

Critical Pass: Selling Ottawa's tech industry

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As the tech industry continues to evolve and regain momentum after the 2001 telecom crash, the marketing of Ottawa as a technology force has never been more important.

Even amid reported setbacks, as young people shy away from technology programs and with venture capital investment at a low ebb, there is much being done to highlight Ottawa's innovation and success stories and push the city as a technology epicentre, says Jeffrey Dale of the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation. But more is needed.

Mr. Dale is well-known as the city's resident technology cheerleader-it's his job, and won't apologize for it. He says it's exactly what Ottawa needs to maintain its visibility and sell its appeal.

Yet even he says Ottawa needs to do a better job of selling its tech industry. "We have to make sure that we're positioning Ottawa as a city state that has the right people, has the critical talent and has the global operations, the air links to get to the international market," he says. "We need to do more of that. I think as a city, it's going to fall upon us to do it."

In a recent issue of Backbone magazine, editor Peter Wolchak bragged about Toronto's showing in a study that compares the performance of several U.S. and Canadian cities (Ottawa not among them) in four critical technology sectors.

These results were released at the kickoff of Toronto's Technology Week in August, which showcases its talent and success stories-just one of the ways Toronto markets itself as a tech leader, he wrote. He concluded by asking, "What actions are other Canadian cities implementing to raise their tech banners?"

Ottawa is taking plenty of action, Mr. Dale replies unhesitatingly. After all, he says, we've quite a bit to brag about. "In the technology space, we're very good at software, very good at middleware, we have some consumer electronics.

"We're very good in the telecom space, both in the wireless and the wire line, hardware as well as software, semi-conductor space, in the life science and clean-tech space, medical devices and the cross-over between our technology industry and our life sciences."

But the task of promoting the city as a technology powerhouse is made difficult, as Ottawa suffers from the country's more naturalistic, rather than technological, image, he says. "Canada has to make up its mind: are we Mounties and moose? Or are we technology and innovation? If we're going to change the way we're perceived internationally, it's going to have to be a Canadian effort."

The place to begin is at the city level. "In Canada, we're not doing an awful lot to promote ourselves as a nation of innovation," he says. "Then you get down provincially, and our provincial government is almost completely sidetracked with the auto sector right now. The emphasis is going to have to fall down to the city. I think city states are where we're going to have to start branding ourselves."

Mr. Dale says Ottawa needs to carefully consider where it should promote and market its technology. "Are we doing enough to push ourselves as a tech centre in San Jose? Boston? New Delhi? Shanghai? London, England? Helsinki and other tech centres?"

That's where I think we have to push ourselves; we have to make sure we're showcasing ourselves as a leader in those centres."

Mr. Dale says OCRI takes the marketing push as far as possible. "We target a number of cities in the U.S.: Boston, Washington, Raleigh, Durham, Tucson, San Diego and San Francisco: those are the main targets for like business services to what Ottawa has. In Europe, we're around Cambridge, Manchester (life sciences); in South America, looking at Chile, Sao Paulo, Brazil, Santiago, and in China as well.

There's another incentive Mr. Dale often pulls out of his sales bag: "When we go internationally and we talk to people about Canada, we talk about Canada being a gateway into the U.S. We sell it as: 'If you set up in Ottawa, you can access the American market from Ottawa because of NAFTA.' People forget about that opportunity."

And of course, there are the marketing videos, packages, touting Ottawa's technology in a variety of languages. But Mr. Dale describes the reaction as "very quiet."

So what message do we need to send? And how loud do we have to say it?
"We need to be proud. Our companies have gone global a long time ago. We need to get out there, and tell our story in a much broader environment than OCRI can do. I think we need to talk about where our strengths are."

He also calls on the municipal government to take a greater role, especially with the leader of one of Ottawa's greatest technology successes at the helm.

Speaking of Larry O'Brien, the colourful, successful businessman who is now Ottawa's mayor, who wants to see the city "swagger"-what about the technology industry? Does it have swagger?

"I think we do," Mr. Dale says. "Ottawa's light shines brighter the further away you get from it."

Even better, says Mr. Dale, Ottawa's story has become an important tale of survival, recovery and renewal amidst devastation and loss. "The tech downturn that happened-I'm amazed at the number of cities that want us to come and talk about how we survived that.

"You go to certain centres like Raleigh, Durham-they were decimated. They had companies pull right out. They had multinationals close up and leave town. We didn't.

"They may have reduced themselves in size dramatically, but they stayed because they knew they were getting a competitive service from this marketplace. When we're out internationally, it's an incredible story."

However, Nortel Networks chief technology officer John Roese says an ideal way to rise above the industry's challenges, garner more support and spark a surge in morale would be to step up a campaign for technology in Ottawa.

"I think if we spent half the efforts we spend on tourism, trying to raise the visibility of Ottawa as a high-tech hub powerhouse, I think it would be time extraordinarily well spent," he says. "It would go a great way toward raising the visibility of companies that have settled here and invested in the community and allow us to attract more and more great workforce into this environment to build on the community. "

OCRI is undertaking one major initiative to do this, says Mr. Dale, in working with the Ottawa Partnership on an "innovation hub."

He explains: "We asked ourselves: 'what do we need to do to put Ottawa on the map internationally as a place of innovation?' We're going to have to be able to showcase what we're doing, we're going to have to have a place where we can incubate companies or for companies to showcase how they're being incubated, we're going to have to have a centre that allows our universities that are creating the knowledge to work with the private sector, in terms of how to commercialize it."

The "innovation hub," he says, is the ultimate tribute to the technology industry and to ensure that everyone-residents, tourists and leaders alike-knows what's happening and of the accomplishments continually being made.

Ottawa's tech industry is certainly not at the dizzying heights it was in 2000, he says, and it may never be again. But it is still thriving; still achieving remarkable things, still the city's livelihood, and it deserves to be celebrated.

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