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PR's smallest large market

Craig McGuire - 8 May 2006 11:00

With Arizona a state of transplants, Phoenix's melting pot is a great test market for campaign and business approaches.

In the Navajo language, Phoenix is known as Hoozdo, or "the place is hot." And while economists expect growth to slow a bit in the Grand Canyon state this year - Arizona grew its employment base 4.1%, while its economy expanded 8.6% in 2005 - it is expected to continue outstripping national averages.

From tourism to tech, life sciences to real estate, Phoenix PR people are finding more opportunities as the city swells in size.

"Phoenix is experiencing a housing boom showing few signs of slowing down," says Iain Watt, account executive at economic development and tourism marketing firm Development Counsellors International, for which the Greater Phoenix Economic Council is a client. "Home prices appreciated by 35% over the year that began December 2004."

The metro Phoenix housing market ranks in the top five in the country. That's 10,000 people moving to the city every month.

This population shift is mirrored by the entrance of scores of businesses launching local operations, inspired by enticing corporate tax breaks, including eBay, Google, Intel, and Monster.com, to name a few.

The agency world

The prevalence of small independent shops and absence of many major agencies in Phoenix is indicative of the fact that only four Fortune 500 companies have head- quarters in Arizona: Avnet, Phelps Dodge, Allied Waste Industries, and US Airways Group. There are 13 Fortune 1,000 companies.

"But [because] there are many small PR firms and few behemoths," says Sara Fleury, president of BJ Communications, "everyone has a chance at every piece of business that comes to town."

Kimberly Schmitz, president of the PRSA's Southern Arizona chapter, says her members report increased spending across the board throughout Arizona, while new independents are sprouting up throughout Tuscon and Phoenix, the state's two major cities.

And the market looks to get even more crowded, she says, as there is rampant speculation from non-practitioners eyeing opportunities to hang out their own shingles.

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"Young talent is seeking to establish their careers in Arizona, so finding account associates is plentiful," says Laura Hall, VP and director of PR at Off Madison Ave. "However, finding senior-level talent is a challenge due to salary requirements and a lack of national accounts to work on."

Still, because it is a major city, yet retains much of that distinct Southwestern small-town appeal, many national companies see metro Phoenix as a desirable test market and hire local agencies to devise and execute programs.

For instance, Thom Brodeur, VP of Brodeur Worldwide, is noticing more inbound requests from companies looking for services, especially in the past six months in the small to midsize sector.

"Arizona is no longer a tier-two state, and Phoenix is no longer a cowboy town," Brodeur says.

Over the years, Arizona has grown to become a regional hub for many private and publicly traded companies that manage their Southwestern and Western operations from here.

"They have been loyal to their Arizona-based PR firms who now represent them in markets beyond the state's borders," says Debbie Mitchell, president of Mullen Public Relations.

Agency activity is also intensifying around key demographics. After all, Arizona is also a border state, deeply affected by the ongoing national debate regarding illegal immigration. Phoenix also boasts one of the US' fastest-growing Hispanic and Latino populations.

"With 125,000 people recently marching in the streets of Phoenix, I would expect this to be an ongoing big story for Arizona in the coming six months," Brodeur says.

The corporate PR scene

To be a successful corporate communicator in this region, it takes flexibility to adapt to the constantly changing environment, says Regena Frieden, director of PR and communications for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona.

"Phoenix is the smallest 'big market' in the country," Frieden says. "It's a tight-knit PR community. We're a state of transplants, so we have practitioners from all different backgrounds and regions in our own backyard."

One of the fastest-growing franchises in the US, Arizona darling Cold Stone Creamery, also found success partnering with regional boutiques. It now has relationships with 29 independents nationwide.

"More people are becoming independent practitioners and relying on their database of contacts and referrals to fuel their business," says Kevin Donnellan, Cold Stone's director of PR. "With an ever-growing population expected to increase at a rate of more than 1 million people per decade between 2004 and 2030, I expect to see growth in all areas."

No longer just known for its tourism trade, Arizona is becoming recognized nationally in the fields of healthcare and biosciences owing to the work of TGen (Translational Genomics Research Institute), SARRC (Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center), ASU's proposed medical school to be located in downtown Phoenix, and major bio and medical research breakthroughs coming from all three of its major universities. This is fueling a burgeoning PR scene.

"Arizona, in general, is a little slower from other large metro areas, so the possibility of trendsetting is much more feasible," says Rodric Bradford, director of PR at Still University of Life Sciences. "With really only two main cities in Tucson and Phoenix, it's a bit easier to corner the market and get to know media contacts throughout the state."

The local media

"From a big-picture, regional viewpoint it appears that Arizona reporters like to take broader stories or trends and make an Arizona connection with them and report on that," says Jan Jurcy, VP of PR at Avnet. "Agencies with good national publication contacts would be in demand, as there are no national magazines or newspapers represented here."

The state's top media are the major TV network affiliates. *The Arizona Republic* is the largest daily. There are a select few influential AM stations, such as 620AM (KTAR) and KYFI (550).

Selected Arizona PR firms

Brodeur
 BJ Communications
 CKPR
 Denise Resnik & Associates
 EB Lane
 Hamilton Gullett Davis & Roman

HMA PR
Mullen PR
Off Madison Ave.
Riesler-Robb
Topete/Stonefield
Zimmerman & Associates

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