VISIT HAYWOOD
WESTERN NC MOUNTAINS

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

2025 - 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

4 ABOUT VISIT HAYWOOD

5 STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH DESTINATION MASTER PLAN

6 2024 MARKETING PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

7 VISITOR RESEARCH & MARKET INSIGHTS

8 BRAND STRATEGY

9-11 MARKETING GOALS & OBJECTIVES

12 HIGH-VALUE VISITORS

13-14 CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK

15 MEDIA & ADVERTISING STRATEGY

16-17 PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY

18 COMMUNITY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

19 MEASUREMENT & REPORTING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Haywood County enters Fiscal Year 2025–2026 at a pivotal moment in its destination marketing journey. Building on the momentum of our newly launched Visit Haywood brand and "Unfiltered" campaign, this plan outlines a strategic roadmap for engaging high-value visitors, supporting local businesses, and reinforcing Haywood's identity as an authentic, must-visit mountain destination.

This year's plan is shaped by both opportunity and responsibility. In the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene, recovery and resilience remain central to our messaging and stakeholder partnerships. The marketing and communications strategies presented here work to both reignite visitation, and also to position tourism as a vital engine for year-round economic development and community well-being.

Each of Haywood's five distinct mountain towns – Canton, Clyde, Lake Junaluska, Maggie Valley & Waynesville - offer unique experiences that contribute to the destination's overall appeal. Our campaign and outreach strategies will emphasize these communities while reinforcing the county's cohesive brand identity.

Our marketing efforts will be closely aligned with the newly adopted Haywood County Destination Master Plan (2026–2035). Through targeted media investments, authentic storytelling, and expanded public relations outreach, we will elevate Haywood's presence in key Southeast markets and inspire new and repeat visitation across seasons.

Key initiatives include:

- Expanding brand adoption through internal engagement and stakeholder activation
- Launching seasonal and niche campaigns to drive overnight stays
- Elevating the visibility of outdoor recreation and Appalachian culture
- Promoting responsible travel practices across all marketing platforms
- Measuring campaign performance and refining tactics in real time

As we move forward, this plan reinforces our commitment to thoughtful tourism that sustains Haywood County's character while driving economic stability.

ABOUT VISIT HAYWOOD

About the HCTDA and its Role

The HCTDA is the official destination marketing organization for Haywood County, responsible for investing occupancy tax revenues to support tourism promotion, visitor services, and product development that benefit both residents and visitors alike.

Purpose of the Marketing & Communications Plan

This plan serves as a strategic guide for marketing and communications activities during FY 2025–2026. It outlines priority goals, target audiences, campaign strategies, and performance benchmarks—all rooted in the vision set forth in the Haywood County Destination Master Plan.

Mission Statement

The Haywood County Tourism Development Authority (HCTDA) drives community and economic prosperity as a strategic leader of the destination. By fostering collaboration and destination stewardship, we strive to make Haywood County an unrivaled place to live, work, and play.

Vision Statement

Haywood County will be renowned as the authentic destination in the Great Smoky and Blue Ridge Mountains, offering diverse, year-round experiences while preserving our natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH DESTINATION MASTER PLAN

Grounded in extensive research and community collaboration, the Haywood County Destination Master Plan (2026–2035) provides a comprehensive, long-range vision for sustainable tourism development across the county. Developed with insights from more than 500 stakeholders and 1,200+ visitors, the plan emphasizes balanced growth that benefits residents and visitors alike. It outlines four strategic pillars:

- Strengthen awareness and perception of the Haywood County tourism brand
- Diversify tourism product offerings and experiences that enhance the destination appeal for all
- Support and promote stewardship of natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities
- Enhance HCTDA evolution while cultivating community engagement and collaboration

While this Marketing & Communications Plan will not address every initiative included in the Destination Master Plan, its strategies are closely aligned with many of the plan's core objectives. Readers are encouraged to explore the full Destination Master Plan for a deeper understanding of the long-term vision and implementation framework.

2024 MARKETING PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

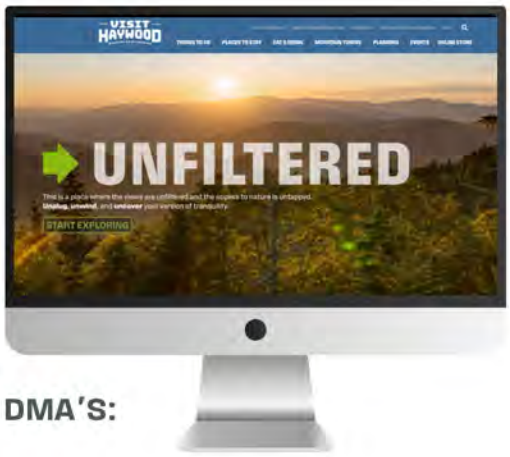
A strong understanding of visitor behavior, preferences, and impact is critical to shaping effective marketing strategies. This section synthesizes data from calendar year 2024 to guide FY 2025–2026 priorities.

WEBSITE TRAFFIC

+88%
Pageviews
(1.4M+ total)

+68%
Organic Search
Growth

+39%
User Engagement



TOP PAGES VISITED:

1. Blue Ridge Parkway
2. Places To Stay
3. Outdoor Activities
4. Cabin Rentals
5. Ice Fest

TOP WEBSITE DMA'S:

1. Atlanta
2. Charlotte
3. Nashville
4. Raleigh
5. Miami

EMAIL MARKETING

50,460
Subscribers

1.5M+
Emails Sent

25.9%
Open Rate

SOCIAL MEDIA

162,000+ Followers
590,000+ Video Views

PUBLIC RELATIONS

82
Placements

241M
Media Impressions

$5.25M
Ad Equivalency

Carolina country · TRAVEL+ LEISURE · Our State CELEBRATING NORTH CAROLINA · Southern Living · Forbes

VISITOR RESEARCH & MARKET INSIGHTS

Visitor Demographics & Trends:

Top States producing visitors

- North Carolina
- South Carolina
- Florida
- Georgia
- Tennessee
- Virginia

>1%: Alabama, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Texas, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio

Average Travel Party Size

3
Overall Average

4.6
Family

2.2
Non-Family

77% of visitors are from out-of-state

60% of all visitor spending goes to locally owned and operated businesses

Length of Stay

Survey Insights (Recent Visitor Survey):

- High interest in repeat visits and multi-generational travel
- Visitors favor authenticity, walkable downtowns, natural settings, and cultural events
- Increased expectations for online trip-planning tools and mobile accessibility

BRAND STRATEGY

The Visit Haywood brand was developed to reflect the county's authentic Appalachian character, abundant natural beauty, and welcoming spirit. This section outlines the guiding elements of the brand and how it will be activated across all channels.

Please refer to HaywoodTDA.com/brand-guidelines for more information.

Brand Promise:
Visit Haywood County, where the Great Smoky Mountains meet the Blue Ridge in Western North Carolina. Experience our Appalachian hospitality and breathtaking scenic views. Explore five charming mountain towns and discover our unspoiled public lands, forests and waters. Whether you seek adventure or tranquility, Haywood offers it all. So take a hike, pack a picnic or enjoy your visit at a rocking chair pace.

Brand Personality:

- Down-to-Earth
- Welcoming & Neighborly
- Uplifting
- Sincere
- Informal & Relaxed

Brand Voice Themes:

- A Charming Mountain Spirit
- A Sense of Adventure
- A Refuge of Tranquility
- A Cascade of Wonder

Brand implementation will include internal rollouts, stakeholder education, partner toolkits, and creative consistency across all advertising, public relations, and owned platforms.

MARKETING GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The following objectives, strategies, and tactics guide Visit Haywood's FY 2025–2026 marketing and communications efforts. Each is designed to support the county's tourism brand development, foster stakeholder alignment, and promote sustainable visitation.

Objective 4.3 1: Launch the new Visit Haywood brand and Unfiltered campaign internally to align stakeholders. (refer to page 44 of the Destination Master Plan)

Strategy 1: Roll out the new brand and messaging campaign.

Tactics:

- Conduct an audit of existing brand assets and create a timeline for replacement.
- Host an internal brand launch event with key stakeholders.
- Create new branded merchandise to generate excitement.
- Leverage local and regional advertising channels to effectively engage both residents and businesses.

Strategy 2: Arm stakeholders, partners and the private sector with tools needed to amplify the new umbrella brand, ensuring visitors are presented with a cohesive, county wide orientation to the destination that reinforces a collective Haywood County experience.

Tactics:

- Develop a digital brand toolkit with guidelines, key messages, and logo assets.
- Educate stakeholders on how the umbrella brand connects the county's five communities.
- Offer new cooperative advertising opportunities designed to support local businesses, broaden marketing reach, and enhance destination visibility.
- Host community work sessions to gather input and foster buy-in.

MARKETING GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Objective 4.3 2: Strengthen external awareness and perceptions of Haywood County as a place to visit. (refer to page 48 of the Destination Master Plan)

Strategy 1: Incorporate the new Haywood County brand and messaging in all visitor engagement initiatives.

Tactics:
- Apply updated brand identity across digital, PR, website, social media, and video.
- Use messaging themes such as "Unfiltered and Untapped" and "Your Western North Carolina Mountain Playground."

Objective 4.3 3: Target high-value visitor segments. (refer to page 50 of the Destination Master Plan)

Strategy 1: Activate the recent visitor survey findings to increase outreach to new/different visitor segments. Focus on attracting a younger/multigenerational demographic.

Tactics:
- Assess demographics to better understand motivations and interests.
- Craft and deliver targeted messaging through paid digital outreach.

MARKETING GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Objective 4.3 6: Establish stewardship messaging and promotion as part of the destination's brand voice. (refer to page 62 of the Destination Master Plan)

Strategy 4.1: Ensure responsible travel is promoted through all marketing and communication channels.

Tactics:
- Develop educational content using Outdoor NC and Leave No Trace resources.
- Ensure stewardship themes are consistently present across all outreach.

Objective 4.5 4:Begin development of an emergency communication and response plan to ensure visitor safety and coordinated crisis messaging. (refer to page 100 of the Destination Master Plan)

Strategy3: Collaborate with public land agencies, local emergency response stakeholders, and other partners to expand communications to encourage visitor safety, reduce emergency calls, and share emergency information.

Tactics:
- Coordinate regularly with emergency managers and stakeholders to enhance visitor safety and emergency communication plans.
- Develop and share safety and emergency preparedness materials tailored for residents, visitors, and tourism operators.
- Establish a clear chain of command for coordinating with local emergency services and communicating advisories to visitors and tourism entities.

HIGH-VALUE VISITORS

Visit Haywood's marketing strategy will be guided by a deeper understanding of the most valuable visitor segments—defined by a combination of demographics, psychographics, and travel motivations. These audience segments are informed by visitor survey data, lodging trends, and campaign performance from 2024.

Primary Target Segments:

Multigenerational Travelers: "Mountain Memory Makers"
Families—grandparents, parents, and kids—seeking meaningful ways to reconnect in settings that feel both adventurous and comforting. They prefer experiences everyone can enjoy, like scenic drives, easy hikes, museums, and small-town strolls. Comfort and accessibility matter, with interest in spacious cabins, family-friendly dining, and flexible activities. Haywood County's nostalgic charm and natural beauty make it ideal for building cross-generational bonds and lasting memories.

Young Adult Explorers: "The Trail-Traversing Trend Setters"
Adventurous couples and friend groups in their 20s and 30s crave freedom, nature, and Instagram-worthy moments. Weekend warriors, they love scenic hikes, craft breweries, quirky roadside finds, and live music—often with their dog. Budget-conscious and socially aware, they look for eco-friendly, pet-welcoming options and value spontaneity. Haywood County offers off-the-beaten-path trails, vibrant festivals, and mountain-town energy perfect for their next shareable escape.

Cultural Enthusiasts: "The Appalachian Aficionados"
Often retired or semi-retired, these curious travelers seek the rich heritage of the Southern Appalachians. They explore small towns for authenticity—bluegrass shows, craft galleries, and local history. Favoring immersive, slow-paced travel, they visit midweek and stay in locally owned inns. Haywood County's arts, traditions, and friendly communities create a soulful destination for story-rich journeys.

Geographic Focus:

Primary markets: North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee

Secondary markets: Alabama, Virginia, Ohio

DMAs:
Atlanta, GA
Charlotte, NC
Columbia, SC
Greensboro-High Point-Winston Salem, NC
Knoxville, TN
Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro, TN
Orlando-Daytona Beach-Melbourne, FL
Raleigh-Durham, NCJacksonville, FL
Tampa-St Petersburg, FL
Miami-Fort Lauderdale, FL

CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK

Visit Haywood's campaign efforts for FY 2025–2026 will center around the destination's refreshed identity and core brand platform: Unfiltered. This approach leverages the region's inherent strengths—natural beauty, outdoor access, and Appalachian culture—while introducing strategic creative activations that speak directly to key audience motivations.

Primary Campaign: Unfiltered The "Unfiltered" campaign serves as the cornerstone of the marketing approach. It reinforces Haywood County's position as a place of authentic, immersive mountain experiences. Messaging focuses on:

- Natural scenic beauty and unspoiled public lands
- Outdoor recreation for all abilities and interests
- A slower, more intentional pace of life
- Appalachian hospitality and charm

This campaign will appear across:

- Digital, video and display ads (Meta, YouTube, CTV)
- Print and traditional advertising
- Paid social media
- Website landing pages and blog content
- Visitor guide integration

CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK

Niche campaigns in addition to the countywide umbrella campaign, targeted seasonal and themed campaigns will be deployed to attract diverse audiences and support strategic visitation goals.

Gift of Haywood: Holiday season campaign focused on shopping local, winter experiences, and gifting getaways.

Ice Fest: A January event-driven campaign showcasing Haywood's winter charm and destination-wide programming.

Fat Burger Month: A culinary-themed spring promotion developed in partnership with local restaurants to spark interest and media coverage.

These campaigns will include a mix of paid media, influencer collaborations, social media activations, and public relations tie-ins. All campaign materials will adhere to the Visit Haywood brand standards and storytelling themes.

MEDIA & ADVERTISING STRATEGY

Visit Haywood's FY 2025–2026 advertising plan continues to prioritize a digital-first approach that ensures efficiency, measurability, and adaptability. Digital platforms provide the targeting precision needed to reach core audiences, build awareness, and drive website conversions.

Advertising Tactics Include:

- Search and display advertising via Google Ad Suite
- Paid social media on Meta, YouTube, and Connected TV (CTV)
- Retarget website users that do not convert
- Seasonal ad flight schedules aligned with key travel and booking periods
- Integration of new video content across all digital platforms
- Participation in Visit NC Partnership programs and other co-branded media opportunities
- Paid publisher programs such as Our State Magazine

	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Google Paid Search												
Google Display/PMax												
Meta												
YouTube												
CTV												

Measurement Approach: DCI, Development Counsellors International (ad agency of record) will lead implementation and performance tracking through a real-time custom reporting dashboard. Metrics will focus on:

- Click-through rate (CTR) and website engagement
- Conversion behavior (lodging referrals, guide downloads, event clicks)
- ROI benchmarks and optimizations

Continuous refinements will be made based on advertising analytics and visitor spending trends, ensuring resources are aligned to what performs best.

PUBLIC RELATIONS OBJECTIVES & STRATEGIES

OBJECTIVES

Position Haywood County as a premiere overnight destination in Western North Carolina.

Secure earned media coverage and social media content creator partnerships that will increase awareness of and drive visitation to Visit Haywood's five partner destinations (Canton, Clyde, Waynesville, Maggie Valley and Lake Junaluska).

Support Haywood County's ongoing tourism industry recovery following the impact of flooding in October 2024 caused by Tropical Storm Helene through strategic public relations.

PR GOALS

Raise awareness and visibility of Haywood County's tourism offerings through regional and national public relations efforts.

Evaluate media coverage for key recovery messaging with a goal of 20% of stories secured in FY25 emphasize "visit now" messaging to drive visitation.

Host at least seven quality and diverse journalists that align with our brand values on individual or group press trips to Haywood County.

Secure coverage in at least 25% of hot list outlets a selection of high priority outlets selected for strong audience alignment and potential for meaningful impact.

Generate at least $200 million earned media impressions in national and regional media outlets covering, lifestyle, travel, food, outdoors and more.

STRATEGY

Visit Haywood will continue to work closely with MMGY Global (PR agency of record) to build broad awareness of the destination and inspire travel bookings and overnight stays. Through MMGY's robust, always-on news engine, including media relationship building, proactive and reactive media pitching, media and content creator hosting opportunities and monitoring and reporting services, MMGY will continue to establish Haywood County as a premier destination in the Western North Carolina Mountains.

Regional Consumer Markets

- North Carolina
- South Carolina
- Florida
- Georgia
- Tennessee

Secondary Consumer Markets

- Alabama
- Kentucky
- Virginia
- Ohio
- Texas
- Indiana

PUBLIC RELATIONS OBJECTIVES & STRATEGIES

PR ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

- Develop and execute an annual public relations plan
- Account management, strategic counsel and message development
- Comprehensive proactive and reactive ongoing media relations/news engine
- Maintain a proprietary media database of local, regional and national print, online and broadcast contacts
- Editorial calendar development for story angles to proactively pitch to media
- Write and distribute pitches and press releases (2-3 per month)
- Fulfillment of media requests and reactive outreach in response to story leads
- Coordinate individual press and influencer trips to generate feature coverage
- Coordination and hosting of one group press trip to Haywood County annually to generate feature media coverage
- Execution of one virtual or in-person media tour in a key market annually
- Minor crisis management, as needed (additional hourly rates may apply for ongoing crisis situations)
- Seek out and make recommendations on brand partnerships brand partnerships, satellite media tours and trade out opportunities
- Creative ideation around destination initiatives
- Ongoing reactionary vetting of non-paid influencers
- Ongoing trendspotting
- Creation and updating of press materials, as needed
- Bi-weekly PR status calls
- Monthly PR activity and coverage reporting, monitoring and measurement

COMMUNITY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is a vital component of Haywood County's destination success. For FY 2025–2026, Visit Haywood will deepen relationships with local stakeholders, businesses, and partner organizations to build pride, support, and alignment with the new destination brand. Visit Haywood will leverage local and regional advertising channels to effectively engage both residents and businesses.

Engagement Priorities:

- Promote adoption of the new brand across all five mountain towns and business sectors
- Foster two-way communication and opportunities for feedback
- Encourage participation in marketing initiatives, cooperative programs, and storytelling efforts

Planned Activities:

- Host a brand rollout event and provide ongoing stakeholder education
- Launch and distribute a digital brand toolkit with logos, messaging, and guidelines
- Conduct hands-on workshops or listening sessions with representatives from Canton, Clyde, Waynesville, Maggie Valley, and Lake Junaluska
- Offer creative co-op marketing opportunities that support shared visibility and campaign amplification
- Highlight local success stories and best practices through newsletters and partner channels

Visit Haywood will serve not only as a marketing engine, but as a connector across the destination. Strong community alignment ensures consistent visitor experiences, greater brand integrity, and long-term tourism sustainability.

MEASUREMENT & REPORTING

Accurate, timely, and actionable performance measurement is essential for making strategic decisions, demonstrating impact, and refining marketing efforts throughout the fiscal year. Visit Haywood will work with DCI and MMGY to implement an integrated tracking and reporting framework.

Measurement Priorities:

- Monitor the effectiveness of advertising and PR campaigns across channels
- Evaluate visitor engagement and conversion metrics
- Share progress with stakeholders and adjust strategy as needed

Key Tools & Approaches:

- A real-time custom dashboard to monitor campaign performance metrics
- Monthly and quarterly reports analyzing KPIs, trends, and outcomes
- Data storytelling to illustrate how efforts support the Destination Master Plan
- Benchmark comparisons and seasonal refinements to optimize ROI

Performance Metrics May Include:

- Website CTRs, on-site engagement, website conversions and lodging referral clicks
- CTR, impressions, and video views for paid media
- Email open and click rates
- PR placements and media impressions
- Social media reach, engagement, and follower growth

By aligning measurement practices with campaign objectives and brand strategy, Visit Haywood will ensure transparency, accountability, and continual improvement throughout FY 2025–2026.

Appendix

The appendix section provides supplemental information, reference materials, and tools to support the implementation and evaluation of the FY 2025–2026 Marketing & Communications Plan.

Glossary of Terms:

Brand Promise: A concise statement capturing the emotional connection and core value the destination offers visitors.

Call to Action (CTA): A message encouraging the audience to take a specific next step (e.g., "Plan Your Trip," "Book Now").

CTR (Click-Through Rate): The percentage of users who click on an ad after seeing it.

Conversion: A measurable action taken by a user, such as booking a stay or downloading a guide.

Earned Media: Publicity gained through PR efforts, as opposed to paid advertising.

Impressions: The number of times content or ads are displayed, regardless of clicks.

KPI (Key Performance Indicator): A quantifiable measure used to track success toward objectives.

Organic Search: Website traffic generated through unpaid search engine results.

Paid Media: Advertising that is paid for (e.g., Google Ads, Facebook ads).

Persona: A fictional profile representing a segment of the destination's target audience.

PR (Public Relations): The practice of managing communication between the organization and the public.

Reach: The total number of unique users who see content or an ad.

Stewardship Messaging: Communications encouraging responsible visitor behavior and care for natural and cultural resources.

User Engagement: Interaction with digital content, such as clicking, sharing, or spending time on a page.