

Davenport Marketing Can't Overcome City's Deficiencies

Written by David C. Aeschliman
Tuesday, 18 April 2006 18:00

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I'd like to write a column about how Davenport is marketing itself. But any discussion about the marketing of Davenport needs to be preceded by a discussion of what's being marketed. That's because we have to fix any company's (or city's) infrastructure if we expect the masses to flock to it as a result of marketing.

So, as a review of what's up in the Davenport marketing world, let's start with ...

The Ugly

Davenport, like its sister cities of the Quads, was decimated by the agricultural depression of the mid-1980s. The farm-equipment manufacturing capital of the world fell apart under the relentless economic depression. It took about five years to undo what it took 50 to build. The big Deere competitors went away, and support companies fell apart at the seams. Downtown Davenport looked like a refugee camp. Gone are Petersen Harned Von Maur, Bishop's, Walgreens, and dozens of others that elegantly lined our downtown.

Today, downtown Davenport serves as one of the most ironic scenes possible. Within a stone's throw are the riches recently built among the tragedies we refuse to bury. The riches are obvious evidence some positive things are happening, but ... more later.

The irony? Empty storefronts in close proximity to a globally classy, multi-million-dollar art museum. A gambling boat anchored next to an abandoned restaurant. A methamphetamine lab of a hotel so successful the owner wants to sell it to Davenport for a dollar ... next to the RiverCenter facility. A tourism welcome center next to an abandoned nightclub. Unfortunately, the city and its residents have become nearly immune to these ironies.

The decaying Brady Street corridor should also remind us that our problems aren't limited to downtown.

And outside of the struggling central city, green-field development continues unabated, including two Super Wal-Mart stores in a city of 100,000 people. New stores and restaurants are built on Utica Ridge Road even as young businesses close their doors.

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The Bad

Davenport has more city employees than any other city its size in the state. A budget to make accountants ill. And some of the city's more recent and storied investments are losing money or are below their projected performance levels. The parking ramps are fiscally suffering. The city's track record with the RiverCenter is abysmal. The museum of art ... same thing when it was under municipal control. The NewVentures Center (to which city government contributed \$1.5 million) needs more new ventures. The Prairie Heights housing development can't seem to get a solid footing. The Eastern Iowa Industrial Center in which the city is a partner has had a slow absorption rate, securing just its second private tenant earlier this year.

Davenport's taxes on businesses are ... taxing. (My \$200,000 business valuation, the 151-year-old Christie Mansion in east Davenport, has property taxes of \$687 per month.) I think taxes in Davenport are competing with health care as a cost line item in many small businesses.

And there seems to be no real plan to deal with these fiscal issues.

Yet, rather than close these fiscal drains, or better yet, fix them, more investments are coming on top of the ones that aren't making money ... such as the proposed public market down on the riverfront. At least DavenportOne President Dan Huber is quoted as saying, "The question is: Will it really work?"

That's the right question, even though some wonder why it's being asked when the city has already budgeted \$600,000 for capital improvements related to the market. Huber needs to stay the course and keep asking until he's satisfied with the answer that it's highly probable "it will really work." In his position, businesses depend on him for that.

The fundamental question remains: Why is Davenport straying so far from financing primary public services such as streets and fire and police protection while unsuccessfully pursuing typically privately financed investments? After all, cities don't do well in private competition, and private industries don't compete well with city services. Whose ideas are these? Whose monies are these? When the answers to those two questions are the same, there will be accountability ... until then, not. And I would point out: There are different consequences for privately and publicly funded efforts. In private enterprise, I use my money; in public efforts, someone else uses my money. One of us has to make it fiscally; the other just gets criticized if they fail ...and typically comes after even more.

At this point, many Davenport public investments have not proven as self-sustaining as projections. Give them time? Sure, but Davenport leaders need to (a) get very good at projecting more realistic operating expenses and revenues; (b) listen to exceptionally talented private business leaders, who are itching to help the city do a better job; and (c) develop an accurate growth-to-profit strategy for each new venture, or an exit strategy for each.

City employees blame the rural tax rollback as the budget-crippling culprit. Very true; it has hit city budgets hard. But we've known about it for years, and it's a fact that has to be dealt with.

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So, the city cranks out a tax on rain for having the audacity to run from high spots to low and, for good measure, a new fire-inspection fee.

But incremental sources of revenue won't fix budgets if the city doesn't understand it cannot continue to make investments without a return. The city will bankrupt itself, its citizens, and its business community.

So what does all this have to do with how Davenport is marketing itself? In marketing, we always say: "We cannot make you something you aren't; we can only reflect to the markets what you are." That's what it has to do with it. If the community wants to grow in both private residences and private business, it has to realize that low taxes, growth incentives, and exceptional public services are attractive, while fiscal deficiencies scare both intelligent citizens and business owners ... away.

The Good

In talking with other communities, benchmarks of marketing success are the number of jobs, citizens, and businesses in the community. Those numbers haven't moved much in Davenport in the past two decades. But at least they're moving. For example, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the population in 2000 was up 2.8 percent from 1990 levels.

"We had to stop the negatives in this city before we could move forward," Mayor Ed Winborn said. "We've done that. We're turning the corner and gaining momentum."

City Administrator Craig Malin agreed. "When is the last time you saw high-rise cranes working in the downtown area?" he asked as evidence of progress. The referenced crane is building the city's new police complex.

So what are we doing about marketing the attributes of Davenport? Communications Director Jennifer Nahra said the city targets its direct marketing monies at Davenport residents. "We have to convince our residents this is a good place to live," she said. She offers marketing evidence of special publications and DVDs carrying titles such as "Davenport, Iowa's Front Porch," "Davenport Neighborhoods, Magical Places," "RiverVision: The People's Plan For America's River," and – my personal favorite – "John O'Donnell Stadium: The Best Ballpark In America". The last title serves best as representing the hyperbolic positions put forth by the city's leaders. O'Donnell? The best ballpark in America? Come on. We have to threaten to close "America's best ballpark" in order to try to collect renovation costs. Again, marketing is powerful, but it can't serve to wish something up from something it's not.

Davenport says it relies heavily on its annual investment in DavenportOne (the chamber of commerce) and the Quad City Development Group (the name accurately reflects its mission) to attract business. In other words, they give money to those two groups and hope they work through marketing to land new businesses and bring them to Davenport.

This makes it appear that Davenport's strategy consists of marketing internally (to Davenport) using its own staff, and relying on professional development groups to market externally. I'll

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actually endorse that thinking because I strongly suspect DavenportOne and the Quad City Development Group are significantly better at marketing than city employees and elected officials.

An Alternative

But Davenport is potentially missing the core marketing value of its simpler, more mundane, and plain heritage. Assets that aren't fancy. They just work.

Here is how I'd capture Davenport in marketing efforts. Davenport is the crossroads of America, providing monstrous shipping advantages for companies that need to distribute and export. We did nearly \$3 billion in manufactured shipments in 2000. Are we marketing that to trucking firms, mail-order houses, and others who rely on distribution for their livelihood?

Davenport has inexpensive costs of living. The median value of a home in 2000 was \$80,200. Are we marketing that to large corporations on both coasts who would consider moving annex offices here? After all, you can't build a garage in New Jersey for \$80,000. Davenport offers moderately rich amenities from which to choose. We have a manufacturing labor force that's incomparable.

We have a "spend locally" mentality. The average per capita spending on retail sales in 2000 was \$15,000. Are we marketing that to businesses who rely on retail expansion and count on being supported by local citizens? We have a Midwestern work ethic and pride I'll pit against any region in the country. Finally, compared to many cities, crime is low, income is high, services and amenities are good. And for the most part, the people are just plain neighborly. Priceless. Are we marketing these performance assets?

The Figge. The Mississippi River. Rhythm City. Libraries. River Music Experience. Shopping malls. Eateries. Excellent school systems. Theatre. Entertainment venues by the dozens. It's a list that can be built upon when we search for primary assets for the guts of our marketing campaign.

I would encourage Davenport to package this message. Push it into the Fortune 5,000 (not a typo for 500) companies and campaign hard to get them to move facilities and people here. Target them with both marketing and selling.

Meanwhile, minor changes would go a long way toward creating an attractive infrastructure that can be marketed: lower taxes for business versus using tax increases and fees to fix budget problems; a little more political realism instead of political wishing; a little more public openness versus closed pursuit of private agendas; a little more courage instead of intimidation; a little more accuracy about investments and returns; a little more attention to public services; a lot less attention to trying to invest in private development; and a lot more leadership.

Davenport has a new mayor. Davenport boasts one of the largest, wealthiest, and most active chambers in the state. Davenport is richly related to the Quad City Development Group, with its Thom Hart-led experience and efforts. We turn to them for hope, for leadership, for listening,

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and for implementation.

Have we stopped the negatives? Have we turned the corner? Time will tell. The ability to fix a problem is initiated with the honest recognition there just might be one, followed by a search for continuity in the cause. Fix the cause, and the problem often goes away. There are many efforts currently underway to help. It's imperative they do.

But if Davenport is deferring its external marketing efforts to DavenportOne and the Quad City Development Group, we'll go talk to them. Stay tuned.

David C. Aeschliman is the CEO of Results IMC, Inc., a comprehensive sales and marketing firm offering its clients strategic growth plans and implementation on pay-for-performance arrangements. For more information about Results, visit <http://www.resultsimc.com>.