



THE IT FACTOR

PLACE BRANDING MIDDLE TENNESSEE

By Michelle Vegliante

How do you build a brand for a region that spans 10 unique counties and is home to more than 40,000 businesses and nearly two million people?

Nashville began its quest to find the answer with a deep-dive into data.

Every five years, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce releases a study that examines all aspects of the Middle Tennessee region's workforce. The findings identify coming challenges and opportunities, and provide a framework for workforce development-related decision making.

The 2010 study found that the local technology industry was growing by an annual rate of nearly five percent. At that pace, it was estimated that 7,100 new tech jobs would be added by 2019. Between job growth and the understanding that about 1,500 technology positions are vacant at any given time, Nashville realized it potentially faced a significant challenge.

Armed with the sobering workforce data, the Nashville Area Chamber set out to combat the tech talent shortage looming on the horizon.

Chamber leaders formed focus groups, comprised of representatives from large employers in the region, to identify tech industry needs and day-to-day objections encountered by recruiters.

"We learned a few things from this exercise," says Alex Hughes, the chamber's vice president of talent attraction and retention. "Employers believed the region was performing well in terms of producing homegrown talent through curriculum alignment and training." But, Hughes says, "our region wasn't performing as well as it could in terms of positioning itself as a top tech hub. There was an opportunity for the chamber to remedy that."

Now the Nashville Area Chamber had not only its data, but also valuable focus group feedback. But the quest to combat the region's tech talent shortage was far from over.

Existing talent from the region and prospective job candidates were brought together to explore ways the Middle Tennessee region might position itself as a more attractive place for techies to live and work.

Many conversations and focus group sessions later, a new creative concept finally emerged: workIT Nashville.



workIT Nashville blossoms

Nashville's workIT is a place-branding initiative focused on technology-sector talent recruitment. Designed to connect the existing and potential workforce with the ins-and-outs of Nashville's thriving technology scene, the region's culture and community stands at the heart of the campaign.

Various outreach strategies target an array of audiences, not just one group or another. "workIT is meant to target all levels of tech workers, from entry level to seasoned executives," said Hughes. "Our goal is to get the best possible talent, wherever they may be in their careers."

Messaging is delivered using a few tools, including an award-winning guidebook called workIT Nashville: A Guide for Recruiting Tech Talent. Facts and vignettes accompany photos of people from the technology sector throughout the publication's 38 pages. Unique quality of life assets – such as the region's low cost of living, expansive education opportunities and convenient geographic location – are called into focus, along with attention-grabbing rankings from popular sources, like Forbes and The Atlantic. ►



Local workIT Nashville advocates and technology leaders. From left: Hannah Paramore-Breen, founder and EVP of Paramore: the digital agency; Clint Smith, CEO and co-founder, Emma, Inc.; and LeShane Greenhill, CEO and founder, Sagents, LLC.

The stories in print transfer to pixel on the workIT Nashville website (www.workitnashville.com), which provides a platform for digging deeper into the lifestyle angle of the campaign. The site features Nashville culture callouts, news and entertainment. It also lists upcoming tech meetups and a blog that highlights happenings in the region—all part of a concerted effort to help people build lasting connections.

Before becoming a standalone website, workIT’s job board was quite a hit. As of June 2016, about 2,800 candidates from 121 countries and 45 states had created a profile on the site. And more than 300 companies had posted 14,000 job opportunities. Openings now live on a site, called We Build Tech (www.webuildtech.com), managed by the Nashville Technology Council. The tech-focused jobs site has become a complete career pathway resource that provides skills assessments and career exploration tools.

An overarching digital media strategy, with a heavy focus on social media, weaves together workIT’s resources. The campaign uses Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google Plus to highlight tech job opportunities and tell tech-tailored stories using #workITNash. The hashtag trended globally soon after the campaign’s launch, attracting 139 million impressions from 162 countries and 5,100 cities.

“This was a huge achievement for us,” says Hughes. “We had a very intentional digital marketing strategy. Lots of it was driven by Google AdWords and strategic social media posts across all platforms. It speaks volumes on the vital importance of a strong online presence.”

As workIT continues to blossom, LiveIt Nashville takes shape

The Nashville Area Chamber team saw an opportunity to capitalize on the momentum from the successful workIT campaign. It launched LiveIt Nashville in 2016 to target workers from all sectors, not just tech, with a holistic approach to place-branding. LiveIt now serves as the chamber’s all-encompassing talent attraction tool.

“Industry diversity is one reason Nashville does so well economically,” Hughes says. “We’re usually one of the last to enter a recession and one of the first to recover. We’re not solely dependent on one industry—healthcare is huge for us and technology is the fastest-growing sector, but we also have music, manufacturing, finance and tourism. You name it, we’ve got it.”

With the idea that many residents don’t live and work in the same county, a new LiveIt Nashville guidebook puts emphasis on the many communities and unique neighborhoods that comprise the 10-county Middle Tennessee region. In addition to being a hot item for county-hopping locals, the guidebook is a popular tool for companies that relocate to the region. Employees of those companies, many of whom are non-native Nashvillians, find the guide to be a welcome and valuable resource.

“When you have a small human resources staff, it can be difficult to give every employee concierge-level relocation advice. Equipping companies with a guide for employees that says ‘where to live and what to know’ is an incredibly valuable selling point,” says Hughes.

Some businesses are even getting creative with LiveIt Nashville assets. When Bridgestone Americas announced it would bring all national operations to Nashville, the company customized the LiveIt guidebook to become Be Bridgestone. Existing guidebook photos were replaced with photos of Bridgestone employees and other adjustments were made to better reflect the company’s brand.

What’s ahead for LiveIt?

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce is exploring opportunities to grow the LiveIt Nashville brand over the next year.

“When you look around the country at our counterparts who have created great livability campaigns – Des Moines, Louisville come to mind – you realize a strong place-brand is a staple,” Hughes says. “With the amount of industry growth we’re seeing in Nashville, branding our community as a great place to live is critical to recruiting talent that fuels growth” 



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