



VIEWS & VISIONS

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Going the Extra Mile to Build New Businesses *and* Friendships

Cam Huffman, President and CEO
The Area Roundtable

Cam Huffman is President and CEO of The Area Roundtable, which includes the Wood County Development Authority and the Parkersburg-Wood County Development Corporation.

He began his career as Director of Purchasing for West Virginia's largest statewide mental health agency. He joined the administration of West Virginia Governor Bob Wise as lead member of the Advance Team and later became Governor Wise's personal aide.

Mr. Huffman received praise from CNN for his role coordinating media outreach for Jessica Lynch's return to West Virginia, one of the largest media events in state history. He has been named to the *The State Journal's* Generation Next "40 Under 40," and has been honored with the Governor's Distinguished West Virginian Award.

In 2003, Mr. Huffman and Keith Burdette formed his current company, the Burdette Group, which organized an accreditation process for local convention and visitor's bureaus that gained the endorsement of the West Virginia Tourism Commission. In 2004, the Burdette Group became the first independent management contractor of a West Virginia Development Authority.

Mr. Huffman continues to utilize his organizational talents for many corporate clients by consulting, networking, and staging a variety of events for both the media and the public.

ASCENT's announcement of its decision to explore construction of an ethane cracker in Wood County, West Virginia, is a result of the love and faith we have in our community and our state. It also reflects the hard work of our citizens, who have put their hearts into building our economy and understand that attracting international investment helps to diversify our economy. They know a diversified economy means we can't rely upon any one industry or even any one country.

ASCENT is an example of how the recruitment of international investments can open the floodgates for jobs and other investments, if we think strategically about the future. This is an exciting time in our economic history, and West Virginia is clearly making a statement that we can be a force in the global economy.

While a lot of focus has recently been on ASCENT and its Brazilian partners, my first major international recruitment effort was with Japan's Hino Motors in 2008. I quickly learned that working with overseas companies sometimes requires more than "normal" West Virginia hospitality. It wasn't enough to sell a building or



even a community. It required helping our international partners to become part of our community. I helped with driver's licenses and opening banking accounts. I helped find apartments and even locate a doctor and translation service for the wife of an employee from Japan, who was six months pregnant and didn't speak any English.

My work didn't end when Hino made the decision to come to Williamstown, West Virginia. It was just beginning. My lasting lesson was that, in the end, it was all about building relationships, and international companies often place more importance on that than U.S. companies.

The Area Roundtable, in Wood County, West Virginia, was taught a lot of lessons while working with Hino. It was when the light bulb went off and we realized the opportunities for our community outside our borders and outside our country that we began to "invest" in that effort. We participated with the West



Governor and Mrs. Earl Ray Tomblin led a West Virginia trade mission delegation to Japan in June 2012.

Virginia Development Office in trade missions to Japan and Europe and, in late 2014, we will be in South America. We place real importance on that outreach. Our organization also appreciates that although we're doing more international recruitment all the time, we have just skimmed the surface of what's possible.

While working with international companies is important, the lessons that we apply at home will serve us well abroad, too. Relationship-building starts with relationships that we already have. Compared to recruiting new business, growing the companies we already have will always be easier.

Retention and expansion in today's increasingly global economy can pose additional challenges, but also offers important opportunities. Wood County is full of companies, large and small, that have learned exporting can be the key to expanding their respective marketplaces. It doesn't surprise people that DuPont, whose second-largest facility in the world is located in Wood County, is a major exporter of goods, but they often are amazed that Kreinik, a small specialty-thread manufacturer on Parkersburg's south side, has exported its products to a dozen countries around the globe. West Virginia's Development Office and its Small Business Development Centers have a group of people dedicated to helping companies, in Wood County and throughout West Virginia, sell their goods and services around the world.

The board of directors of The Area Roundtable consists of a veritable "Who's Who in Wood County." These businessmen and women actively contribute both time and money to maximize our community's potential. They work every day to find new and innovative ways to boost our economy through their own businesses and through those around them. We are successful because of our business community's active



The West Virginia delegation at the K Plastics Show in Dusseldorf, Germany.

engagement. These individuals function as a team and consistently overcome disagreements and self-interest in order to focus on the common good. It's a formula for success. However, there are other pieces to the puzzle.

We believe in partnerships, both in our community and our state. Recognizing that any business in West Virginia is good for our county, we've developed good working relationships with other development offices in our region. We've partnered with the state at industry trade shows and in identifying prospects that would be a good fit for our area. We've worked with the West Virginia Department of Agriculture to identify opportunities in agriculture. It's important for a business to have a go-to guy. I want to be the go-to guy in Wood County, but if I don't know the answer to a question, I make it my job to *know who knows*. That's when our partnerships pay off.

At the end of the day, the most important component in our success is demonstrating our commitment to a relationship by *going the extra mile*. Sometimes this has translated to my

trekking through mud or stacks of legal documents, pushing a broom, mower or leaf blower, or politely swallowing an international dish with obvious parts of animals I don't purposefully eat. It means trying to anticipate the needs in each unique encounter. We don't just point our international business partners in a direction, we drive them to their destination. We don't just offer locations of neighborhood playgrounds; we may set up play dates for their children who are relocating. We buy extra water bottles for car rides and help obtain hunting and fishing licenses, so our new business friends may get "hooked" on what West Virginia has to offer. We take them to replace a pair of reading glasses, and we certainly always make them laugh. Yes, this takes an investment of time and effort, but we get a great return. We create both new businesses and new friends.

To some, it sounds like work, but if you really believe in your community and our state, it's all a labor of love. ♡