

A Major Marketing Effort Landed Mississippi Its New State Flag

From statues to street names, the most prominent reminders of the United States' history with racism are often these lingering remnants of the Confederacy. Mississippi's state flag, which featured the Confederate flag in its upper lefthand corner, is just one example.

It had long been a controversial point for the state, and in 2001, a referendum vote to change it failed. Speaker of the House Philip Gunn supported removing it after that initial rejection, however, and the state's legislature ruminated on it for the past several years.

This June, nearly 20 years after that referendum, Mississippi legislators made moves to change the state's flag for good.

At the end of June, Governor Tate Reeves signed a bill to redesign the flag, with the resulting design up for vote in the November election. The design, which was dubbed the "In God We Trust" flag, featured the state's flower, the magnolia, surrounded by 20 stars to signify that it was the 20th state and a five-point star to honor the state's indigenous tribes.

Unlike the presidential election, which has had final results drawn out over days, Mississippi overwhelmingly approved its new state flag with 71.4% voting yes.

Getting here was largely due to a multifaceted marketing effort led by Jackson, Miss.-based agency GodwinGroup. In 2001, there wasn't a campaign around the vote, which led to a

lack of support.

"We learned from [2001]. People need to know the importance of this, that it does matter," said Philip Shirley, Godwin's chairman. "The eyes of the world are upon Mississippi, and our image will suffer if we don't change the flag."

Rather than just one campaign, the agency worked with three clients.

A campaign with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History explained the design process and meaning behind the potential flag. Another with nonprofit Alliance for Mississippi's Future focused on educating voters about the proposition. And the last was an advocacy campaign with the In God We Trust Committee aimed to encourage voters to vote yes on the new design.

The latter two groups were created by the Mississippi Economic Council, one of Godwin's longtime clients.

Due to legalities, the three campaigns' teams couldn't communicate with one another directly. But since Godwin was working on all three, there was synchronicity, said Shirley. The campaigns rolled out over a four-week period and reached across television, print, radio, outdoor, digital, text and phone.

"We wanted to build momentum," Shirley said, which came from consistent messaging and exposure to the new design. The most basic challenge, Shirley said, was getting people to like the design. Once that was accomplished, it was about getting people used to it.

"We ordered hundreds of flags and found ways to get them flying all over the state, to show it in everyday life," he said. "We envisioned what the future would look like if this became our flag."

At the center of the campaigns was the phrase on the flag: “In God We Trust.” Its inclusion was one of two mandates the legislature dictated for the new design. The other, of course, was the removal of the Confederate flag.

“Mississippi’s pretty devout people. They’re people who consider themselves believers,” said Shirley. “‘In God We Trust’ meant something to them, so we knew that would be a part of the messaging.”

Godwin had conversations with people who were against the idea of changing the flag. The agency shared that the Confederate flag in the design contributed to some of the state’s problems, such as younger citizens moving away, a drop in tourism and that it had been co-opted by hate groups. From there, according to Shirley, these people “change[d] their hearts and minds.”

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