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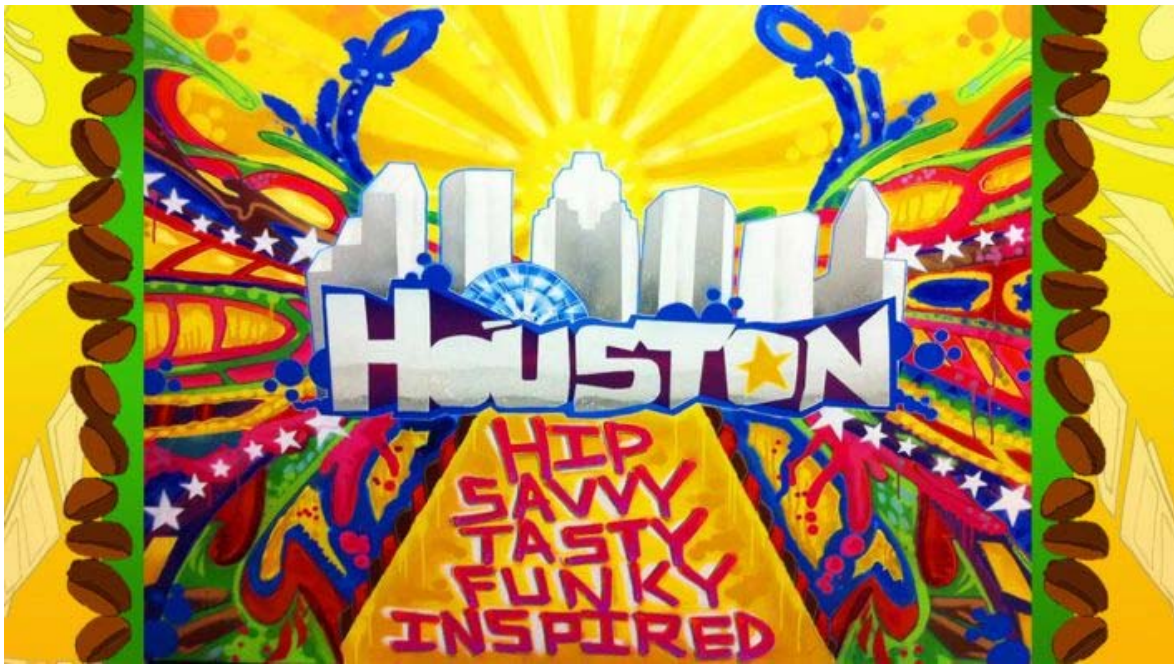
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Houston readies biggest image ad campaign ever

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Gonzo247

A proposed mural designed by Houston graffiti artist Gonzo247 will be part of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau ad campaign that begins Feb. 14, 2013.

By David Kaplan

January 23, 2013 10:20 AM

A rapper, a ballerina and a host of top chefs are among the locals who will be featured in a new Houston image campaign launching next month.

The \$425,000 promotional blitz targeting readers of the Wall Street Journal, New York Times and even Cooking Light magazine will feature a number of other artists and performers to capitalize on Houston's growing reputation as a regional culinary and cultural arts capital, city boosters say.

The "Houston Is" campaign will feature such notables as the rap star Bun B, the Houston Ballet's Nao Kusuzaki and graffiti artist Gonzo247 in the largest effort of its kind in the city's history in terms of its national reach, said Holly Clapham, vice president of marketing at the Greater Houston Convention & Visitors Bureau, the group behind the effort.

Coolness factor: Find out what art venues and restaurants make Houston cool

The decision to emphasize dining and cultural arts was based on a 2012 study done by global travel research firm TNS, which found that among the cities with which Houston competes most directly for visitors - Dallas/Fort Worth, San Antonio, Austin and New Orleans - Houston ranks No. 1 in the categories of "variety of dining options" and "cultural/performing arts."

Highlights diversity

The print ads feature 32 Houstonians, most of whom are in the restaurant and cultural arts communities, in themed group portraits. The campaign also highlights the city's ethnic diversity.

"Our research has given us the road map for how to speak directly to what travelers expect of Houston," said Greg Ortale, president and CEO of the visitors bureau.

George Haley, professor of marketing and business at the University of New Haven, likes one-half of the campaign more than the other.



Julie Soefer

Local performers, from left, Joel Orr (and Mason, the puppet), Todd Waite, Frank Huang, Constance Washington, Joshua Hopkins, Nao Kusuzaki and Tamarie Cooper strike a variety of poses at the Hobby Center.

Haley believes performing arts is a bigger draw than dining.

A dominant cultural arts position - even if it's just regional dominance - can influence a person's decision to visit a city, he suggested.

"A major show at a museum is a big draw, for example," Haley said, adding that people are less likely to visit a city because of its restaurants.

Diverse appeal

In a New York Times Travel section piece two weeks ago, however, restaurants Oxheart, Underbelly and Uchi were touted alongside the new Asia Society Texas Center and Museum District highlights like the Rothko Chapel in earning Houston a spot on the paper's 2013 list of "46 Places to Go in 2013."

"I have no doubt people will like certain ads more than others," said Clapham, of the visitors bureau. "The beauty of the campaign is that it can appeal to different interests."



...e a city where the arts take center stage.
(and Mason, Todd Waite, Frank Huang, Constance Washington, Joshua Hopkins, Nao Kusuzaki and Tamarie Cooper)

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Julie Soefer

Local performers, from left, Joel Orr (and Mason, the puppet), Todd Waite, Frank Huang, Constance Washington, Joshua Hopkins, Nao Kusuzaki and Tamarie Cooper strike a variety of poses at the Hobby Center.

Valentine's Day debut

She said she will be able to analyze each ad when it runs, and if one theme does better than another she will be able to make adjustments.

One ad is a portrait of seven performers on stage at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. Another shows eight chefs inside Mongoose Versus Cobra bar.

Big blitz: See who is represented in the ambitious ad campaign

The "Houston Is" campaign spun out of the visitors bureau's "My Houston" campaign launched five years ago, Clapham said. The "My Houston" campaign included TV spots featuring such Houston natives as Beyoncé, Lyle Lovett, Jim Parsons and the members of ZZ Top touting the city.

The "Houston Is" print campaign debuts in the Wall Street Journal on Valentine's Day, followed by ads in the New York Times and Texas Monthly. In Washington, D.C., Chicago and Houston only, ads will also appear in Forbes, Fortune, Business Week and Cooking Light.

The Wall Street Journal and New York Times will each run five different ads four times, Clapham said.

The visitors bureau, a nonprofit group funded by hotel occupancy taxes, is spending \$425,000 to produce and place the various ad spots.

The creative team behind the campaign included photographer Julie Soefer and set designer Maggi Poorman. The creative concept and post-production was executed by Soefer, Poorman and the visitors bureau team, Clapham said.

Gonzo247 created an art print as a tribute to the image campaign for a nominal fee, she said. The bright design features the city skyline. His work will be turned into a wall mural, and the visitors bureau is currently considering locations.

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