



## New Media

RICHARD KOLENDA

# The Mayor's E-Commerce Commission one year later

by Ric Kolenda

When former Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell announced plans to form an e-commerce commission in December 1998, he signaled a commitment to an industry that many of us believe will be a regional growth engine for years to come. When co-chairs Rob McCord and Steve Mullin convened the commission the following March, they outlined five goals.

- Retain, attract and train high-tech talent;
- Develop feasible ideas for policy and structural improvements;
- Develop an index of e-commerce enablers;
- Measure and monitor e-commerce impact; and
- Promote the Philadelphia area's role in e-commerce nationally.

Four task forces were created to handle human capital, infrastructure, metrics and public relations.

It has been a year since that first meeting, and a lot has changed. We have a new mayor in City Hall, e-commerce has dominated the stock markets and national and regional news, and nearly half of the Super Bowl advertisements were for dot-com companies. So where was the e-commerce commission during these changes? I spoke to McCord and Mullin to find out what's been done and what is planned for the coming months.

"We have one of the lowest ratio of boastables-to-performance [ratios] of any region in the nation," said McCord, CEO of the Eastern Technology Council in Wayne. "The Philadelphia region is the real deal. The job of the commission is to bolster and promote that position."

The commission has been collecting data on the region to compare with other areas, working on ways to attract and retain tech workers and developing a national public relations strategy.

Mullin, former director of the Philadelphia Commerce Department under Rendell and now a principal with Econsult Corp. in Philadelphia, said the commission already has brought e-commerce to the minds of local leaders. "The commission assembled an excellent, wide-ranging cast of characters to work on the issues. [Commission members] put the important issues on the city's policy agenda, collected data which showed the amount of activity in the region, helped create media interest, began a marketing campaign for the region and set up scholarship and signing bonus programs for students," he said. "As an example of our impact, [Philadelphia Mayor] John Street had a transition team devoted to the new economy. That wouldn't have happened a year ago," he said.

## The data

Somewhat ironically, the first real output of the group was a report. Robert Hollebeek, a commission member and president and CEO of HUBS Inc., drafted a study of Philadelphia's place among the nation's regional technology centers. According the report, entitled "Philadelphia's Leadership in the New Economy," Philadelphia ranks high in most areas but has the potential to do even better. McCord makes a specific comparison. "Take Austin. The Philadelphia region has an equal-to-better quality of life and better access to customers, capital and employees."

But the picture is not all rosy. "If the region has one problem, it's that we're not retaining enough local talent."

## Creating human capital and buzz

The next area of concern for the commission is human capital. This is a problem not unique to the region, but one of national scale. The group has developed a strategy to offer scholarships to encourage technology studies and regional signing bonuses to attract or retain hot technology graduates. Many have said that the main difference between Philadelphia and the so-called high-tech centers such as New York's Silicon Alley, Austin or Seattle is publicity. The commission is aiming to address that issue with a national public relations campaign spearheaded by The Garfield Group in Trenton. But giving out signing bonuses and marketing costs money. So far, the Eastern Technology Council has funded most of the commission's efforts along with help from the companies represented by the commission itself. In many ways, the future of the commission is directly tied to creating a reliable funding source. Whether that source is the City of Philadelphia, private contributions or from the tech council will determine what form the commission will take in the coming months.

Both McCord and Mullin are optimistic that the commission will receive the funding necessary to achieve its goals, and both plan to continue their involvement. In particular, McCord mentioned three continuing goals important to the recently departed mayor. "As he was leaving office, Mayor Rendell told me he wanted to make sure that the commission followed up with public relations and marketing initiatives to attract and retain employees and helping companies by getting involved directly or indirectly with business incubation efforts," McCord said.

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