



# WEEKEND WAVE

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## Rebranding cleared for takeoff

By **GARY ROBERTS** - Staff Writer - **CHARLOTTE SUN**

MURDOCK - Attempting to distinguish itself from competitors, the Charlotte County Economic Development Office is designing a new marketing campaign with an integrated approach to attract new businesses.

"Sky's the Limit" is the new brand identity that ties together the potential of Western Michigan University's upcoming aviation program and Charlotte's other inherent advantages, said John Abbate, president of consulting firm Marketing Alliance Inc., with an office in Punta Gorda.

The challenge is to devise a strategy that appeals to the target audience of CEO's and site selectors.

But with more than 3,000 economic development agencies in the U.S. all vying for the same thing, the key is to offer something truly unique to Charlotte County, which Abbate calls "true branding."

"We have a specific audience that we need to communicate to. Those are the people who make decisions, based on relocation and expansion," he said. "The whole goal of this branding process is to differentiate ourselves and try to appeal to our audience. What makes our community special?"

"Sky's the Limit" won over other possible brand platforms such as "Building the Future," "Quality of Work/Life" and "Targeted/Light Manufacturing." Armed with results from a 20-question online survey, interviews with business leaders and industry data, Abbate said "Sky's the Limit" scored higher in elements such as selling potential, truth and emotional reaction.

"We have a message that is unique, credible and it differentiates. It gives us a competitive advantage," he said.

Lucienne Pears, economic development director for Charlotte County, said the rebranding campaign emerged from a strategic plan identifying economic opportunities. Chief among them was establishing a business plan for the county.

The new brand also is intended to overcome problems that in the past have impeded business recruitment. Marketing Alliance works with 170 economic development organizations in 18 states, primarily in the Southeast United States.

"There are some things we need to address," Abbate acknowledged. "Our messaging wasn't as strong as it could be."

Charlotte's needs extend beyond catchy slogans, though. The lack of a skilled workforce, drained by a continuing exodus of young families, is a major obstacle in generating economic development, and jobs. In this respect, Charlotte is not alone.

"The biggest issue with any organization right now is workforce and workforce training. Not just in our county but nationally, there's a crisis of available workforce," he said. "The availability of workforce is the No. 1 criteria for site selection today."

In many ways, the WMU College of Aviation, in preparing pilots as well as mechanics, is the perfect foundation for the area's future. First, it will provide sorely needed workforce training in a burgeoning high-tech industry, creating a huge benefit for the county.

Secondly, it is estimated that more than a million skilled aviation professionals will be needed in the next 16 years across the nation. And with five airports within 200 miles, Charlotte is a top flight location for aviation-support companies.

Partnering with a major university to bring one of the nation's largest aviation training programs here is a major coup, creating opportunities in health sciences, aviation support, light manufacturing and workforce development.

"Sky's the Limit" projects this optimism for all to see, delivered through print and digital advertising, website redesign and large displays at destination airports.

"(The aviation theme) seems to pull together so many initiatives that we've been working on over the years," County Commissioner Ken Doherty said.

Added Commissioner Chris Constance: "I tried to look at this as a consumer: How does it make me feel? And found it very positive, uplifting and forward-thinking."

Some commissioners offered additional suggestions as well to lure more businesses here.

Chairman Bill Truex urged the EDO to combine its marketing efforts with tourism, which can serve as a lead-in to economic development. Business leaders may get their first impression of the county while on family vacations, he said.

Commissioner Stephen R. Deutsch said the county should also highlight other consumer-friendly attributes in the area such as low electric rates.

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