

Economic Development Partnership of Alabama remakes website to reflect community focus

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By **Michael Tomberlin -- The Birmingham News**

By



For 20 years, the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama has been a catalyst for economic growth in the state. During that time, the Partnership has contributed to Alabama's greatest economic development successes. A totally private, non-profit organization, EDPA is uniquely positioned to partner with state, local and private entities involved in Alabama's economic development efforts. EDPA provides services to companies looking to locate in the state, encourages emerging business development and assists companies and communities who want to improve their competitive edge.



The **Economic Development Partnership of Alabama** has changed its online identity to better reflect the private economic development organization's new direction.

"When you compare the old website and the new website, it's really an interesting picture of where we are now and the changes that have taken place as a result of what's happened in the world at large," said Bill Taylor, the EDPA's chief.

What once was a website almost totally devoted to site consultants and companies checking out buildings and property in the state for a new plant or office is now meant to engage communities in addition to the member companies that make up EDPA.

A big part of that is the fact that EDPA's focus is not just on marketing and research as it relates to recruitment. The economic reset and the slowdown in new recruitment projects forced EDPA and others to look at how they can use their resources to better help with recruitment and retention.

One way was in giving direct assistance to communities through a new Community Partner program. So far, 17 communities have participated and there is a waiting list of others wanting to know how to better position their community and bring players to the table for recruitment, retention and renewal.

"What we bring to the table are resources to answer some questions and to allow communities to at least start movement," Taylor said. "There is no fast-forward. You can't just go from A and get to Z. You can't take a quantum leap. I'm a firm believer in small steps. What can we do today to make tomorrow better?"

In aiding communities, EDPA is aiding itself and future industry with a richer website.

"We're developing a database on these communities like we never dreamed of getting," Taylor said. "The knowledge base we are getting is just incredible."

Wendy Wallace Johnson, director of marketing for EDPA, spearheaded the website's redesign. She said the new site is a direct result of what consultants and communities wanted.

"Since I've been here, this is the third or fourth version of our website," she said. "Each time we obviously try to move it forward and each time what we do is a direct response to what consultants or communities tell us they want."

The database of sites and buildings and communities is still the most visited area of the EDPA site, which had more than 4.3 million hits in 2010.

In first two weeks of April, Johnson said the website had 126,373 hits from 26 different countries. Most of the hits went to the database, which now has 488 industrial buildings and 414 industrial sites listed.

Johnson said that as consultants and others have become more Internet savvy, what they expect from a site has changed.

"With the old thinking, an economic development website was more of a marketing tool for a state or community to say, 'Hey, come here,' and then throw out a bunch of facts," she said. "The consultants have their own set of data. We don't need to provide what they've already got. We need to supplement what they've got with more targeted, localized information and do a better job of explaining the different players. I see our website as having moved away from being about the 'what' and being more about the 'how.'"

Taylor said there is still a big marketing component to the website, even if the approach has changed.

"What sets Alabama aside from other states? What makes us special? From the standpoint of recruiting, companies look at how business is doing in your state," he said. "That's really one of the things we're putting on the table -- businesses really do well in Alabama. I think that is a strong message we need to put out there more and more as a recruiting tool."

Johnson said the website needs to keep pace with new realities.

"If our new focus is going to be on recruitment, retention and renewal, then that's what has to take center stage and be front and center on the website," she said. "That's what we've done."

A new addition to the site is a blog, with the initial one done by Taylor. Future ones may be written by others from EDPA, its partner companies or one of the state's universities.

"We really are going to try to start up a meaningful discussion," Johnson said.

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