18/2020

We understand that our industry partners are facing difficulties during this time of uncertainty. Please find FAQs below that may help inform your business strategies or answer questions from guests/visitors.

Per the counsel of our partner agencies in the areas of marketing, public relations and social media, we want to assure you that our team is doing all that we can to mitigate concerns and to continue to stay top of mind for our target visitors.

Please forward this information to any tourism/travel industry colleague who might benefit.

How are Coastal Mississippi's marketing strategies changing?

- At the highest level, our overall strategy is the safety of our visitors, residents, Coastal Mississippi team members, and industry stakeholders.
- Consumer behavior is changing, either as a proactive measure of risk-aversion to exposure or due to financial necessity from any economic impact the outbreak is causing.
- As added factors, attractions, venues and events are being shuttered or cancelled at every given moment.
- These factors: (1) maintaining safety, (2) a consumer mindset shift and (3) an increasing industry-wide stance on shifting visitation promotions means we should look to create more conservative, strategic approaches to our marketing and media outreach for the short term.
 - The goal is to maintain awareness while ensuring a healthy return to business in the long term.
- In light of the many uncertainties, we have paused all paid media for the next 30 days and constant reassessment will be the standard for the foreseeable future. Organic, or non-paid, efforts on our social media channels will continue.
 - We will work to share information about how local businesses are adapting to the regulations set forth by official agencies.
- Preparation
 - Bracing for further impact - The travel industry is already feeling the impact of the spread and may continue to do so for an extended length of time. We should prepare our businesses to withstand any scenario, modeling contingency plans for successfully withstanding this time of crisis and however it unfolds.
 - According to a recent study conducted by Longwoods International:
 - 58% of American travelers are changing their travel plans for the next six months because of coronavirus.

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- When asked how these travelers will change their plans because of the pandemic, 36% will reduce travel in the next six months, 30% will shift travel from air travel to auto travel, 28% will cancel some travel and 22% will shift their travel from international destinations to domestic destinations.
- Of the travelers surveyed, 35% of them indicated that the coronavirus pandemic would “greatly impact” their decision to travel in the next six months.
- Action
 - What can we do now?
 - While business response should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, addressing the crisis in an empathetic and responsible approach can set our brands up for maintaining positive sentiment and consideration, while avoiding scenarios where our marketing could be considered ill-informed or placed alongside less than ideal news content.
 - Developing strategic plans now to be able to come out of the gate quickly once things turn for the better.
- Maintain Optimism - We can be a model for other brands and our consumers in these times, practicing positivity in the face of dire situations and looking ahead to the recovery period.
 - The situation is fluid and changing every day, and while the situation is serious, there’s promise of recovery in the not so distant future.
 - Travelers are still optimistic! According to a survey of travelers by Entada Insights, 47% still plan on traveling this summer with less than 10% canceling summer vacation plans.
 - Domestic travel and local business could be poised to capitalize during recovery as people remain wary of international travel, look to drive markets and are eager to get out of the house.

How will the Coastal Mississippi website be adjusted?

- Continuing to add transparent messaging about healthy travel and measures being taken by our industry partners to combat the spread of the virus.
- Changing information on the homepage to be less reflective of specific events.
- For the short-term future, shifting content and messaging to more storytelling, tastes of the experience, etc. to inspire future visits to the destination.
 - We are reinforcing postponements, not cancellations.

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- Included a COVID-19 Resource message on the homepage, leading visitors to a [visitor-specific landing page](#) related to the issue.
- Created landing pages with temporary closures and event cancellations/postponements here:
 - <https://www.gulfcoast.org/temporary-closures/>
 - <https://www.gulfcoast.org/event-changes/>
- In process of adding a landing page that explains what measures businesses are taking to align with recommendations from CDC and officials, including:
 - Extra sanitation
 - Additional carry-out opportunities
 - Virtual experiences

How are Coastal Mississippi's sales strategies changing?

Leisure

- Expedia campaign ended March 15 as originally planned.
- We are working with our bus cancellations to reschedule them to later dates.
- We have suspended travel to shows and sales missions until they are safe to resume.
- We continue to reach out to our tour operators and offer to assist any way we can with them and our hotel partners on future bookings.

Conventions/Events/Meetings

- Our team is in constant communication with their clients to assist them with rescheduling their events planned in Coastal Mississippi
 - National Beta Club- Scheduled for March 18-20, 2020 - CANCELLED on 3.12.20
 - 5Linx - Scheduled for April 27 - May 2, 2020 - RESCHEDULING
 - MGC Volleyball Open - Scheduled for March 13-15, 2020 - RESCHEDULING
 - Omega Psi Phi - Scheduled for March 25-29 - RESCHEDULED FOR MARCH 2021

How is your public relations strategy changing?

Media relations/pitching

- National and regional pitching has shifted from specific short-lead time frame (spring/early summer) to more evergreen experiences, or experiences that can be enjoyed throughout the year.
 - We are only sharing these stories with appropriate contacts who are specifically asking for them, not pitching widely.

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- Based on our agency and team pitching, most media are only interested in COVID-19 related stories.
 - We will continue to share thoughtful and appropriate pitches with relevant media contacts to keep Coastal Mississippi top of mind.
 - Nationally, the media does not have appetite for fun, light-hearted travel stories.
 - Media are asking destinations to consider what is providing help, what is innovative and different?
 - How are our destination partners offering help and resources?
 - Reinforcing the healthy travel practices that we can offer (social distancing in all natural offerings) by including information from official sources.
- It is important that we inform, not interject. The health of residents and travelers is our top priority.

Issues management response

- We are sticking to the facts from the official sources and encouraging healthy travel practices.
- Please refer to the [COVID-19 partner page](#) on our website for links to official resources.

Partner communications

- You will continue to receive frequent updates from our team about the issue and how our strategies evolve as we learn more information.
- We will update the [COVID-19 partner page](#) on our website and will share new information via email.
- Our team is conducting outreach to municipalities, counties, and industry partners to determine what measures are being put into place to enhance facilities or services in order to be ready for demand when recovery begins.

Consumer email marketing

- Shifting the messaging from less aspirational and event-heavy to what visitors need to know to travel healthily.

How is your social media strategy changing?

Sparkloft is monitoring the situation closely. Please find **week two** of the COVID-19 social sentiment reporting available for review and download here:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qnk-GH9HJDIRxBM1J1WTyU8EtbEfZLUh/view?usp=sharing>

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This week the focus has been on bookings and major events, especially given the state of cancellations, travel ban, operators offering change fee waivers and increased limitations of travel. There is a lot in this report, but just a few notes:

- The key trend, in regards to travel, is the 36% increase in cancellation conversations, indicating that the population is understanding the gravity of the situation and questioning their plans and the implications of canceling.
- Conversely, the trend of millennials and Gen Z's looking at this as an opportunity to book cheap flights and packages has driven conversation about this being an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. Travelers are still looking for deals in the medium term, hoping this blows over in time.

Paid social media

- Pausing paid advertising on social media channels for week of 3/16 to adjust the messaging and targeting.

Organic social media

- Focused on real people enjoying real experiences on The Secret Coast, relying upon user-generated content to display how accessible our destination's experiences are.
- Continue to reinforce the itinerary-based opportunities available in Coastal Mississippi, which are derived from earned content (media coverage) and owned content ([blog posts](#)).
- Continued issues management and response on all channels.
- When we do receive a question/comment, we ask the individual user if we can share a private message to address their concern. Please see example below.
- Keeping audiences updated about what is happening in-destination, organically through our social media platforms.

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Potential FAQs from visitors/clients:

All questions related to COVID-19:

Please refer to the Mississippi State Department of Health COVID-19 Hotline. The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) has activated the Mississippi COVID-19 hotline to answer questions from the general public from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. For up-to-date information, call the hotline, check the MSDH website at HealthyMS.com/COVID-19, or download the free MS Ready app for Apple and Android. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website](https://www.cdc.gov) also has a wealth of information.

The hotline number is 1-877-978-6453.

This hotline is for the general public only. Media calls should always be directed to the MSDH Communications Office for information.

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Follow MSDH by email and social media at HealthyMS.com/connect.

Questions related to healthy travel practices:

This is a rapidly evolving situation and we want to keep you updated and aware, so please check with CDC and WHO often. Also, be sure to always follow [healthy travel practices](#), especially during flu season.

General guidance:

- The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus. As a reminder, the Department of Health always recommends everyday preventive actions to help impede the spread of respiratory diseases, including:
 - Avoiding close contact with people who are sick.
 - Staying home when you are sick and avoiding contact with persons in poor health.
 - Avoiding touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
 - Covering your cough or sneezing with a tissue, then disposing of the issue.
 - Washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing.
 - Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Questions related to mass gatherings:

- Center for Disease Controls and Prevention officials recommend reconsidering public events with attendance of over 10 people and limiting gatherings, especially for people over age 65.
- Official authorities have also recommended that travelers know which areas are at most risk and to avoid them while traveling. If you are receiving questions from visitors and clients related to COVID-19 and its implications for Coastal Mississippi, please refer them to the Mississippi State Department of Health COVID-19 Hotline.
- Read full release from Mississippi State Department of Health [here](#).

Questions on social media channels:

Sample messaging:

- The travel industry's guiding principle is to seek and heed the most up-to-date expert guidance, and we urge the traveling public to do the same.

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- Coastal Mississippi's tourism leaders have been engaged with local and state health department officials surrounding the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) to help mitigate concerns about traveling to the region for business and leisure. [Please include specific information about precautions your organization is taking to ensure the safety of guests here].
- This is a rapidly evolving situation and we want to keep you updated and aware, so please check with CDC and WHO often. Also, be sure to always follow [healthy travel practices](#), especially during flu season [include link to graphic: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/stop-the-spread-of-germs.pdf>].
- When we do receive a question/comment, we ask the individual user if we can share a private message to address their concern.

Where can I find additional information?

Visit the [COVID-19 landing page](#) on our partners page to view latest updates and resources: <https://www.gulfcoast.org/partners>.