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Rocky Mountain High

Craig McGuire - 17 Apr 2006 11:00

An entrepreneurial spirit is infusing Colorado's business scene, and companies and PR agencies alike agree talent is abundant.

Like many other regions, job losses in telecom, tech, and tourism slammed Colorado in the wake of the 2001 recession. But while recovery here has lagged behind the overall economy, today the area's performance, especially in the metro Denver area, is outstripping many national averages.

"As our economy has improved, the value of PR is increasing as a vital marketing tool among our state's business community," says local PRSA president Scott Harris.

In the news, the \$1.7 billion T-REX infrastructure initiative (light rail and highway improvements for metro Denver) has created buzz. Denver International Airport marked its 10th anniversary, welcoming the return of Southwest Airlines, much to the discomfort of rivals Frontier and United.

Time named Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper (D) one of the top five US mayors, leaving politico watchers wondering, "Will Hickenlooper run?" for governor.

In other news, the University of Colorado's football team was hit by sex scandals, Coors and Molson toasted a merger, some fumed at a smoking ban, and the Broncos didn't make the Super Bowl.

The agency side

Ogilvy has long been the market's only major national. "We've found tech and consumer marketing to be the two most active segments," says MD Amy Messenger. "Local clients like Level 3 want a national perspective. Consumer clients like Crocs need a global network [with] consumer goods creativity, but appreciate a local team."

Still, Colorado is dotted with scores of independents.

"The state's most successful firms are both homegrown and home-owned," argues Peter Webb, principal at Webb PR. "Colorado businesses are loyal and know they can get the same strategy and professionalism from the business friends they see on the ski slopes as they can from a New York firm."

But Weber Shandwick will soon enter the market when it launches a dedicated office in Colorado, says Laura Taylor, SVP at WS.

"Speaking from the tech side, we continue to see Colorado as a region of smaller companies,

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but perhaps where more innovative business is being launched," she adds. "My focus is bringing PR back to Colorado. So many companies still outsource their agency business outside the state."

The vacuum left by the 2001 recession made the market more suitable for smaller agencies with less overhead, says Patrick Ward, partner at 104i West Partners.

"Several new firms have been created... and [many] individual consultants have put out a shingle," says Ward. "That has created a fragmented market where generalist shops suffer and shops with unique capabilities thrive."

The momentum may spawn consolidation "as the market picks up and clients require a single view into certain PR activities or want a deeper bench than individual consultants can provide," Ward adds.

Still, Colorado should stay strong for independent PR firms.

"We don't have a lot of Fortune 500 companies, but we're a strong market for small businesses and privately held entrepreneurial growth companies," says Leanna Clark, principal at Schenkein.

As the state's economy has recovered, there's more inbound growth and disposable income, creating growth activity in consumer goods and real estate, and a resurgence in tech, ever the main driver here.

"Colorado has perhaps the highest concentration of serial entrepreneurs and highest per-capita tech work force in the nation," says John Metzger, CEO of Metzger Associates. "The technologies of the future - biotech, aerospace, telecom, energy, and IT - are aligning in Colorado like no place else."

Inside the corporations

Corporate communicators are finding it crowded in Colorado these days, says James Moore, SVP of corporate communications and development at Ent Federal.

"The increased quality of PR by competitors simply raises the bar," he says. "The true challenge is breaking through the increasingly complex communications environment to attract and hold an audience's attention to a message."

Locals agree that strategic communications talent is abundant.

"It is a major US market that gives us a central location to strategically manage communications in our 14 Western states," says Bob Charlton, corporate communications VP for Qwest. "Still, we know it is incumbent on us to be more assertive to engage national media.

"This is a wonderful location to work," adds Charlton, who has been all over the world and only landed in Denver five months ago. "Professionally, it is also very invigorating. The region has an incredible technology story to tell."

The region's diverse array of specialized firms also has its benefits for corporate PR pros, he adds.

"We regularly tap a variety of talented firms," Charlton says. "This enables us to bring in relevant niche players when we need to and not be beholden to a larger firm."

The media market

Colorado has both thriving traditional outlets and a growing number of homegrown bloggers. And Denver is fortunate to still have two dailies: *The Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*.

"A joint operating agency manages business operations and advertising for both, but editorial operations are independent of each other, which keeps them competitive," says Barry Grossman, Praco PR's account group director.

Elsewhere, such cities as Aurora, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Fort Collins, and Grand Junction boast daily and weekly newspapers.

"The fact that consumers have so many choices, including a proliferation of resources for news outside of Colorado, significantly reduces the impact of the traditional approaches," Ent Federal's Moore says. "I don't believe it will get easier or simpler in the future."

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