

The "Insights" column was designed to give leading experts in site selection a platform from which to express leadership ideas, to raise concerns, or to offer advice for both sides of the site selection/economic development dynamic.



Dennis J. Donovan

Economic Development Website Underperformance

By
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Economic development (ED) websites comprise an indispensable tool for the corporate site selector as well as the most cost-effective marketing medium for economic development organizations. This is especially true for smaller communities with limited business recruitment budgets.

Yet despite the criticality of ED websites in the site selection process, most fall far short of customer expectations. The biggest shortfall is lack of important information necessary to develop a basic understanding of a particular location's fit for the project in question. From experience, I would rate at least 2/3 of economic development websites as sub par. Developing meaningful websites should be accorded highest priority by economic development organizations (EDOs).

The Challenge

The essence of the challenge involves lack of knowledge as to what information is most important. It appears that most economic development websites are designed without obtaining customer input. There are several "hot buttons" in terms of data that should be found on economic development websites. These include:

1. Current information for population, workforce, and other data
2. Data reported at the county and, where appropriate, metro level
3. Key, succinct statewide information such as taxation, incentives and regulatory considerations
4. Comprehensive listing (typically at least 25 companies) of major employers to include:
 - Company
 - City
 - Industry
 - Function
 - Employment

- Union status
5. New, plus expanding employers over the past two years (same information as above) and date announced/incremental employment
 6. Downsizing companies over past two years (same information as above, plus date announced and number of affected employees)
 7. Utility profile
 - Service providers
 - Average costs
 - Electric power (\$/kWh)
 - Natural gas (\$/MCF)
 - Water (\$ per 1,000 gallons)
 - Sewer (\$ per 1,000 gallons)
 - Electric power fuel sources, excess capacity, transmission capacity, reliability measures
 - For telecom, include which service providers have hard wire (as opposed to leased lines)
 8. Summary chart of tax practices (e.g., what's taxed and what's exempt) and rates
 9. Summary chart of incentives including which can be used in combination
 10. List of transportation service providers
 11. List of two/four year colleges including full time enrollment and annual graduates
 12. Synopsis of the local industrial and office real estate markets including asking rental rates and average land prices
 13. Searchable site/building database
 - No log-in required
 - Search criteria should be simple
 - Initial search result should be a matrix summary of qualified properties
 - Click on a property for a one-page profile including photo
 - Another click to get a detailed profile along with aerial photo and topo map

14. Air quality attainment status
15. Quality of life features, including SAT/ACT scores and housing costs

The Solution

The majority of economic development websites need to be overhauled. A blueprint for the essentials that should be incorporated onto websites can be found in the IEDC (International Economic Development Council) data standards. These standards contain numerous data fields, divided into factor categories, that are of greatest importance in site selection.

Beyond county and metro reporting, it is also advisable for smaller communities to present selected information (e.g., demographics) for the primary commute zone (e.g., 25 miles). How the community positions itself as a corporate location is also important. And, under "Contact Us," a staff directory (name, title, telephone and email) is helpful. Also mention that inquiries will be treated in strict confidence.

The time is long overdue for the economic development profession to create websites that are of maximum value to the corporate site selector. Those that do so will be more successful in business recruitment. Hopefully the above commentary will aid EDOs to better serve their corporate prospects. **T&ID**

About WDCG

Wadley-Donovan-Gutshaw Consulting (WDCG) is a global site selection firm based in Bridgewater, NJ. For over 30 years, WDCG has advised companies across the industry spectrum on facilities location.

Dennis J. Donovan is one of WDCG's principals. He has been a site selection consultant for 35 years. Dennis teaches CoreNet's site selection course and is a frequent speaker/author on the subject. Dennis received degrees in economic geography from the University of Nebraska at Omaha (bachelors) and University of Rhode Island (masters).

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