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New assets, broader appeal for uptown Charlotte

How marketing to region could put center city on the map

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Erik Spanberg](#) Senior staff writer

Find your center has found its audience — and it reaches well beyond the city limits.

Two decades ago, Charlotte landed big-league sports teams on the theory of regional drawing power. At the time, sports-marketing executive Max Muhleman drew a radius around the city and counted satellite populations throughout much of the Carolinas as realistic targets to buy tickets for NBA and NFL games if franchises located here.

Now the regional pitch is pushing Charlotte's emerging cultural and entertainment districts. The city has added a slew of entertainment and cultural options in the past year, with several more slated to open next year.

From the EpiCentre near the NBA arena to the College Street bar district and over to the South Tryon Street cultural campus coming to life, the city now boasts concentrated areas where visitors can pick and choose from a variety of attractions.

When the night club Halo opened this summer at the N.C. Music Factory in Fourth Ward, 20% of the crowd during the first weekend came from out of town. The 6-acre Music Factory complex includes a 5,000-seat amphitheater and a 2,000-seat music hall. Those venues have brought everyone from B.B. King to The Fray to town — and pulled in audiences from the Triad, upstate South Carolina and elsewhere in the region.

Uptown boosters, developers and tourism leaders foresee an increase in regional visitors, spurred by more attractions. At the same time, they say the need to keep building that long-sought regional crowd is greater than ever.

"We've got to draw regionally," says Noah Lazes, president of Ark Group, developer of the N.C. Music Factory. "Atlanta has done it for years and now (Charlotte) is right on the cusp of drawing from Raleigh and Greenville (S.C.) and Winston-Salem. People are realizing they can come to Charlotte for the weekend and enjoy downtown — and not just for the Panthers or NASCAR."

It's a sentiment shared by Charlotte Bobcats President Fred Whitfield. While 80% of the team's season-ticket sales come from within a 25-mile radius, the NBA franchise also handles arena booking and operations. An alliance with entertainment company AEG has helped bring more concerts to the arena, filling seats and nearby restaurants and hotels. Metallica, Miley Cyrus and Bruce Springsteen have made appearances in recent months, with Bon Jovi and the Black Eyed Peas scheduled next year.

"When you have acts like that, they play maybe one date in the Carolinas, so we want to have them here," Whitfield says. "People will come from all over North and South Carolina to see these acts."

The EpiCentre opened last year, but developer Afshin Ghazi says it didn't become a true destination until early-2009 when the movie theater and bowling alley opened. On a typical Saturday night — the busiest time of the week for the 300,000-square-foot complex — 10,000 people visit the various clubs, shops, and restaurants. With several more tenants to be added early next year, Ghazi is ready to launch his first regional marketing campaign, likely starting with Columbia and other cities that have fewer entertainment options.

Evidence of regional growth is anecdotal for the most part. The concert and sports venues track ticket sales to gauge their reach. A study two years ago by Charlotte Center City Partners found more than half the people in the surrounding five-county region on average travel to uptown 11 times per year for something other than work.

The real push — and ability to document center city's drawing power — will start with the opening of the NASCAR Hall of Fame, two museums and the revamped Discovery Place next year.

Next month, the NASCAR Hall of Fame launches the latest phase of its marketing push, including an emphasis on outlying Carolinas cities. The \$200 million hall of fame and racing museum, which opens in May, expects 800,000 visitors during its first full year, with 30% from Charlotte and the rest evenly divided between visitors from within a 700-mile radius and those from beyond 700 miles.

At the visitors authority, a combination of ad campaigns, social-media blitzes on Twitter and Facebook and other online promotions have aimed at strengthening the regional pull. The pitch has included themed cooking and dining weekends as well as a month-long, shop-in-Charlotte promotion.

A two-year plunge in corporate business makes leisure travelers much-coveted among restaurants and hotels. Through October, hotel occupancy fell to 53%, down 15.5% from the same period a year earlier, according to Smith Travel Research.



photo NANCY PIERCE

The EpiCentre complex at College and Trade streets added a hefty mix of restaurants and nightclubs to uptown's appeal.

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Nightlife and museums can spur interest and also make the city more attractive as a host site for major sporting events, giving visiting fans more options while they're here. David Taylor, president at the newly opened Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts and Culture, points to the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association's basketball tournament as a prime opportunity. The audience for the CIAA tournament's historically black colleges and universities is a perfect fit for events and tours at the Gantt Center, he says.

Next year, the new attractions should also benefit from the arrival of the Atlantic Coast Conference football championship in December. The football weekend, set for Charlotte in 2010 and 2011, is expected to kick in a \$15 million to \$25 million impact — and bring thousands of fans looking for diversions before and after kickoff. Also in 2011, the uptown arena will host the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

Taylor, the Gantt Center executive, suggests a shared ticket program among the museums, including the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art that opens next month, the Knight Theater and the consolidated Mint Museum opening in the fall of next year.

Building on the momentum is a major emphasis of the 2020 Vision Plan now under way. Pulling in more regional visitors, adding two uptown parks in 2011 and focusing on continued transit expansion are key components. "This needs to be the place where people celebrate, a memorable destination," says Michael Smith, Center City Partners president. "Our promise is to be the entertainment center of the Carolinas."

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