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Alabama Gulf Coast tourism bureau signs on as SEC sponsor

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The Gulf Coast of Alabama, ravaged by the BP oil spill last year, is bouncing back this year and hopes that a new sponsorship deal with the SEC will push the area's tourism recovery.

Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism will announce this week that it has become a corporate sponsor with the SEC as a way to promote its beaches, seafood, golf and other coastal activities.

"We're pretty confident that this is the first time a destination has used a conference sponsorship to push a tourism strategy," said Vince Thompson, CEO of Melt, the Atlanta-based marketing agency that's working with the tourism bureau on activation and advertising spots. "This allows us to keep the message focused on the people who are within a driving proximity and to promote the idea that Gulf Shores is part of the SEC family."

In addition to the nonexclusive sponsorship, the agency plans a large media buy on ESPN's SEC Network games. Those spots will feature ex-coaches who made their name in the SEC, including Gene Stallings, Pat Dye, Phillip Fulmer and Vince Dooley.

The new partnership, which was brokered by the SEC's multimedia rights partner, IMG College, is expected to be announced this week in Birmingham during the conference's football media days, the annual press gathering to preview the season.

Melt and Charleston, S.C.-based Fishbait Marketing are working together on the activation. Fishbait, which represents the American Football Coaches Association, has the ties to the coaches.

"It's just a great way for us to let the world know that we're open for business," said Herb Malone, CEO of the tourism bureau, whose records show that lodging revenue was down 47.3 percent last summer compared with 2009, but that it has recovered this spring to pre-oil spill numbers.

The tourism bureau hopes to build on that recovery with its SEC partnership. Industry sources say that the sponsorship, advertising and activation will cost the bureau close to \$2 million this year.

Melt's Thompson initially suggested the SEC partnership last summer in the aftermath of the oil spill. He and a Gulf Shores businessman, Shaul Zislin, who owns souvenir shops, restaurants and entertainment venues in the region, were originally working on a concert to raise money for the area when the idea of an SEC sponsorship came up. Zislin used his contacts with Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism to bring them on board.

"This is a great idea and a unique partnership, oil spill or not," Zislin said. "But when you look at the basics of increasing traffic and spending in the area, the SEC demographic is perfect for us."

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