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FEATURES

Living by the Lists

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Plan ahead to get your community on a "Best" list... but also be prepared for an appearance on a "Worst" list

LIVING BY THE LISTS

THE PHONE RINGS. IT'S YOUR RESEARCH STAFF INFORMING YOU THAT A NEW SURVEY WAS JUST PUBLISHED BY AN INDEPENDENT RESEARCH GROUP. IT'S CALLED THE "BEST AND WORST CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE IN THE WORLD." WHAT IS YOUR INITIAL REACTION? IS IT, "FANTASTIC! I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS LIST TO COME OUT. I'VE SPOKEN TO THE PUBLISHER AND THOUGHT WE MIGHT MAKE THE 'BEST LIST'?" OR DO YOU REACT WITH A FEELING OF TREPIDATION, REMEMBERING THAT YOU BLEW OFF THAT YOUNG RESEARCH ANALYST WHO CALLED A FEW MONTHS AGO? PERHAPS THE NEWS JUST LEAVES YOU AMBIVALENT, SINCE YOU HAVE NO CLUE HOW TO DEAL WITH ALL THESE RANKINGS?



By Michael Langley

positive stroking that demographers and journalists mete out versus ending up on the lists that examine "Highest Crime

Almost every chamber of commerce and every community has, at some point, found themselves on either a "Best" or "Worst" list. You know, "Top Places to Spend a Long Weekend," "Best Regions for Business Startups," "Highest Graduation Rates," "Most Affordable Housing." Clearly chambers, economic development groups and community leaders aspire to be included in the type of

Rate," "Worst Air Quality," "Lowest SAT Scores," or — God forbid — Dave Gilmartin's highly subjective but frequently quoted list of "The Absolutely Worst Places to Live in America."

So exactly how do you handle it when your chamber's name winds up on someone's list, good or bad? Let's examine strategies and actions that you should consider to effectively cope with the challenge, including some tips to enhance your chances of ending up on the "Best" lists and to mitigate the negative implications of landing on the "Worst" lists.

THREE DECADES OF LISTS

Unfortunately, "Best" and "Worst" comparisons have been around for a while and show no signs of disappearing. David

Lists are here to stay... We will continue to see more and more comparative lists fueled by an ever-expanding blogosphere and social media.

Savageau, the stalwart "Places Rated Almanac" publisher, launched his "Most Livable City" report in 1981 and continues that tradition today with his sixth publisher. Bert Sperling is perhaps the most prolific "listmaker," with his "Cities Ranked and Rated" and a plethora of spinoff publications. *Fortune* magazine is currently the ratings king online, with new business and community rankings seemingly published every week. Many of these rankings contain comprehensive indicators and can be very useful to chambers and civic organizations as a ready source of comparative data. They can also help a chamber's economic development research staff in competitive positioning and business recruitment.

Nearly 30 years later, more and more lists are being published, with new ones popping up every few minutes, it seems. Some of these lists could generate potential benefits or problems for the communities and businesses you serve.

Where government has traditionally assumed responsibility for collection and analysis of demographic and economic data in the U.S. and around the world, in recent years, particularly in the era of freedom of information and electronic ubiquity, more and more lists are being developed by traditional print and broadcast media as well as online sources. Now, beyond traditional print and broadcast media jumping on the "survey and sell" bandwagon, we will continue to see more and more comparative lists fueled by an ever-expanding blogosphere and social media.

RANKINGS READINESS

Potentially, the most valuable aspect of "Best" and "Worst" lists is that they should motivate you and your region to *be prepared*. As you engage in strategic planning activities, board retreats, and priority setting for public and private investment in your community, it would behoove you to know the lists on which you will most likely appear and to use that as an opportunity to help you achieve your annual promotional goals.

"Appearing on these lists isn't necessarily the goal of a well-devised regional promotion plan, but rankings can be valuable indicators of your region's relative strengths and weaknesses, and they can be used to support both your advocacy and marketing efforts," says Shawn Bannon, president and CEO of Bannon Communications, a company that played an important role in support of the Pittsburgh region's 250th anniversary celebration in 2008 and the international public relations effort related to the G-20 summit in Pittsburgh this past September.

As you start to prepare, expand your "SWOT" (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to include a prognostication of the potential "Best" and "Worst" lists on which you may possibly appear during the year. The underlying criteria that drive the rankings can help you determine if you are focusing on



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“When a negative ranking makes news, don’t shy away from it. You can do just as much good for your community’s image by talking about what you’re doing to improve.”

the root cause of problem areas and if you recognize the elements of your work that are truly driving success in your region.

You can also do advance legwork by reaching out to the editors and publishers who rank your community. It’s impossible to touch them all, but if you focus your outreach on a few key lists, you may convince the list maker to take a deeper look at your region and feature your community as one that possesses a “best practice.”

YOUR CHAMBER AND THE “BEST” LIST

Julie Pastrick, CEO of the Flagstaff (AZ) Chamber of Commerce, has had the good fortune of dealing with a number of positive rankings. To better increase your chances of making the “Best” lists, Pastrick advises, “Not enough can be said about contacting the media over and over when you are not necessarily on a ‘Best’ list, because the more you work a good relationship with reporters and local media representatives, the easier it is for them to think of you first for that story.”

Once you’re lucky enough to actually rank on a “Best of” list, make the most of the opportunity. Write about it in your newsletter, on your website, and through your business-related social media activities. Consider adding a tagline to outgoing emails or the bottom of your letterhead touting your ranking. Mention it in your marketing and promotional materials. If you’ve moved up from #32 in a previous year to #2 now, create a buzz about it. Continue the positive press for as long as possible.

Hopefully, if you prepared in advance, your community’s marketing and promotion strategy is set up to fully maximize the “Best” rankings. Engage the publisher for copies/reprints

and potential editorial play. Push the positive information to your elected officials and business leaders in a format that they can integrate easily into their remarks and publications. You might even consider using the ranking as the basis for a public-ity campaign.

YOUR CHAMBER AND THE “WORST” LIST

Unfortunately, however, you still need to prepare for the inevitable “negative” list. You certainly know your challenges, so ensure that you have a crisis communications plan in place to deal proactively with low rankings and “Worst” lists. If you plan and anticipate, you will be prepared to talk to the press and your leadership about the improvement plan that is already in place and the progress that is being made to turn negative to a positive.

Prior to receiving the inevitable low ranking, **Vera Smith-Winfree, executive director of the Bloomfield (CT) Chamber of Commerce**, recommends, “Learn from the best and keep it simple. Determine areas for improvement, create a strategy, and set realistic and manageable goals. Collaborate with those committed to improving ‘our’ ranking. Track progress through regularly scheduled meetings. Continue to highlight your successes.”

It’s important to recognize that every ranking — good or bad — is an opportunity to tell your story to the press, to people you’re looking to attract and to policy makers you want to influence. When a positive ranking hits the wires, it validates what you’re doing as civic leaders. Be prepared to back it up with other examples of your success. When a negative ranking makes news, don’t shy away from it. You can do just as much good for your community’s image by talking about what you’re doing



to improve. In the end, remember that the news of the ranking is only the first line of the story.

My home region of Pittsburgh is a glaring example of that last point. Although Pittsburgh is the only region in the country that has received the Places Rated Almanac "Most Livable City" ranking twice, the region has also found itself atop the American Lung Association's (ALA) list for worst air quality in recent years, primarily due to one air quality monitor in close proximity to a coke production facility. News of the ranking each year has been unwelcome for local leaders who dispute the ALA's methodology, but it has also opened the door to a broader discussion about Pittsburgh's remarkable work at environmental reclamation and green renewal. And the positive stories that resulted have helped to change global perceptions of Pittsburgh, which in turn has led to the region's selection as host for both this year's G-20 summit and next year's United Nations World Environment Day celebration.

Remember, chambers that work to implement strong fundamentals for economic growth, a sustainable environment, and social cohesion in their regions can use these rankings to support their strategies for business investment, talent attraction and a higher quality of life. Chamber leaders can use negative rankings to bring together leaders who are motivated to effect positive changes in regional investment and public policy. And you can look to your improvement or decline on these lists as one more way of tracking the effectiveness of your efforts over time.

ALL COMMUNITIES HAVE GOOD AND BAD

Like more and more professionals today, including more and more chamber executives, I have had the opportunity to live and work in a number of wonderful communities during my life. I've trekked from Arkansas to Maine to California to Washington, D.C., to England, Belgium, Florida and, currently, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Every place I have lived has proven to me that the economic, environmental and social fabric of our world is so diverse and immense, that every community has something to crow about, and every community has tough challenges that are limiting its economy, environment and social cohesion.

So ultimately, community rankings will come and go. What's important is that regions organize collaboratively and broadly around a set of basic principles for excellence. Do that, and the rankings will take care of themselves.

Oh, one more thing. If you get a call from Dave Gilmartin, the guy from "The Absolutely Worst Places to Live in America," tell him he has the wrong number! ☒

Michael Langley is the founder and president of Langley Group (www.langleygroup.com), a consulting practice focused on helping private and public sector leaders and civic organizations achieve excellence in their regions by "Organizing for Success." He has been CEO of chamber, economic development, and civic leadership organizations, and is immediate past chair of the Alliance for Regional Stewardship. He can be reached at (412) 874-7145 or mlangley@langleygroup.com.

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