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CASE STUDY:

Raleigh-Durham International Airport

GROWING AN AIRPORT – ONE FLIGHT AT A TIME

The Situation

Industry consolidation and cost pressures have forced airlines to expand only in places where they can maximize revenue and minimize operating costs. Airports, therefore, have had to become aggressive in courting airlines for new flights, especially to international destinations. As an economic development engine, Raleigh-Durham International Airport (RDU) has an \$8 billion impact on the RTP region annually. Conservatively, the direct impact of one domestic nonstop flight is \$15M-\$20M annually, while each international flight contributes at least \$50M yearly. Yet, a majority of business and community leaders are unaware of this and often fail to appreciate the airport's role in economic development. The new airport director and his senior staff sought to build understanding of RDU's impact and solicit support for efforts to add more domestic and international nonstop flights.

The Work

The RDU Authority hired Forge Communications to conduct a grassroots research and communication program. Our tasks were to: determine the level of knowledge of the business community about the airport and its economic impact; identify travel patterns and future needs; gauge the depth of support for RDU's efforts to entice additional nonstop flights; determine the most desired nonstop destinations domestically and internationally; and develop a long-term community outreach and engagement program.

We conducted one-on-one interviews with nearly 50 CEOs, presidents and/or leaders of the largest and most influential businesses and organizations in the area. We developed, coordinated and analyzed an online public survey to gauge satisfaction with both business and non-business air travel.



The Outcomes

Forge was able to speak at length with virtually all of the area's senior executives and nearly 1,800 individuals responded to the survey. Many provided an in-depth and behind-the-scenes look at their current and future business plans. While the specific findings are confidential to the RDU Airport Authority, the data was put to immediate use when RDU senior officials met with airline executives at World Routes, an annual gathering of nearly all carriers worldwide.

In addition, the data provided detailed information about what destinations are important to businesses now and what destinations could be in the future. In conjunction with the Authority, we're currently developing a detailed community outreach and engagement program to build on this project's momentum in 2014 and beyond. In particular, the strategy will aim to generate sustained grassroots support throughout the region for the airport and its recruitment efforts.