

Branding the 7 Rivers Region

By Steve Cahalan La Crosse Tribune

Pam Culver believes communities in the 7 Rivers Region will benefit by working together, without losing their individual identities.

"The concept behind 7 Rivers Region is collaboration," said Culver, who heads the 7 Rivers Region branding effort and who owns the La Crosse marketing consulting firm Gathering Waters Design. "The brand was brought about as a concept to bring together the region so we could look at economic development, at tourism and at other things more as a region.

"If you look throughout the country, individual communities are no longer competing against each other," Culver said. "We're competing against the Chippewa Valley, the Fox River Valley, the Quad Cities, the Twin Cities. That's who we're competing against for tourists, jobs and businesses."

The 7 Rivers Region brand name was announced in July 2002 and was officially launched last fall. University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Chancellor Doug Hastad and former La Crosse Tribune editor Rusty Cunningham have been credited with getting the branding project started.

Culver said the stakeholder group behind the project has expanded to about 25 individuals, businesses and other organizations. Stakeholders have hired her on a part-time basis, for six months to one year, to continue moving the branding effort forward.

"There is an effort under way right now for 7 Rivers to associate itself with an existing organization," Culver said. She declined to give details on the effort, until it receives all of the necessary approvals.

The "7 Rivers" term does not refer to seven specific rivers. There are more than seven rivers in the region, Culver noted, but the decision was made to use that number because it's graphically and figuratively appealing, is a lucky number in many cultures, and is a finite number.

When the 7 Rivers Region was unveiled a year ago, it generally included seven counties in Wisconsin, two in Minnesota and one in Iowa, but Culver said there were no hard lines on what communities are in the region.

The region has "gotten bigger" in the past year, Culver said. "One thing I don't like to do is really specify counties or hard lines, because this is really based on being inclusive," she added.

A map on the Web site www.7riversregion.com shows the geographic area generally considered to be the 7 Rivers Region.

The Web site belongs to the 7 Rivers Region Technology Business Alliance, which promotes development of high-tech jobs in the region. The alliance is a separate organization comprised of representatives from businesses, educational institutions and local governments.

Culver noted a 7 Rivers Small Business Owners Association has formed in the past several months, and other individuals and organizations mention the 7 Rivers Region name when they talk about the area. In April, the Tri-State Area Technology Group and the alliance held the first 7 Rivers Technology Expo.

Culver urges organizations to use the 7 Rivers Region brand name in their own promotional efforts.

The branding project, the alliance and other organizations and businesses have created a video on the region that is used to promote it. Businesses and other organizations are invited to customize the video for their use in employee recruitment, business development and customer promotions.

The www.7riversregion.com Web site lists other ways that people and organizations can promote the region. For example, they can do business with other companies in the region, and encourage entrepreneurs to pursue their ideas within the region.

"I think the brand is needed," said Lee Rasch, president of Western Wisconsin Technical College in La Crosse. "It's an important opportunity to try to seek ways for regional collaboration." WWTC will use the 7 Rivers Region logo when it posts job openings, he said.

"I think it's an excellent effort," said James Johnson, president of Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical in Winona. "We have to look at how we can partner with each other in the region." He said his college will start using the 7 Rivers Region logo soon on some of its documents, such as an annual report to the public.

"Having a regional brand lets the rest of the world know how to identify this particular region," said Jim Hohlfelder, president of The State Bank of Viroqua in Viroqua, Wis. "You always hear about the Fox River Valley and the Wisconsin Dells, but there's never been (a brand for this region) to this extent." The term "Coulee Region" hasn't been used in the entire 7 Rivers Region area, and many people don't understand what it means, Hohlfelder said.

The Viroqua bank uses the 7 Rivers Region logo in its newspaper advertising, said Hohlfelder, who also is president of the Viroqua Development Association.

"We're trying to get people talking and strengthen the links that are already there," Culver said. "It's not about taking over and getting rid of the individual communities and their identities. It's about enhancing them."

Culver has been speaking to business groups throughout the region. "I inform them of the brand and what it means, answer their questions, and find out how they think the brand can help their

community," she said.

"My job is really just kind of the start-up, trying to create these regional links," Culver said of the 7 Rivers Region project. "And from there, getting people to meet and talk on a regular basis."

In the past year, an organization of regional leaders known as the Greater La Crosse/Winona Collaborative met to discuss ways to promote economic growth in the region, and met again on how legislators from both sides of the river can foster regional economic development.

MORE INFO

For more information on the 7 Rivers Region, call Pam Culver at (608) 787-8777 or check the Web site www.7riversregion.com.