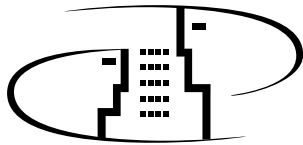


Ambassadors: Your Secret Marketing Weapon

Current issues for
economic development professionals



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Introduction

The idea behind any ambassador program is simple: In a world of too much information, a message delivered by a trusted source is the most effective. Think about it. If you were considering relocating or expanding, would you be more interested in:

- a) A generic information package?
- b) A pitch from city officials with an obvious stake in your decision?, or
- c) A qualified recommendation from someone who knows your business because it is their business too?

The answer of course is c). The best way to lend immediate credibility to an investment location and make it stand out from the crowd is with a recommendation or success story from a peer. A U.S. consultancy, Development Counsellors Inc., has surveyed top executives responsible for site selection five times since 1996. They asked the question “What sources of information influence your perception of a city’s business climate?” The most recent survey saw “dialogue with industry peers” as the top response, at 61%.¹

That helps to explain why so many communities are turning to ambassador programs as critical elements of their marketing and communications strategies. This white paper will discuss how these programs work and how you can create an effective ambassador initiative in your own municipality or region.

How do ambassador programs work?

These programs recruit leaders from business, government and community, as well as past citizens now living elsewhere,

to formally promote the community via a consistent set of tools and events. These are people who are prominent among their peers, actively involved in their networks and are already influencing your community’s image and potential for investment, albeit informally. Why not work with them to ensure they are sharing a consistent message?

According to Placebrands, an international consultancy that ranks how cities are doing at projecting a unified vision and image:

“A place brand strategy requires a realistic, competitive and very compelling strategic vision for a city, region, or country, and needs to ensure that it is supported, reinforced and enriched by every act of communication between that place and the rest of the world. Every government and municipal department or local agency, local people and local companies must consistently communicate and demonstrate the same carefully developed brand.”²

This unified voice is the goal of ambassador programs. They marry pride in a community with tangible investment results. The mandate for each ambassador is to promote the community as a place in which to invest and live, share success stories and personal experience, and to promote specific programs and incentives that are attractive to their industry networks.

Because of all the choices and marketing messages out there, an economic development brochure or a DVD has maximum impact when it is being handed over by a trusted source. Ambassadors bring a new level of credibility to your economic development efforts. They harness word-of-mouth potential to more effectively bring your brand to other businesses and skilled workers.

Ambassador Recruitment

When recruiting your ambassadors, it is critical to ensure that the number of people is large enough to have significant reach from a networking standpoint, but small enough to lend exclusivity and credibility to the program participants. Ambassadors should be identified and invited to become part of the program, perhaps using through a peer nomination process. It is important that members feel chosen as representatives and leaders in order to garner their commitment and passion.

Specifically, you should target the following types of ambassadors:

- Leaders from business and the community with strong affiliations with provincial, national or international industry associations and organizations. You want to leverage their contacts, membership privileges and attendance at trade shows and events to increase the reach of the program.
- High-profile community members, past and present, with recognition and credibility beyond the community.
- Former residents who can leverage networks in their new place of residence to promote the benefits of your community.
- Leaders in sectors that are a strategic focus for your community.
- Most importantly, each member must have a passion for your community. They must demonstrate a commitment to the community through their involvement and support for initiatives.

Implementing your Program

A good ambassador program involves six key ingredients:

1. The strategic recruitment of high-profile leaders and influencers as discussed above.
2. The development of tools that will enable these leaders to present a compelling and consistent case for investment in your city.

These may include:

- Orientation and training materials. Clarify for your ambassadors what it means to be an ambassador, what is expected of their role, and what tools are available to help them.
- Online resources that can be accessed remotely when your ambassadors are traveling to tradeshow and conferences.
- Ambassador kits that include key facts and figures about the community. It is critical that your ambassadors are educated and can speak about specific programs and incentives that may be of interest to their peers.
- Apparel, a lapel pin or some other means to identify them as ambassadors. These also serve as conversation starters with their peers.

3. The identification of opportunities for ambassadors to use these tools in a networking and educational capacity. The ambassadors themselves should identify these opportunities and commit to their role in these situations. These can include trade shows, conferences, online peer networking forums, social networking tools and industry publications.

4. Involving the ambassadors throughout the prospecting process. Providing economic developers with leads is fantastic. Assisting with meetings, introductions and tours is even better. Prospective investors will feel comfortable with a “friendly face” participating in the process, and will be able to ask direct and industry-specific questions of your ambassadors on the spot.

5. Ongoing communication with your ambassadors can help to keep the program top-of-mind for them. Be sure to inform ambassadors about new programs, developments and incentives that may be of interest to their peers. You can do this effectively through periodic email communications. You may also wish to share ambassador success stories with other ambassadors as inspiration and motivation.

6. Finally, recognizing your ambassadors is critical. Their participation in the program should be publicly acknowledged and celebrated, through the media, recognition events and special opportunities to network and be involved in the community. Help ambassadors to see the impact they are making.

The time it takes to develop and nurture ambassador relationships is significant, but the payoff is immense. They truly are your secret marketing weapon, and one that you should seriously consider adding to your arsenal.

About the Author

On Three Communication Design Inc. is a creative agency specializing in promoting places not products. For more information and insight, visit them at www.onthree.ca or read the blog at <http://blog.onthree.ca>.

In Closing

Ambassador programs can provide economic developers with reach into networks that may not otherwise be possible. Further, this reach will involve conversations between trusted peers, rather than a “pitch” from a city official. Ambassadors can share success stories and improve your community’s perception in national and international markets through simple networking activities.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://blog.onthree.ca/2008/08/04/insights-for-economic-development-marketing/>
- 2 http://www.placebrands.net/_files/placebrands_Agenda_Feb2004_FindA_Vision.pdf
“Find a Vision and Dump the Spinning”(emphasis added by M. Thususka)

About this White Paper Series

EDAC is pleased to announce a new service for our members to support your communications activities.

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