

# PROVEN MARKETING STRATEGIES TO GROW RURAL AMERICA

PRESENTED BY GOLDEN SHOVEL AGENCY,  
A FULL-SERVICE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
STRATEGY AND COMMUNICATIONS FIRM



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# DEAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPER,

Golden Shovel Agency was founded to empower economic developers with the tools and guidance they needed to make a positive impact on their communities. Initially, we only served rural America. Our founders observed rural economic developers fighting to stop population loss, and create jobs with limited resources, often feeling like they were fighting with one hand tied behind their backs. We developed communication solutions to make their job easier, while positioning them to win for their communities. And while our company's reach has grown to serve larger metropolitan areas, we have not forgotten you, or our mission.

We see you, we understand you, and we are here to help. Over the past year, we have met with and surveyed rural economic developers throughout the country, seeking to understand their challenges, and how we can step in to help solve them. This whitepaper is a result of that engagement, as is our newly launched, more affordable, rural economic development services and solutions.

In today's rapidly evolving world, rural America faces unique challenges and opportunities. As economic developers, you are on the front lines of attracting people, investments, and businesses, to build thriving, diverse economies, and create high-paying jobs in your regions. While your role has always been critical, the task feels even more urgent now.

Economic developers in rural communities nationwide are being asked to do more with less, and achieve great results with limited resources. To be successful, you need proven strategies that have worked for other communities.

This whitepaper is a roadmap to navigating the complexities of rural economic development marketing. We'll share original research, success stories, and proven strategies that have helped other rural communities across the country achieve success. May this information inspire you to take action, and empower you with the knowledge necessary to do so. And if it all feels overwhelming—know that we have your back. Our entire team is available to answer questions, provide guidance, and develop strategies and solutions to meet your community's needs.

Happy Reading!

**Bethany Quinn, President • Golden Shovel Agency**



# INTRODUCTION

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Golden Shovel Agency was founded to support economic developers in their efforts to save and grow their rural communities. ***"We saw that many economic developers were alone, unable to afford strategies or marketing tools available to larger communities. They were trying but getting nowhere because they didn't have a way to tell their story. Either no story was told, or the story was negative because that's all the news cared about,"*** said Aaron Brossoit, CEO. ***"We've been working to change the narrative ever since. By giving economic developers access to the strategies and tools they need to take control and tell their own stories, we've seen real results, including billions in investment, thousands of jobs created, homes built, and talent attracted. Together - we are winning for rural America."***

While that's true for our clients, many rural economic developers still do it on their own.

One economic developer told Golden Shovel, ***"Rural communities worldwide face the same challenges. Not enough rooftops. Not the right demographics. Lack of labor pool. Poor transportation if they are off interstates. A lack of amenities. My continuing question to site selectors is, "How do we get on your radar?"*** One replied, ***"You can't. Why are you here?"*** Economic development in rural communities is tough, unless there is a community buy-in to fund marketing, which many community members resent and don't understand. Our boss said it best.

We understand these challenges, and have rolled out a suite of services for rural America, which provide support at a reduced cost. But before you start marketing, it's important to look at the research, best practices, and tools that make marketing campaigns successful.



# WHAT ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS ARE DOING TO MARKET THEIR COMMUNITIES: THE DATA

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**With hundreds of economic development clients, and thousands of economic development contacts, Golden Shovel is in a unique position to gather data on the industry's state.**

For this whitepaper, we surveyed economic developers to determine what they were doing to market their rural communities. We aimed to identify commonalities and differences between organizational approaches, and their respective outcomes.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of economic developers do not have a marketing strategy.
- Most economic developers focus marketing efforts on specific projects, properties, or initiatives.
- Economic developers use a combination of marketing approaches, typically starting with a dedicated website as the foundation for a campaign.
- Those who are marketing are experiencing success, sometimes in non-traditional ways, such as increased private investment, or securing grant funds.

# WHAT ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS ARE DOING TO MARKET THEIR COMMUNITIES: THE DATA

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## MARKETING STRATEGIES

Of those surveyed, just 35% of economic developers have a dedicated marketing strategy, and a budget to fund plan implementation. Marketing strategies can be developed in-house, by a group of team/board members or by third-party experts, like Golden Shovel.

Not having a strategy hasn't stopped most economic developers from engaging in some sort of marketing activity. An additional 52% market their community, but only on a case-by-case or project-by-project basis. This typically involves marketing an available site, promoting a local incentive, or launching a workforce attraction campaign. In this situation, marketing can be an effective tool for raising awareness (or producing results). Still, it may not establish a holistic community brand, since campaigns are not aligned, but occur in a disjointed, responsive manner, rather than being planned out and proactive.

### Have You or Your Organization Taken Steps in the Past Five Years to Market or Promote Your Rural Community?

