

# Why Ask WHY?

A pro-Virginia campaign prompted no soul searching at the local NPR affiliate.

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WHYY proudly proclaims its mission to make "our region a better place, connecting each of us to the world's richest ideas, and all of us to each other." But these days one could add "... and tempting Philadelphia-based businesses to move to Virginia."

Since April 18 WHYY has been running weekday spots, known in public broadcasting as "underwriting announcements," detailing Virginia's beauty and advantages as a business location. The spots will continue to run four times each weekday, in morning and evening drive times, through May 1.

"Supporting WHYY, the commonwealth of Virginia, where you'll find pro-business values and a skilled, productive workforce, all surrounded by the beauty of Virginia," the announcement reads before directing listeners to a state-run website. "Virginia is for business."

WHYY officials bristle at any suggestion that they're encouraging Philadelphia businesses to move. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations prevent public broadcasting's underwriting messages from directing listeners to take any particular action, says Debi Hoxter, director of corporate underwriting for the station.

"It's an underwriting message," she says. "It's not editorial. It's not WHYY's opinion. We're not touting it as a great place. We're purely providing information on behalf of the underwriter."

But the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, the quasi-governmental group that funded the month-long campaign, doesn't see it in quite those terms.

Virginia expects a return on its investment—specifically that Philadelphia businesses will consider Virginia for relocation and expansion.

"We're marketing Virginia to business prospects," spokesperson Christie Collins says.

The underwriting announcement, however carefully couched to comply with FCC rules, is clearly an encouragement to Philadelphia listeners to do business elsewhere, says Bud Carey, a professor of media management at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and a longtime general manager and administrator at a variety of TV stations.

"It's a commercial," he says. "It's a commercial for Virginia. Come on down, hang out with us for a while. It's a great place to live, and as a matter of fact, if you happen to have a business that employs 300 people, come on down and we'll give you a tax break."

Carey says all public broadcasting stations—both TV and radio—have been forced to push the limits of "underwriting announcements" in order to make ends meet. The FCC seems inclined to allow them to do so in recognition of

most stations' difficult financial position.

"This isn't unique to WHYY in any shape or form," Carey says. But, he adds, "if you want to endear yourself to your listening audience," encouraging them to move away isn't such a great idea.

No one will say how much the Virginia underwriting messages cost. WHYY says it will have 270 or so underwriters this year. Underwriting accounts for about 13 percent of the station's budget, which runs about \$27 million annually.

Collins says Virginia is running similar campaigns at stations across the country. But she can't get further details about the campaign because the Virginia Economic Development Partnership's marketing director is on a trade mission to India and Japan with the state's governor, Mark Warner.

Virginia has long been known as an aggressive recruiter of business, handing out generous relocation grants and marketing itself worldwide. The state promotes itself by heralding its close proximity to Washington, D.C., easy access to the ports of Norfolk and Baltimore, and—perhaps the juiciest plum for some businesses—an almost complete absence of labor unions.

Philadelphia economic development officials aren't particularly surprised or worried by Virginia's efforts, says Jim Shannon, chief marketing officer for Select Greater Philadelphia, a private nonprofit corporation devoted to promoting the region to businesses nationwide. "We raid each other all the time."

Shannon says it's tough to criticize WHYY, since the underwriting complies with FCC guidelines. The station has been supportive of Select Greater Philadelphia, which was founded last year, and has discussed the possibility of having the group do underwriting of its own.

So far, though, Select Greater Philadelphia has avoided radio, and concentrated part of its projected \$2 million marketing effort on print media, such as the ad that ran last week in *The Wall Street Journal*.

State officials also take the out-of-state marketing in stride, says Kevin Ortiz, spokesperson for the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. "It's a competitive marketplace," he says, and Pennsylvania has plenty of attractive features to keep businesses coming to the state.

WHYY, meanwhile, sees nothing incompatible between the underwriting message from Virginia and the station's mission statement.

WHYY has never run anything similar, Hoxter says. But if other states or regions wanted to support the station's programming and broadcast a similar message, WHYY would accept their support.

"I don't see anything that's unusual," Hoxter says firmly. "We're just providing information. This is not an unusual thing." ■

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