

They'll Never Remember You

# If You Look Like Everyone Else

Why most regions lose deals  
they'll never know they lost.

 Elasticity

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# The Invisibility Tax

There's a particular kind of failure that never announces itself. It doesn't show up in your metrics, pipeline reports or a lessons-learned meeting. Thus, you often don't know anything is wrong.

**This the Invisibility Tax:** Deals that never materialized because you were never seriously considered.

Site selectors who glanced but moved on; shortlists you never made. You can't measure what you never had, which makes blending in so dangerous.

It feels safe because the costs are invisible. It often starts because humans are wired to fear standing out. The proverbial nail that sticks up gets hammered down. Generations of evolution taught us differentiation is risk and conformity with the pack is survival. These instincts served us well on the savannah but are killing us in the markets. When we live in a world of infinite comparison—attention has become the scarcest resource.

When a site selector, hiring manager, venture capitalist, or anyone making a high-stakes decision can compare you against a dozen alternatives in minutes—blending in isn't playing it safe. It's forfeiting the game before it even starts. And when decisions happen fast and attention spans have collapsed, memorability is the only thing that matters.

A decision-maker compares options and eliminates those obviously unqualified. Then, they consider viable options. Five, maybe seven—all competent, all capable, all... similar. This is where decisions actually happen. And this is where blending in becomes fatal.

The region that blends in falls into the cognitive void where all the interchangeable options merge into background noise. The region that stands out—that made a deliberate choice about what they are and communicated that choice with clarity and consistency—occupies mental real estate. It has a shape in the decision-maker's mind that can be recalled, considered, chosen.

What follows is a diagnosis and a prescription examining why most regions—despite their best efforts, substantial investments, and genuine strengths—end up looking identical to the site selectors who might choose them. What does it take to break free from the sea of sameness,

to become genuinely memorable, to convert invisibility into recognition.

The stakes are higher than they've ever been. The regions that have done the work—knowing exactly what they stand for and have reinforced it relentlessly—will rise above the noise.

The rest will keep paying the Invisibility Tax, losing deals they'll never know they lost, wondering why the phone isn't ringing.

### The good news:

Which category you fall into is still your choice. At least for now.



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# The Era of Interchangeable Regions

Let's be blunt: **Economic development marketing has become a sea of beige.**

It's predictable. It's safe. It's so devoid of personality you could swap the logos on most regional websites and no one would notice for weeks.

The structure is always the same:

- Workforce
- Location
- Infrastructure
- Incentives

Each section dutifully checked; each statistic carefully presented; each proof point cataloged with the enthusiasm of a tax filing. **Congratulations.** You've built a brochure that could belong to anyone.

When a site selector reviews a dozen regions in a single afternoon—and they do—the details don't just blur. They evaporate. Your website looks just like the other guy's. The jargon overlaps so completely that your "world-class logistics network" becomes indistinguishable from their "unparalleled distribution capabilities." Your "highly educated talent pipeline" merges seamlessly with their "skilled and adaptable workforce."

You spent months assembling those proof points. The site selector spent forty-five seconds forgetting them. What



separates one region from another isn't data. Data is table stakes. Everyone has data. What separates you is whether you've made hard choices about what you are and what you're not.

That means saying no to some messages so others can breathe. That means accepting you can't be everything to everyone. That means having the institutional courage to stand for something specific, even when the economic development committee wants to add seventeen more bullet points to the homepage.

Right now, most regions are presenting information. Almost none are presenting an identity. And when identity is undefined, incentives become the only conversation. Once you're negotiating purely on incentives, you've already lost. You're in a race to the bottom, competing on who can give away the most public money to win a deal that may or may not deliver the promised jobs.

**That's not an economic development strategy—that's desperation with a press release.**

# What Changes When a Region Becomes Unforgettable

**But there's another path.**

When a region makes deliberate choices about what it wants to be—and then reinforces those choices with manic consistency—something shifts. The effects compound. Attention accumulates. The phone starts ringing before you pick it up to dial.

## CASE STUDY:

**The Midwestern city that refused to be defined by its past.**

Nothing changed about the region's actual assets. **Everything changed about how those assets were framed.**

For decades, this city was known for one thing: a legacy manufacturing industry that had been declining since the 1980s. The rust belt narrative was baked in. Site selectors had already made up their minds before they opened the research folder.

But the reality on the ground had changed. Startups were launching. Research institutions were spinning out companies. Early-stage capital was flowing in from coasts that had priced out founders.

**The assets were there. The story hadn't caught up.**

Leadership made a choice: Stop defending the old identity. Start owning the new one. Organize every message, every media pitch, every site selector presentation around the emerging innovation ecosystem.

The result? Venture capital investment increased 256%. National publications started writing "unexpected startup hub" stories. Site selectors who had written off the region began returning calls.

CASE STUDY:

## The aerospace coalition that refused to fragment.

Before a major industry symposium, a statewide aerospace initiative faced a familiar problem: too many stakeholders, too many programs, too many competing messages. Everyone wanted their logo on the banner. Everyone wanted their talking points in the materials.

**The path of least resistance was a cluttered booth and a forgettable presence.**

Leadership made a different choice. One banner. One identity. One story. Individual programs subordinated to a unified narrative about what the state offered as a whole.

The result was record-engagement at launch and sustained industry momentum that outlasted the event itself. Attendees remembered one thing clearly, instead of forgetting seventeen things completely.

CASE STUDY:

## The downtown district that chose people over buildings.

A downtown struggling with perception—"unsafe," "declining," "not for us"—had invested heavily in infrastructure. New streetscapes. Renovated buildings. Improved lighting.

None of it moved the needle. The perception was sticky, and photos of construction projects don't change minds.

Leadership shifted strategy. Instead of leading with infrastructure, they led with humanity. The artists and entrepreneurs returning to the district. The restaurants opening against the odds. The residents choosing downtown despite its reputation.

**Authentic stories. Real faces. Human energy.**

Digital engagement grew more than 300% in months. The infrastructure mattered, but it wasn't the story. The people were the story.

In each case, the regions didn't acquire new advantages. They didn't suddenly discover assets they didn't have.

What changed was clarity. What changed was choice. What changed was the courage to be specific.

The assets were always there. They just needed someone willing to surface them strategically and defend them relentlessly.

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# Why Momentum Is Hard to Sustain

If this were only about messaging, every region would have solved it by now. **But economic development doesn't operate in a vacuum.** It operates inside a pressure cooker of competing interests, shifting politics, and institutional inertia.

Political cycles turn over: New mayors have new priorities. New governors want new headlines. What was the strategic focus last year becomes the abandoned initiative this year.

**Leadership changes: The economic development director who championed the identity work takes a job in another state.**

Their replacement has different ideas, different relationships, different blind spots.

Funding fluctuates: Budgets get cut. Marketing becomes the line item that's easiest to slash because no one can prove exactly which deals it generated.

Stakeholder interests multiply: The tourism board wants messaging about quality of life. The workforce development agency wants messaging about training programs. The chamber wants messaging about

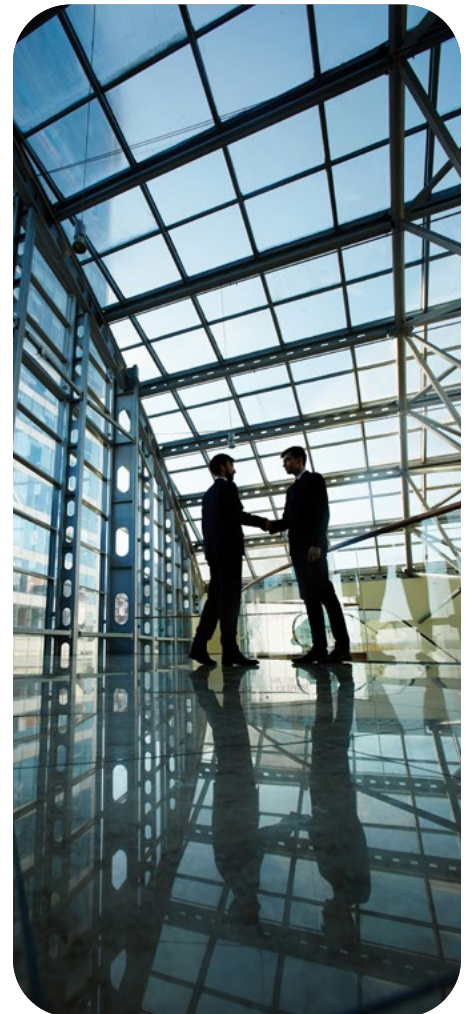
the business climate. The mayor wants messaging about whatever they announced last week.

Each request is reasonable in isolation. Collectively, they're facing death by a thousand dilutions.

Over time, initiatives expand to accommodate everyone. Messaging stretches to offend no one. The original through-line—the thing that made you distinctive—gets buried under layers of compromise and committee feedback.

No one intends for this to happen. No one wakes up and decides to make their region forgettable. It simply emerges from the accumulated weight of institutional dynamics.

The challenge isn't creating a distinctive identity. Smart people can do that in a workshop. The challenge is defending that identity against the forces constantly working to dilute it.



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# A Practical Path Forward

Regions that stand out over time tend to follow three disciplines. Not three tactics—disciplines. **Things you commit to and protect**, not things you try once and abandon.

## 1. They Decide What They Want to Be Known For

It's not everything. It's not "we're great at lots of things." It's not a list of seventeen attributes that could describe any metropolitan area in America.

Rather, it's one thing. Maybe two. The specific, defensible, actually-true positioning you're willing to organize everything else around.

This requires saying no. It requires leaving things off the homepage that someone important thinks should be on the homepage. It requires the fortitude to disappoint stakeholders who want their pet priorities elevated.

Most organizations can't do this. The ones that can become unforgettable.

## 2. They Align Around Measurable Outcomes

Awareness is not a goal. Impressions are not a goal. "Getting our name out there" is not a goal.

Goals look like: Investment dollars

attracted, site selector inquiries received, media placements in target publications, workforce relocations from target metros, industry event speaking invitations.

If you can't measure it, you can't defend it when budgets get tight. And budgets always get tight.

More importantly, measurable goals force clarity. When you know exactly what you're trying to achieve, you stop doing things that don't contribute. The newsletter that no one reads gets killed. The trade show that generates no leads gets dropped. Resources concentrate on what actually moves numbers.

## 3. They Replace Campaign Spikes with Consistent Presence

The traditional model is: something happens, you do a burst of marketing, then you go quiet until the next thing happens. This is backwards.

Site selectors aren't making their decisions on your schedule. If you go

radio silent for eight months between campaigns, that's eight months where you aren't in the consideration set, eight months you're out of the conversation, and eight months when you may as well be invisible.

Successful regions treat visibility as a continuous discipline. Consistent content. Steady media relationships. Sustained digital presence. Ongoing optimization for how research actually happens now—including AI-driven discovery, where the models that summarize your region are trained on whatever you've published, with a weighting on recency.

What builds over time is familiarity. Familiarity builds trust. Trust reduces friction in decision-making. The region a site selector has encountered repeatedly—in trade publications, their LinkedIn feed, AI summaries—starts with an advantage the region they've never heard of can't overcome.

# The 2026 Test

Before your next planning cycle, pressure-test your current positioning: **If your logo were removed from your website and materials, would anyone recognize it as yours?** Or could it belong to any of the fifty regions you're competing against?

Do your internal stakeholders describe your region the same way? If your mayor, your economic development director, your chamber president, and your workforce board chair were all asked "What is this region known for?" in separate interviews, would they give the same answer?

Are you chosen for what you represent, or negotiated down to what you'll give away? When deals close, is it because the company wanted to be in your region specifically?

Or because you offered the best incentive package?

When AI tools summarize your region, do they reflect your actual identity? Try it. Ask Claude or ChatGPT what your region is known for. The answer might be sobering. Those models are trained on your digital footprint—or lack thereof.

Is your visibility sustained, or does it spike and crash? Look at your analytics. If you see dramatic peaks around announcements and flatlines in between, you're invisible most of the time.

**These aren't rhetorical questions. They're diagnostic. The answers tell you where you're vulnerable.**

In 2026, site selection will move faster. AI-assisted research will expand. Attention will compress further. The regions that have done the work—that know what they stand for and have reinforced it consistently—will rise above the noise.

The rest will keep wondering why the phone isn't ringing.

# Blending In Is a Choice

Economic development has always been competitive.

**What's changed is the speed and volume of comparison.**



A decade ago, a site selector might deeply research three or four regions. Today, they're skimming twelve in an afternoon, assisted by AI tools that summarize and compare at machine speed. The window to make an impression has shrunk from minutes to seconds to milliseconds.

In that environment, being pretty good isn't good enough. Being comprehensive isn't good enough. Having all the right data in all the right places isn't good enough.

Standing out requires deliberate positioning—choosing what you're known for and ruthlessly subordinating everything else.

Standing out requires internal alignment—getting stakeholders to describe the region consistently, even when they'd prefer to emphasize their own priorities.

Standing out requires sustained presence—showing up continuously, not sporadically, so that familiarity compounds over time.

The regions that win the next decade won't be the ones with the longest list of assets or the most generous incentive packages.

They'll be the ones that turned their assets into a coherent identity—and then defended that identity against everything trying to dilute it.

That's harder than it sounds. Most organizations won't do it.

**Which is exactly why it works.**

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NEXT STEP

# Regional Visibility Diagnostic

If your organization is ready to stop blending in, you must:

- Establish what you want to be known for—specifically, defensibly, courageously
- Align stakeholders around measurable outcomes—not vanity metrics, real results
- Strengthen AI-era discoverability—because the models are already summarizing you, whether you've shaped that narrative or not
- Build sustained, compounding visibility—presence that accumulates rather than spikes and crashes

We invite you to schedule a Regional Visibility Diagnostic. Thirty minutes. No pitch. Just an honest assessment of where you stand and what's at stake. Because blending in isn't neutral anymore. Blending in is losing deals you'll never know you lost.