



Samples of the "Mississippi, Believe It!" advertising campaign are displayed last week in Flowood, Miss.

—ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP



Poor. Fat. Racist. Stupid.

Mississippi Makeover: Ads seek to overturn state's old image

BY HOLBROOK MOHR

JACKSON, Miss. — For Mississippian Rick Looser, the last straw came on an airline flight a couple of years ago when a 12-year-old boy sitting next to him asked: "Do you still see the KKK on the streets every day?"

That prompted the advertising executive to spend his own money on a campaign to dispel Mississippi's image as a forlorn state of poor, illiterate, racist good ole boys.

"Mississippi has more black elected officials than any other state in the country," Looser said. "The old stereotype of the short, fat, white, bald men in suits smoking cigars just doesn't carry weight."

Looser's campaign — "Mississippi, Believe It!" — doesn't shy from the fact that the state has a segregationist past, or that national studies consistently put it near the bottom in education and near the top in poverty and obesity. But the campaign seeks to show another side.

One of the slogans — "No Black. No White. Just the Blues." — points out the state is the birthplace of the blues and greats like B.B.King, Bo Didley and Muddy Waters

\$300,000 on campaign

Another says, "In Mississippi, We Always Have Our Hand Out. But It's Usually to Give, Not Receive," pointing out that for eight years in a row Mississippians have given more per capita to charity in relation to income than residents of any other state.

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The debate over exactly what Mississippi has to offer came to the forefront last month when Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) said to the New York Times: "Mississippi gets more than their fair share back in federal money, but who the hell wants to live in Mississippi?" Rangel apologized days later.



Rick Looser Funds effort

Looser plans to send Rangel a shirt with the slogan: "Yes, we can read and a few of us can even write," part of a campaign to highlight the state's literary giants such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams and John Grisham.

Looser, president of the Cirlot Agency, has spent about \$300,000

on the year-old campaign. He said the biggest stumbling block remains Mississippi's turbulent racial history. Several of his ads meet this head-on, including one that touts the state's status in electing blacks: "Meet a Few of Our New 'Good Ole Boys.'"

Klan link 'a cliché'

Mark Potok, director of Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, which monitors hate groups, agreed Mississippi doesn't always deserve such a bad rap.

"People think that the Klan and white supremacist groups in general are Southern artifacts, but that simply is not the truth," he said. "we see as many hate group, and certainly as many hate crimes, in Northern and even coastal states."

But even Potok couldn't help taking a jab at Mississippi: "Over here in Alabama, we say, 'Thank God for Mississippi' or else we'd be last in everything."