

# FY26 Iowa Tourism Marketing Grant Guidelines

The Iowa Tourism Marketing Grant (ITMG) program promotes tourism in Iowa by funding tourism-related marketing campaigns that benefit both local economies and the state's economy. It supports IEDA's Mission *"to strengthen economic and community vitality by building partnerships and leveraging resources to make Iowa the choice for people and business."*

Funded projects empower tourism partners across Iowa to elevate their own unique visitor experiences and hidden gems with out-of-state marketing campaigns that inspire travel to Iowa. Applications are available annually, and preference is given to projects that support the marketing strategy of the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA) in terms of its target audiences and messaging. Through this alignment, local leaders expand their capacity for success, leverage local and state resources and foster a unified industry that yields a greater return on investment for all Iowans. Iowa Tourism Office campaigns are informed by industry research and implemented with effective, measurable and synergistic marketing tactics. Campaigns are evaluated using the latest industry research and trends, as well as data analysis platforms.

## IEDA/Iowa Tourism Office Marketing Plan

"Give it Time" is the Iowa Tourism Office's newest marketing campaign, building on the success of the previous years' "Soul of Iowa" campaign. While Soul of Iowa was designed to generate broad destination awareness and encourage potential visitors to "see Iowa from a new perspective," the Give it Time campaign is designed to move consumers further down the funnel – from interest to action – by inspiring trip bookings.

### **Messaging Approach:**

- Tap into emotional motivators: Focus on creating connection through storytelling and relatable travel experiences.
- Align with travel trends: Embrace slow travel, road trips and unplugging as core drivers.
- Promote the "three R's": Position Iowa as the perfect place to relax, recharge and build relationships.

### **Target Audiences:**

- Young families with children under the age of 17, living in surrounding states.
- Childfree professionals ages 25-44, living in surrounding states.

### **Media Channels:**

- Video & audio: YouTube, Connected TV, Meta (Facebook & Instagram), Spotify (podcast placements)
- Digital display: Search engine marketing, Programmatic, Pinterest, TripAdvisor, Reddit

## Eligibility

Applicants must be a tourism-related entity based in Iowa. This includes nonprofits, for-profits, cities, counties and regional government and planning entities. Applicants may submit one application per funding cycle. The same project cannot receive funding from the ITMG program two years in a row.

## Application Requirements

Each application must contain the following:

- Applicant name, address, email, phone number, contact person and federal identification number
- Description of how the application supports [IEDA's marketing plan](#)

- Selection of the **primary** marketing tactics of the campaign in alignment with the budget
- Selection of the Target Audience(s) to be reached with the campaign
- Selection of the Iowa Tourism Office tourism message(s) that the campaign aligns with
- Verification that the grant request will align with the actual cost of implementing the project. Verification will include reference to specific vendor quotes, bids, advertising rate sheets and/or invoices that total at least the grant amount request plus the cash match.
- Written documentation from the applicant organization that commits the applicant to providing the cash match required to implement the project. The letter *must state* that the applicant will provide the cash match, the amount of the cash match and be signed by an authorized representative of the applicant organization.
- Completed Minority Impact Statement Form and W9 form. These are incorporated into the Slideroom grant application.
- Description of the plan to recognize IEDA/Iowa Tourism Office for its investment in the project. Use of the Iowa Tourism logo is required in marketing initiatives unless standard industry practices utilize other recognition such as the “#”s used by influencers.
  - Travel Iowa credit language and logos are always available at [traveliowa.com/logos](https://traveliowa.com/logos)

## Funding

Minimum grant request: \$2,500

Maximum grant request: \$10,000

- All funds requested must be whole numbers between \$2,500 and \$10,000 and be in increments of \$100. (i.e., \$2,500; \$2,600; \$2,700; etc.)
- A cash match of 20% of the project is required. Cash match may not include in-kind donations of labor, materials, etc. Cash match is cash that is expended by the organization to an outside vendor or contractor who is completing the work. The required match of 20% of the *total* project cost can be calculated by multiplying the total project times .20. The resulting amount is the required cash match.

*For example:*

Total project of \$12,500 x .20 = \$2,500 cash match. The applicant may request \$10,000 in grant funds.

Total project of \$5,000 x .20 = \$1,000 cash match. The applicant may request \$4,000 in grant funds.

## Eligible Expenses

All project expenses (grant request plus cash match) must be detailed in the application. The expenses for proposed activities must occur within a reasonable timeline within the **2026 calendar year**.

All expenses included in the project must:

- Directly relate to the implementation of a tourism-oriented marketing initiative, event or meeting.
- Be for work that occurs between January 1, 2026 and December 31, 2026.
- Be paid for within the calendar year January 2026 – December 2026.

Please note that no extensions will be given beyond December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2026. An exception for an expenditure before January 1<sup>st</sup> of 2026 may be allowed only when related activities are scheduled for early in the 2026 calendar year and the vendor requires pre-payment *for the 2026 work*. However, the applicant must clearly state the request for the exception and provide justification for the specific expenditure in their application. If the grant administrator does not feel the early expenditure, or any other expenditure, is adequately detailed and or justified, any expenditure may be excluded from any award. An applicant that receives a partial award will be contacted by the grant administrator prior to development of a contract. The applicant may decline any

award – partial or full before the contract is signed by all parties and funds have been dispersed. After state funds have been dispersed, the applicant is obligated to implement the project as described in their contract, which includes their application, and must return funds if the contractual obligations are not met.

Advertising in local communities is NOT an eligible expense unless it unavoidably occurs as part of an out-of-state campaign.

Any expense that doesn't directly relate to the project is ineligible for funding. Other ineligible expenses include:

- Staff salaries and wages
- Vertical infrastructure (includes installation of signage)
- Equipment and software
- Postage
- Marketing programs already subsidized by the Iowa Tourism Office
- All travel, meal and lodging costs of staff and contractors
- Alcoholic beverages
- Solicitation efforts
- Lobbying fees
- Projects supported by other state grant programming
- Prizes given to participants or attendees

## Scoring Criteria

ITG applications receive a score between zero and 100 points. Volunteer reviewers affiliated with Iowa's tourism industry assist with scoring. Throughout the scoring process, preference is given to applications that reach IEDA's target audience(s) and align with IEDA messaging and tactics. Collaboration is encouraged and sustainability is important. The guidance the volunteer reviewers use to award *maximum points* in each category is provided below. The full ITO Marketing Grant Scoring Rubric is available to applicants to help them more effectively move through the campaign planning and grant application process.

### Project Description – Max Score = 20 Points

- Clearly conveys how the campaign or project aligns with IEDA's mission and the ITO's marketing campaign in its approach, target audiences and media channels.
- Overall application is clear, concise, and well-composed. It clearly identifies, articulates and justifies the proposed campaign details, use of specific tactics, progression of the campaign through major milestones and accurately identifies responsible parties.
- Summary includes information about how the applicant has prepared for calendar year 2026 implementation.
- Clearly describes how state funds will be used to implement specific campaign tactics.
- Is an out-of-state marketing campaign.
- Timeline is well-thought-out, appropriate, clear, breaks down the appropriate campaign milestones between 1/1/26 – 12/31/26 and aligns with the narrative, budget and tactics.

### Economic Impact and Ability to Promote Tourism Industry Growth – Max Score = 20 Points

- *Clearly describes* how the project aligns with the Iowa Tourism Office's overall strategy to grow the state's economy through travel expenditures and using travel as a catalyst for talent attraction.
- Strongly aligns with specific ITO marketing strategies: messaging approach, target audiences and media channels.
- Is clearly included in the applicants' marketing plan as a strategy the applicant will implement to increase tourism's economic impact.

- Describes how benefits will be measured quantitatively and details platforms, tracking or other industry measures that will be used and by whom.
- There is high confidence that the project will benefit the economy at a local level, magnify Iowa's brand, increase Iowa's marketing success, positively impact Iowa's brand, and statewide economic impact is likely.
- The project has a high likelihood of becoming an example for other tourism partners and/or for the State.

#### **Innovation – Max Score = 15 Points**

- Is a brand-new campaign.
- Clearly articulates how the entire campaign is innovative for the Iowa tourism industry.
- Clearly and succinctly describes specific innovative qualities of the campaign and how the campaign is expanding or evolving the applicant organization and/or partner's tourism marketing capacity.
- Explains what new information and/or research informed the campaign.
- Details how the campaign's tactics will attract the attention of or connect with the selected IEDA target audience(s) in a new way.
- The innovative enhanced and/or distinctive nature of the project for the Iowa tourism industry, applicant and partners is obvious.

#### **Need – Max Score = 5 Points**

- Clearly articulates why state funds will enhance the project.
- Details other sources of funding sought out to support the project.

#### **Sustainability – Max Score = 15 Points**

- Articulates how implementation of the campaign will enable the applicant and/or partners to advance tourism marketing beyond FY 2026.
- Clearly details how and why specific funding entities and partners were active in campaign development to advance support and funding for future tourism campaigns.
- Clearly describes how the applicant will obtain and distribute results of the campaign to stakeholders to leverage future funding and/or support for their organization, partners and/or for future marketing campaigns.
- When applicable, includes details about how the applicant and/or partners will use, and pay for utilization of, any tangible components of the campaign beyond FY 2026 (i.e. website, photography, drone footage, influencer testimonies).

#### **Budget – Max Score = 10 Points**

- Budget section is justified, well developed and consistent throughout and is mathematically accurate.
- High confidence that all grant and matching funds will be expended between 1/1/26 and 12/31/26.
- Expenses are directly related to the campaign detailed in the application, aligning with timeline, description of how funds will be used and the cash match letter.
- The letter of cash match is mathematically accurate, verifies that the applicant organization will provide at least 20% of the total project cost in cash match and is signed by an authorized representative from the applicant organization.
- The cost of all proposed expenses has been justified by the applicant through reference to specific vendor quotes, discussion with vendors, (or bills incurred for similar projects within the past year) *and* vendor names and the type of communication with the vendor has been clearly stated in the budget

table (i.e. the applicant does not have to provide a bid but they must refer to the bid they have and state who it was from).

- The budget does not include any ineligible expenses.

### **Collaboration – Max Score = 15 Points**

- Applicant is from a membership, a multi-partner organization or a collaboration and the campaign goes beyond normal partnership efforts.
- Campaign engages 3 or more entities, including private businesses in development and implementation.
- Applicant clearly defines and describes the land area they are including in their “tourismshed”.
- Campaign markets multiple visitor opportunities within the defined “tourismshed”, encouraging travelers to visit multiple attractions, patronize businesses and engage in multiple activities.
- Campaign is likely to result in increased length of stay, overnight trips, increased money spent per trip and return visits.
- More than one private business is very likely to realize increased traffic or sales.
- Collaborative nature of the campaign will demonstrate the benefit of marketing to both private and public entities within the tourism industry.

### **Required Records and Reporting**

Iowa Tourism Marketing grant awardees receive state funding for their campaign or project upfront after a contract has been developed by IEDA and signed by authorized representatives for both parties. Successful grantees are required to submit final reports, documentation for eligible project expenses and proof of payment/s that total at least the grant award amount plus the cash match. They must also provide examples of how they acknowledged the Iowa Tourism Office’s investment in their campaign or project, including evidence of use of the Travel Iowa logo. Projects that come in under budget or cannot produce eligible invoices are required to reimburse the IEDA Iowa Tourism Office. All project contracts for the fiscal year 2026 Iowa Tourism Grant will begin January 1, 2026 and end December 31, 2026. Final reports are due by the deadline provided in the contract. The Iowa Tourism Office will hold at least one Mandatory Grant Report Training to review required records and reporting with awardees annually.