

Changing Image, Changing Reality

Orlando Cultivates Industry Around Another Kind of Mouse

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Orlando, Florida is better known as a theme park heaven (or the opposite, depending on your age group) than as a technology center. But since 2000, when a technology strategy for the region was completed, The Metro Orlando Economic Development Commission has been working to change both the image and the reality of its economic base.

“We have evolved from the model of ‘let’s go get everything we can, bring it back and make sure it stays here,’” says Maureen Brockman, the EDC’s vice president of marketing and communications. “Our approach has become much more strategic and targeted, based on those industry clusters that we can best support here.”

Any good economic development strategy, tech-based or otherwise, begins with an understanding of existing assets and seeks to build on them. Orlando was fortunate to have a technology base in place: Military training facilities have been in the region since the 1950s, and defense technology companies – many of which work with advanced simulation for training – have clustered there since.

The region also is home to the University of Central Florida (UCF), which has strong programs in engineering and computer science, optics/lasers and simulation development. And of course, let’s not forget Orlando’s creative base, fostered by the presence of the theme park and filmmaking industries.

Once its technology strengths were identified – modeling, simulation and training; optics and photonics; and information technology – the EDC set out to build on them.

Tools and techniques

Per the EDC’s tech strategy, developed by AngelouEconomics, one of its initial efforts was to create a new brand that would both build on the region’s reputation as a top travel destination and signify its importance as a technology center. That two-year effort resulted in “Putting Imagination to Work ...Orlando.” The EDC then set out on an aggressive targeted marketing plan centered on focused ad buys, direct mail, trade shows and a four-color magazine.

The EDC developed a series of hairstyle-themed ads specific to its targeted technology clusters – one with optical fibers in the shape of a Mohawk, another with dreadlocks made up of computer cables – and placed them in technology magazines such as *Wired* and more focused niche publications such as *Game Developer*. Its direct mail campaign, targeted at attracting specific companies, creatively packaged items such as ice cream scoops (by Tupperware, which is headquartered in Orlando) with customized messages about “getting the scoop” on your industry in Orlando.

The EDC also decided that it needed a vehicle to both tell the region's technology story to the outside world and to share information among the local technology community. Leveraging funding from Orange County Government and a publishing partnership with the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitor's Bureau, the EDC published the first edition of *Texture* in May 2004, a magazine focused on all things technological in the region. The semiannual magazine includes features on local high-tech entrepreneurs, success stories, innovative happenings and cultural events.

But as any economic developer knows, marketing, by itself, isn't enough. Growing certain high-tech sectors requires in-depth knowledge of those industries and bringing together stakeholders with common interests.

Thus, each member of the EDC's business development team is a "sector specialist," charged with becoming the organizational expert on his or her particular industry. They establish relationships with key players and build lists of contacts, with the goal of being able to talk to those contacts very specifically about what's important to their industry. The specialists also get involved in local chapters of key industry trade associations; the EDC was instrumental in setting up the photonics industry organization's local chapter.

The EDC also manages a group called the Central Florida Technology Partnership (CFTP), which essentially acts as a clearinghouse for information about technology events, conferences, issues and challenges. Its most important role, however, might be strengthening relationships among its founding members – the EDC, Florida High Tech Corridor Council, the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce and UCF.

The payoff: Electronic Arts and UCF

One of Orlando's greatest coups arose from the workforce needs of a single company – Electronic Arts, the biggest video game developer in the world. About three years ago, Electronic Arts decided to consolidate its studios into large hubs of one thousand to two thousand employees.

"Orlando had a 165-person studio that was doing well. Nobody was going to say it, but if we couldn't get over the 500 [employee] mark, it would probably go somewhere else," says Ben Noel, former chief operating officer of Electronic Arts. But recruitment and retention weren't so easy: Nearly 70 percent of the company's employees came from out of the state or country, with only 17 percent coming from Florida universities.

In 2004, Electronic Arts began talking to UCF about its need for hundreds of programmers, artists and video-game producers. UCF already had a strong computer science program, and in 2003 had formed a School of Film and Digital Media.

In April 2004, Electronic Arts, the EDC and other partners helped secure funding from the state for UCF to develop one of only a handful of graduate-level academic programs in the country focused on video-game development, the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy (FIEA). The City of Orlando and the university subsequently partnered to

provide a home for the School of Film and Digital Media, and FIEA within it, in downtown Orlando.

“So my goal when I came here,” says Noel, now director of FIEA, “was how to take 165 [employees] and turn it into 1,000?” FIEA now has two semesters under its belt, 29 students and another 50 to 60 coming in August.

The significance of FIEA has a personal element for Noel. He grew up in Orlando, but went to Austin for nine years because he says “there wasn’t enough [professionally] to do here.” He says that in the past, the main reason a software developer wouldn’t want to move to Orlando for a job was an unanswered question: if the job didn’t turn out to be a good fit, would there be other places to work?

Noel acknowledges that while Orlando has lots of engineers in the aerospace industry, and the theme park world has become much more sophisticated, the region doesn’t have a critical mass of software developers yet. But now, he says, the options are greater than they’ve ever been.

He also attributes part of Orlando’s technology industry growth simply to being a good place to live. Echoing the thoughts of several prominent economic development consultants and theorists, Noel says, “People are now going to areas where they want to live and finding work there. Orlando is laid back, people like to visit, the cost of living is good, it has no taxes, [it has] access to beaches...it’s a melting pot.”

He says that the creation of FIEA is “just the beginning of the game” and that the region has to refine both the message and the reality of being a great place to live. Entrepreneurs need to know that if they want to move a company to Orlando – or start a software company in the city – that buildings, parking and housing are available, he says.

Looking ahead

The EDC has had other successes besides the retention of Electronic Arts and the establishment of FIEA. In addition to helping establish a number of small tech-related projects, its best-known win is probably the establishment of JetBlue Airways’ simulation and training facility. While JetBlue’s executives weren’t sold on Orlando at first, the region’s depth of expertise in simulation research and development apparently changed their minds, leading to the creation of more than 150 new jobs and \$160 million in capital investment.

Now the region is looking to expand its areas of technology expertise into the life sciences sector. “We have some good research programs, but we lack a medical school, and no major life science program exists that isn’t built around a med school,” says Brockman.

That barrier is about to come down; UCF recently announced that it will be starting a medical school. “Our role is to help articulate and quantify what we have to have in place,” says Brockman of the EDC’s role. “We don’t establish a med school, but we can

articulate that need.” (As an aside, Brockman notes that a catalyst for the medical school may have been a loss: Two years ago, Orlando was first runner-up for the Scripps Research Institute that ended up in Palm Beach County.)

As it moves forward with its technology strategy, what the EDC has in mind is nothing less than a transformation of the region’s economic base and its image. “Our goal would be for our tech industry to equal our tourism industry,” says Brockman. With the progress the region has made in recent years, that goal sounds like no fantasy.