

Upstate looks inward for common identity

Regional branding can help economic development

Francis B. Allgood, Managing Editor

Whether it's connecting with business leaders or politicians, the Upstate Alliance says there's work to be done in branding the region locally.

"What we have been able to do is be successful in branding the Upstate outside our 10-county border," says Jody Bryson, vice president of investor and public relations. "The automotive industry in Detroit knows who we are, and about ICAR (Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research) and BMW. The European community knows who we are."

Formed in 2000, the Upstate Alliance is a public/private economic development organization that markets 10 counties and three cities in the Upstate.

"Now we have to look within the region," Bryson says.

While the economic development chiefs in each community are on board with the organization's mission, Upstate Alliance chief Hal Johnson says there are those in the community that haven't caught on.

Johnson points to Kansas City as a region that has rallied around a branding message.

"ThinkKC" is the Kansas City Area Development Council's national marketing and branding campaign. The branding initiative is endorsed by 18 counties, two states and 50 major communities.

In Liberty, Mo., a city of 30,000 people about 15 miles northeast of downtown Kansas City, Alicia Stephens says she could never afford the national exposure that KCADC brings.

"They made it easy for the small guy," says the executive director of the

Partnership for Community Growth and Development. "It's one stop for a site location consultant who may look at many sites all over the region."

She says its partnership with KCADC attracted Sears Holdings Corp.'s new mid-sized store format, Sears Essentials, to Liberty.

The slogan and KC red dot found in the ThinkKC logo are used throughout the region for a number of initiatives. It can be found on business cards, billboards, and community arts initiatives.

Liberty's slogan is "Think Liberty Mo." The "i" in "Think" is dotted with the red KC circle.

"We know where Liberty is, but nobody else knows where it's at," Stephens explains. "By seeing the KC dot, they know where we are."

Externally, the brand of the Upstate Alliance is "The right climate for global business."

"We're a business-friendly region with a great quality of life, strong automotive sector, strong advanced manufacturing, along with a research university and great technical colleges," Bryson says.

Kansas City augments ThinkKC with an internal brand. "OneKC" reminds the economic development agencies of the bond they have in growing the region.

Home to the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan., is about 50 minutes from Kansas City International Airport.

"We have a great bioscience culture," says Lavern Squier, president of the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce. "We've got great arts and cultural base, and people seek us out for that reason – a solution to the metro area hustle and bustle."

Squier says the regional branding has a proven track record. What's key is realizing there is strength in numbers. Squier helped

establish the Western Kansas Rural Economic Development Alliance in 1994, a coalition of 53 western Kansas counties.

"This critical mass elevates your dollars in economic development," Squier says.

He says it was because of KCADC that Lawrence was able to retain Berry Plastics Corp. for a \$118 million expansion over three phases, beginning this year.

In Georgia, the state has been pushing counties to be more regional, according to Patrick Topping, senior vice president of the Macon Economic Development Commission.

"On an informal basis, we have a good relationship with our marketing," he says. "I helped with some product development to one county that does not have a professional economic developer."

A collaborative is forming among 10 communities along Interstate 75, branding it as a logistics corridor, Topping says.

MEDC has taken strides in branding itself, too. In 2004, it launched "Macon Works" for the central Georgia city at the crossroads of I-75 and I-16.

In its logo, the letters in "Macon" have been tweaked to resemble target industries.

"It brands us as a location for our three target industries – logistics, aerospace and shared services, or high-end back office," says Topping.

Topping says the campaign has been extremely successful, landing three major logistics announcements since 2004.

The Upstate Alliance will kick off an internal branding task force Feb. 28. It hopes to have a campaign by the end of the year.

"We're seeking an internal brand for the Upstate that has broad support – that has buy-in – that gives folks a sense of identity and trust in ownership," Bryson says. 85