



A look back at real cut-throat economic development advertising

By Michael C. Randle

Here are examples of competitive economic development advertising in the 1980s and the 1990s when adjoining counties were essentially at war with each other; not to mention states. That, of course, was prior to the whole “all for one and one for all Kumbaya” unity that became regionalism. Make no mistake, though, there still exists a healthy dose of “sibling rivalry” between counties. That has not changed, yet regionalism has essentially become the norm.



Disasters in California

In 1989, there were earthquakes (Loma Prieta), mudslides, floods, fires (sometimes all at once) and many other disasters that hit California. The *Arizona Republic* ran a back-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times* with the headline, “What’s next, Locusts? Move to Arizona!”

That was foretelling as the *Los Angeles Times* reported on massive swarms of pallid band-wing grasshoppers (sometimes referred to as locusts by the public) that hit Arizona (specifically Lake Havasu City) and Southern California (including Anaheim) in April 1998. So, both were invaded by locusts after that insensitive but very effective full-page advertisement.

The *LA Times* article titled “Days of the Locust” describes a scene akin to a biblical plague, with grasshoppers so thick they obscured the center lines on Arizona roads.

The phrase “What’s next, locusts?” has since appeared in *LA Times* newsletters and sports commentary in later years (2013, 2019) to describe a series of unfortunate events. But it was first used by the Arizona Commerce Authority through the *Arizona Republic*.

The *New York Times*’ job at Mercedes-Benz choosing Alabama in 1993

We tried to find out who was behind the *New York Times*’ parody editorial graphic in October 1993, after the prestigious German automaker chose Alabama for its first full-scale assembly plant in North America to build SUVs, which were considered a new model at the time that combined a sedan with a mini-van.

As decent journalists, we wanted to see if New York’s economic develop-



ment agency, Empire State Development, did a pay-for-play deal through *The Times*. We found nothing, as no one up there would talk to us. Still, an example of “stab one in the heart” advertising.

Actually, Alabama officials loved it! That cartoon and Mercedes put Alabama on the international map for three more car and SUV plants, changing the state’s economy for the good in every way.

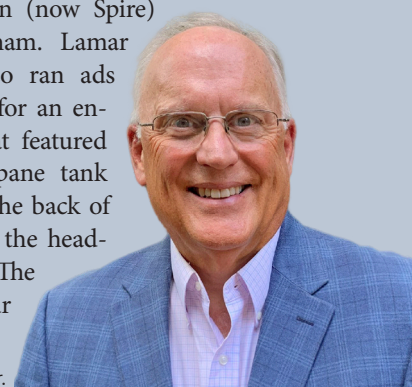
Bob Leak, Jr.

Bob Leak, Jr., Winston-Salem Business Inc., and his dad, Bob Leak, Sr., were previously featured in the Southern Economic Development Hall of Fame in Volume 1.

Bob bought the first ad in Southern Business & Development in 1992. After the sale, I had to go to my next appointment in High Point, so I asked him how to get there. He said “Michael, just take Highway 311 down to High Point and when you start seeing trailers, cars on blocks and folks with no teeth, then you know you are in High Point.”

Lamar Smith

Lamar was a long-time supporter of SB&D when he worked for Alagasco and then Energen (now Spire) in Birmingham. Lamar and Alagasco ran ads with SB&D for an entire year that featured a giant propane tank adjacent to the back of a home and the headline read, “The bomb in your backyard.” ✪



Bob Leak, Jr.