

KnoxvilleChamber
driving regional economic prosperity

Commerce

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To the Moon...

Chamber Launches Bold Initiative



Over its 140-year history this organization has amassed an impressive list of accomplishments. The Chamber has contributed to the development of the Market House, the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the hosting of the 1982 World's Fair, the location of Department of Energy facilities in Oak Ridge, the creation of the Dogwood Arts Festival, the founding of UT Medical Center, and the highly successful economic development efforts of the last decade.

However, all of these initiatives pale in comparison to the initiative recently announced by chairman of the Board Michael Strickland to make Knoxville America's Best Business Address.

In the same way that President Kennedy announced his intention to send a man to the moon without a perfect plan to achieve that goal, the Chamber expects to learn much in the pursuit of this goal. Together, the Chamber and the local business community will identify initiatives and pursue strategies. Some programs will be developed along the way and some others may have to be abandoned.

However, there is little doubt that the goal of becoming America's Best Business Address will require the Chamber to shoulder significant responsibility and take some bold and aggressive steps. It will not be an easy thing to achieve and will require a tremendous amount of effort. And it will not come overnight. We understand that this is a long-term ambition and may take five to 10 years to achieve. But it is the direction that we are going. We will forge ahead with unyielding determination, and we will be better for it.

Knoxville and the region have the geographic, logistical, intellectual, and personnel assets to make this happen. It is only right that we set our sights high and work hard to achieve this goal.

The Knoxville Chamber is uniquely positioned to establish the goal of making Knoxville America's Best Business Address and to direct its achievement. With more than 2,100 members the Chamber represents the largest single group of businesses in the area. These businesses can help to kick-start the effort. In addition, the Chamber has respect among community and business leaders that places it in a unique position to rally the stakeholders and get the required momentum behind the effort.

About 18 months ago, the Chamber staff began to critically examine the organization, its role in the community, and the services it provides to its members. We have long been

a cutting-edge chamber of commerce. We've launched new programs, services, events, and kinds of membership. These have included the Shrimp Boil, Schmoozapalooza (the tabletop expo), the No Risk/Just Results membership guarantee, and the Tiered Dues structure. Despite all that, we recognized that we were operating in a crowded marketplace – a marketplace with many other opportunities and competitors.

The questions we repeatedly asked ourselves were, "What competitive advantage does the Chamber have?" and "What role should it play?"

We came to the conclusion that we must assume the business and community leadership role expected of a major regional chamber of commerce. That's why we took on the challenge outlined by Michael Strickland.

But how are we going to achieve this goal? By pursuing two distinct and important strategies.

First, the Chamber will become a forceful advocate for business and community issues. It will lead, urge, and partner to address important issues like transportation and infrastructure, quality of life, education, and business-friendly government policies.

The Knoxville Chamber has long been expected to play this leadership role, but we are now assuming this role with newfound vigor. The organization will step up to become a vocal advocate and strong contributor to the policy decisions that shape this community in the future.

Second, the Chamber will radically change the way it does its day-to-day business. It must become much more aggressive in the delivery of services. We can no longer present a menu of benefits and hope that members will use them. Instead the Chamber must ensure that businesses are actively improving themselves and addressing their weaknesses.

We will identify businesses' weak spots by using a business analysis.

Much like a health risk assessment, the business analysis will help companies to understand their risks and allow the Chamber to shepherd these businesses through a program to get better and stronger. This program is not a cure-all. Businesses will not be guaranteed success. But they will be better prepared and more likely to succeed.

By addressing the major concerns of the business community and by focusing on the individual problems of each company, the Knoxville Chamber will progress toward the goal of making Knoxville America's Best Business Address.

Becoming America's Best Business Address will require determination, fortitude, and vision, but I am convinced that we are prepared to embark on this journey. And I invite you all to join us.

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Knoxville, Tennessee
**AMERICA'S BEST
BUSINESS ADDRESS**

Knoxville, TN: America's Best Business Address

Chamber Initiative Changing Organization's Role in Business Community

IT MAY VERY WELL SEEM A LOFTY GOAL BUT THE REALITY OF BECOMING AMERICA'S BEST BUSINESS ADDRESS IS WELL WITHIN THE REACH OF THE KNOXVILLE-OAK RIDGE INNOVATION VALLEY. Positioning itself to lead this region to become the most attractive location for any business is now priority number one for the Knoxville Chamber. This priority will take a tremendous amount of effort. Over the next few years, the Chamber will become the advocate for broad community issues – issues like transportation, urban growth, and infrastructure. And perhaps most notably to all who work with the Chamber on a frequent basis, the Chamber will take on an aggressive “personality.”

Recent economic developments require that the organization help each of its member companies actively work to improve its weaknesses. Gone are the days that the Chamber simply hopes businesspeople take advantage of the resources available to them. Now, more than ever, the Chamber and many area business leaders realize a pathfinder is needed to make this America's Best Business Address.

“We all know this is a great place to live, work, and play or we wouldn’t be here,” says Dogwood Arts Festival Executive Director Lisa Duncan. “I think that this transformation process will make the Chamber much more relevant to the business community. We need to continue to provide pertinent services to our Chamber members and local business owners and we need to continue to successfully recruit new companies to conduct business in our community.”

Taking on overt business-community leadership responsibilities and offering proactive business support to Chamber members will enable the region to thrive.

“Can the area’s business community survive without this transformation project? Yes,” Chamber Vice President of Membership Mark Field says. “But can it thrive? This is what we’re making sure happens! We’ve started to create an envisioned future where our community focuses on more than just survival.”

The Chamber is not leaving the region’s advancement up to luck or circumstance. It is making a bold statement that it will shepherd the area’s business community to higher levels of economic prosperity.

How will the Chamber accomplish

its goal to help the region reach its highest potential? First, it will become a vocal advocate on issues important to the business community and the economic success of the region. These issues will likely include transportation and infrastructure, urban growth, community resources, and other government and community policies.

“We are creating an environment where

Vocal Business Community Advocate

the Chamber and other organizations are out front and leading on large, community-wide issues,” says Michael Strickland, chairman of the Chamber’s board of directors. “The business community has always looked to us to be in this role and at various times we have exerted leadership. However, in Knoxville, TN: America’s Best Business Address, the chamber will always and continuously be a strong, out-front advocate for these kinds of things.”

Leading the way in supporting community issues is not new to the Chamber. It has been successful in reinforcing the need for improvements to the area’s education system. The goal of making Knox County Schools one of the top 10 school systems in the nation over the next 10 years prompted the school board to create its 100-90-90-90 initiative that has led to the development of the unique Education Management Information System. This creation has been recognized throughout Tennessee has a necessary and groundbreaking tool.

The organization’s five-year Jobs Now! campaign set out to create 35,000 net new jobs, to generate \$2.5 billion in new non-residential capital investments and to increase the annual average wage by \$5,000. That effort later transitioned to the new Innovation Valley regional economic development campaign. The Chamber has often received very positive feedback when it’s taken a leadership role in the community. It continually receives requests to take more leadership positions, and it will increasingly strive to do so.

The assets of the Oak Ridge research complex, the University of Tennessee, and many other area strengths allow businesses located in the region to realize their potential and also attract other businesses here to do the same thing.

“There is an awakening in this region,” Field

says. “This is enabling us to understand how to best utilize the many assets that exist in this community so that it can become the best business address in America.”

Assessing Pain Points

It is often difficult for businesses to articulate to the Chamber what it can do to help them. Businesses that are hurting sometimes don’t know why they’re hurting. Perhaps the company saddled with ill-structured pay-rates, or they may be struggling with costs or inventory. Some companies that have these types of problems don’t know how to identify the problem, much less what to do to fix it.

The Chamber will help businesses understand their problems and identify tactics to address them.

Just as taking a more active role in supporting community issues suggests, transformation is about creating a more visible and proactive Chamber. As part of its new aggressive strategy to support the area’s business community and to do all it can to make Knoxville America’s Best Business Address, the Chamber is instituting a tool that will allow it to evaluate members and determine the areas that need to be addressed for higher success rates. Five key components that drive business success will be examined. The Chamber will make sure that businesses are financially and operationally sound, technologically aware, market and relationship savvy, personally and professionally prepared, and legislatively and politically safe.

How did the Chamber come up with these areas for analysis? It started by asking businesses about pain-points: pains businesses feel.

“Every business has pain points,” notes Field. “Pain for each business is different.”

For some well-capitalized companies, their pains may be vendor relationship problems that arise when they conduct business with companies that may not be as capitalized as they are. Their pains aren't due to their own lack of money, but rather to the lack of money the business that supplies them has. For other businesses, pain points may be insufficient capital that denies them the ability to pay employees. Companies need to know how to deal with the pain points that can ruin businesses. The Chamber's new business analysis tool can help companies determine what difficulties they have in the five key areas.

The business analysis will be remotely conducted by Chamber account executives. The preference is to conduct business assessments onsite but the tool will also be available online. Onsite evaluations ensure accurate and timely completions of reviews. Upon completing the analysis, the Chamber will deploy specialists, refer members, identify resources, and provide services that will help businesses avoid potential future risks.

"As local companies continue to fight through challenging economic times and more competition, I think most businesses will find the business analysis very valuable," Duncan says. "I think linking area businesses to potential providers is a unique and beneficial aspect of this transformation initiative."

The business analysis tool is designed so that the Chamber knows what area businesses need

to succeed and so that businesses understand what they need from the Chamber. Making Knoxville area businesses more financially and operationally sound, technically aware, market and relationship savvy, personally and professionally prepared, and legislatively and politically safe will support the goal of making Knoxville America's Best Business Address.

Success in Knoxville, TN:

America's Best Business Address will happen as the Chamber becomes more collaborative with organizations that are already focused on helping businesses grow. It will happen when an environment emerges where businesses care about each other, purchase from each other, use each other's services, and partner with each other as resources and mentors. It will happen as the Chamber increasingly assesses area business's needs and as it continues to provide programs to meet these needs.

"This journey is about transforming the Chamber and more," Strickland says. "It's about acting as a catalyst to stimulate future progress within the business community."

Being America's Best Business Address will mean this area's business success rates are significantly higher than in any other region in the country. This business community deserves

Business Address Success

to have a Chamber that is thinking deeply about its relevancy and the services that it provides its members. It's required that the organization think about the needs of the members of the business community and how it can tangibly help them grow their businesses. Information and technology is changing so rapidly that the Chamber needs to make sure it becomes as flexible as possible. Instead of making a decision in a vacuum, it's focused on building a culture that is reacting to the information that it discovers via the newly designed business

analysis tool. There is a new response to the business owner who asks, "Why would my company become a Chamber member?"

In the past it was, "It has great networking events and strives to bring more companies to the area." (A one-size-fits-all answer.)

Now the business owner hears, "Let us perform a business assessment for your business and we'll tell you!"

(The Chamber's transformation initiative begins after careful consideration, thought, and research by organization staff and management. Read more about the project and about how crucial Chamber President and CEO Mike Edwards feels the program will become in this month's Q&A feature: page 50.)

Knoxville Chamber Account Executive Elected BNI President

Knoxville Chamber Senior Account Executive Ashleigh Adkins has been elected president of the Legacy Chapter of Business Network International. Adkins has been a member of the chapter since its inception three years ago. She has been associated with BNI for five years. As president, Ashleigh plans to increase membership by 50 members, increase the number

of quality referrals within the group, and increase the amount of monthly economic value available to each member. BNI East Tennessee is a business and professional networking organization that provides members with a structured environment for the development and exchange of quality business referrals and the opportunity to share ideas and contacts.

