

## The Experts: Local economy

# Tech clusters will keep us prosperous

Some believe the national economy has entered a period of sustained decline. Others may worry that, in a severe recession, the country will lose its preeminence in matters scientific and technological as investors and investment turns elsewhere. From where I sit, neither appears to be true, particularly in the case of Hampton Roads.



Lee Beach

Partly that has to do with the region's considerable support from the federal government. But I believe the main reason is "homegrown": One only has to look at the substantial progress being made locally to see that technology-based economic development is thriving and accelerating. That progress can be attributed to a growing number of partnerships that are concentrating on real products for the marketplace.

That's where the Hampton Roads Research Partnership comes in. We're in our ninth year and are currently a consortium of seven colleges and universities, two federal laboratories and a research institute: Christopher Newport University; College of William and Mary; Eastern Virginia Medical School; Hampton University; Norfolk State University; Old Dominion University; Virginia

Wesleyan College; Thomas Jefferson National Accelerator Facility, or JLab; NASA Langley Research Center and National Institute of Aerospace.

Applied-technology-wise, these are a group of heavy-hitters. Our members receive many millions of dollars to support research and technology efforts, and for good reason. No one should think the recipients are conducting ivory-tower exercises, suitable only for the rarified air of the cloistered laboratory. Our institutions are pursuing useful projects that are having or will have substantial impact on our daily lives.

This application of laboratory know-how creates real-world jobs, bringing in much-needed revenue, giving birth to companies which, as they mature, create even more opportunities as well as their own spinoffs. That translates locally into what we are calling "technology clusters." We at the research partnership think, and are betting on, the viability of Hampton Roads clusters to create not just a small-scale nexus of prosperity, but a model for the regional economy. Our premise in creating clusters in 2004 was to gain the power to compete on an equal footing with other areas in the country by leveraging existing strengths in judiciously selected disciplines. The three technology clusters that we chose – bioscience, modeling and simulation, and sensors – have a critical mass of expertise and proven economic viability in Hampton Roads, and so made sense from every point of view that we considered.

Here, I should mention the critical financial support we've received from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration, under the terms of awards to Norfolk State University and the Hampton Roads partnership. Without the EDA grants we simply couldn't have accomplished what we have; simply put, the EDA has made HRRP clusters a reality.

The cluster model has as its fundamental premise that proactively facilitating relationships between technology generators like universities and federal labs and technology users like industry will ultimately produce prosperity for all. Traditionally in Hampton Roads, many of our companies do not have relationships with the regional universities, do not know how to partner and work closely with them, and, particularly if intellectual property is involved, are wary of potential problems likely to arise.

A key cluster goal is to help companies in each technology area make good decisions in finding the best university/lab expertise or partners for their particular needs (and vice versa). This is a time-consuming process that often involves facilitation of initial and then subsequent contacts between interested parties, and involves multiple industry and university personnel. It's taken a while, but we're already starting to generate results.

In April of last year, for instance, we organized a business-academia roundtable that took place during

the fifth annual research exposition at Old Dominion. Roundtable talks centered on how successful firms are bridging the gap between potentially profitable ideas and their viability as a commercial application or product.

This year, in mid-February, we co-sponsored a half-day symposium in Suffolk at the Virginia Modeling Analysis and Simulation Center that featured some of the extraordinarily advanced research in biosensors under way in Hampton Roads. Panelists reviewed biosensor projects that are in the development stage and that are creating opportunity for collaboration with locally based academia and industry, and several collaborative projects are in the works as a result of the event. A perspective on the potential for bioscience can be found at <http://www.hamptonroadsrp.org/Bioscience%20Survey%20Final%20Report.pdf>.

The bottom line: Our clusters are thriving, gaining traction and membership. We continue to develop activities to help them mature and flourish.

But don't take my word for it. Visit our Web site, <http://www.hamptonroadsrp.org> and see for yourself. One innovation at a time, our economic development future is indeed taking shape.

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## The Experts: Social networking

# Pent-up demand will lead to sales

There is an old adage among marketers that says you build market share in a down economy. The recession will end as they all do. Customers are not buying right now, but they are shopping. What are you doing to help create a "pent up" demand?

You need to tell your story about your newest innovations, the best recovery methods or simply how you do things better. Before you get started, it is always a good idea to re-educate yourself on the options available to you. Don't listen to the naysayers who might tell you that the new social platforms are dangerous. You are only putting a message out there and not trading commodities.

Have you considered the greatest asset available to you? Your desktop computer! The Internet provides powerful social networking opportunities that allow users to effectively

target their audience. Speaking in your own words about what you have that others may not is the best way to communicate with buyers on their terms.

Frankly, it is my belief that public relations efforts during this economic climate make the most sense to cost-conscious suppliers and service providers. Finding the right way to reach your public requires some work and some help from others. Your goal should be to create pent-up demand for what you have. So why are we recommending social networking over other disciplines?

By employing social networking, customers will be educated about your offering and when the economy starts to breathe again, your product or service will be top of mind. The good news is that some won't be able to wait for the economy to straighten out and will choose to make purchases sooner rather than later. "Make me money, save me money or get out of the office," is a basic rule to follow when creating the right message to reach potential customers.

Easier said than done? You bet. Ensnore yourself in social media platforms and learn how they work,

who they reach and what are the most trusted sources. The research is fun, educational and a great way to start each day.

Using these platforms is also economical as many sites are begging for content. Remember the '90s when Internet sites were asking for the same thing. The "free model" for posting is alive and well in social networking.

Connect on the professional social media side through resources such as LinkedIn where you can participate in discussion with peers and research others who can point you in the right direction. After browsing the site you will easily see how you can connect with others in your field and link with potential customers. Posting your own profile will lead others to you who have an interest in who you are and what you do,

Don't be afraid to ask for help from others in your business subset. Posting a question on a professional social networking site can lead to two things: A call from an agency wanting your business or a colleague who may have overcome similar challenges in the past.

Determining which sites to use can

be made a little easier by logging onto [www.insidecrm.com](http://www.insidecrm.com) to see their recommendations of the "50 Social Sites That Every Business Needs a Presence on." Each entry has a short synopsis on its personality and features.

As always, there is professional help available to help you get started if you feel the need. Full-service marketing firms can offer great advice on where you should be and how you can communicate what you have to offer.

When this economy begins its steps forward you can expect results. Creating "pent-up demand" eventually turns into sales. Take this time to explore and enrich your knowledge in the new world of social networking business marketing. Make sure your messaging is on track and concise and enjoy all the new friends you will make along the way.

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