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## Click Here If You “Like” My Community

Funding for economic development is tightening as state and local governments continue to feel the impact of the recession. For perspective, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates states had to address a budget gap of \$125B in fiscal 2011, and will have to do so again for fiscal 2012 to close a projected gap of up to \$140B. In most cases the solution has been a combination of cutting services and raising taxes. Economic Development Organizations (EDOs) that rely on public sector support have been, and continue to be, under pressure to accomplish more with less. It isn't any wonder EDO Managers are increasingly focusing attention on the internet as a cost effective alternative to traditional approaches in promoting their communities for capital investment.

But, before going too far, or too fast, it is important to ask two questions – 1) Is my target audience using the internet? and 2) What are other EDOs finding works?

Like any other marketing mix decision, you must first understand if the target audience you are trying to influence is engaged in the communication channel. If your target isn't using the Internet to get information to help make a capital investment decision, then investing in an Internet based communication plan is a waste of resources.

The good news is that a significant subset of capital investment decision makers appears to be engaged with the Internet and view it as a reliable resource for information. Forbes interviewed 354 top executives at large U.S. companies and found there is a generational shift that is transforming executive use the Internet. The study reported the Internet is the top information source for executives for locating business related information. It is relied on more than references from colleagues, personal networks, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, conferences and trade shows. This study also found a marked difference in Internet use based on the age of the respondent. Younger C-level executives relied more on the Internet than did older, and would more often use search engines for research personally versus delegate the task to an Assistant. The full results are contained in the Forbes publication entitled “The Rise of the Digital C-Suite”.

In addition, a 2008 market research study among U.S. executives (completed by Development Counsellors International) suggests 71% of the time a short list of location options for due diligence consideration is created without contacting an economic development professional. That means for 71% of the potential capital investment

decisions your community image determines if it makes or is left off the short list. In order to be well positioned for inclusion, it is imperative capital investment decision makers are aware of your community and what it has to offer. Your communication strategy must have a broad reach image building component to complement your company specific sales effort.

Based on the above data, it is reasonable to conclude that, if your goal is to increase awareness among C-level executives (particularly those under age 50) of the benefits to working and living in your community, investing in internet communication may be an effective approach.

With respect to the question of what is working, there are a number of options available and more are being created all the time. Here are 10 of the more popular tactics used in promoting communities that you may want to consider including in your marketing mix.

1. Website – A wealth of information about your community that is catalogued in a way to make it easy for a capital investor to learn about what it is like to live and work there. Often, community websites will include access to searchable databases of available properties to help facilitate the investment decision. A well built and maintained website helps increase the global reach of your community message.
2. White Paper – Typically 8 – 12 pages long. This is a perfect choice for telling a detailed story about an industry cluster or asset strength of your community. It can be published as a PDF and made available for downloading on your community website.
3. eBook – A report that is generally 10 – 40 pages in length and loaded with visuals that help present content in a reader-friendly way. It can be published as a PDF and made available for downloading on your community website.
4. Digital Magazine – A visually compelling periodical authored in a magazine format. Typically contains multiple stories focused on communicating a specific theme/message. Building a subscriber base for the magazine is often the tactical challenge. Email lists can be rented from third-party suppliers to help facilitate gaining subscribers. It can also be pushed using an RSS feed.
5. Case Study – Often 1 – 2 pages long document that tells the story of a real experience. It helps the reader understand what might be expected if your community is selected for capital investment. It helps overcome investment hesitation. It can be published as a PDF and made available for downloading on your community website.
6. eNewsletter – Subscription based way to share current information about what is happening in your community that is of interest to your target. Building a subscriber base for the magazine is often the tactical challenge. Email lists can be rented from third-party suppliers to help facilitate gaining subscribers. It can also be pushed using an RSS feed.
7. Blog – A tactic that allows you to initiate a dialogue with a potential investor by encouraging comments about the information you provide.
8. Push email – An electronic equivalent to direct mail that allows you to create interest in learning more about

your community and to build all important traffic to your community’s website. Email lists can be rented from third-party suppliers and you can create your own database of addresses to use in push email campaigns.

9. Social Media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, RSS feeds) A group of tools designed to help you stimulate dialogue about your community. Typically used as a component of a viral marketing effort where you count on information sharing by participants. Great way to engage citizens of the community in your promotional efforts.

10. eNews Release – An electronic press release that is often picked up by other websites and made available to their readers. Well crafted, the upside potential for exposure is typically 15 million or higher.

Having a sound, articulated strategy is the key to deciding which of the above Internet communication tactics to include in your mix. For example, if your goal is to share a lot of complex information to help familiarize the reader with what is available in your community, then tactics like a white paper or eBook might be great choices. If you want to share an unvarnished look at what it is like to live and work in your community, then interactive tools like Social Media or a Blog might be a better selection.


Every one of these tactics will require an investment of staff time to execute and keep fresh; potentially, a new FTE may need to be added. On the balance sheet, you will see a cost shift from out-of-pocket to overhead. In addition, it is a brave new technical world for many EDO leaders, and investing in outside expertise to selectively guide tactical development is often a wise choice. You may experience an increase in expense for this line item as well.

It is important to appreciate, the centerpiece of an Internet strategy will be your community website. If it is designed poorly or does not contain relevant information that is easy to find, your community will be at a great competitive disadvantage. One easy way to determine if your website is technically sound, is to check its “grade” using HubSpot’s free Website Grader tool. It can be found online at <http://websitegrader.com>. If your website scores below 80, then consider investing in strengthening it as your top priority. A poorly designed website makes every other Internet tactic less effective.

It’s okay if you are hesitant shift your promotional budget to using the Internet to promote your community. Start small, learn, and scale up what you find works. As that famous Star Wars teacher Yoda said – “No! Try not. Do, or do not. There is no try.”

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