

Made for Rockford: Talent Attraction Campaign Strategy December 19, 2025

Introduction: From Vision to Impact

The **Made for Rockford** initiative was born from a shared recognition that to strengthen the Rockford region's future, we must not only attract visitors but also retain and welcome new residents.

From the very beginning, the **City of Rockford** has played a pivotal role in transforming that vision into reality. Your investment has provided both financial fuel and public confidence, enabling **GoRockford** to launch a bold, coordinated strategy to reshape how Rockford is perceived and experienced.

That investment is paying off. The story of Rockford is shifting from decline and doubt to optimism and action. Together, we are not simply telling Rockford's story; we are rewriting it.

Momentum

Over the past year, clear indicators show that Rockford has entered a period of measurable growth and revitalization both in numbers and in narrative.

Population Growth

For the first time in more than 16 years, Rockford's population is increasing. According to U.S. Census estimates from May 2025, the city gained **687 residents between 2023 and 2024**, signaling renewed confidence and sustained interest in the region's livability, affordability, and opportunities.

A Red-Hot Housing Market

In January 2025, **Realtor.com** and **The Wall Street Journal** named Rockford the hottest housing market in the country, citing its blend of affordability, amenities, and community appeal. In December 2025, **Zillow** announced Rockford was the **#1 most popular market** in the country among Zillow real estate shoppers.

This recognition didn't happen by accident. The visibility generated by the Made for Rockford campaign drove unprecedented traffic and engagement to Rockford real estate listings on Realtor.com. Our targeted marketing not only told the story of Rockford's value and livability but also guided prospective residents directly to explore homes and neighborhoods online.

As a result, interest translated into action. The marketing campaign's reach inspired first-time buyers, former residents returning home, and new residents seeking the quality of life that defines Rockford today.

National Recognition: "An Improbable Turnaround"

A feature from *Enterprise Community Partners* titled "*An Improbable Turnaround*" captured what Rockford community members already feel: Rockford is redefining itself. Once known for high vacancy and economic distress, the city now boasts rising property values, renewed downtown vitality, and growing civic pride. These outcomes affirm that *Made for Rockford* is not speculative marketing; it's the storytelling engine of a real transformation.

The Strategic Imperative: Talent, Tourism, and Transformation

GoRockford's mission has long been twofold: to attract visitors and to strengthen the region's reputation as a great place to live. In 2024 alone, tourism contributed **\$523.4 million in visitor spending**, supported **4,687 jobs**, and generated **\$14.7 million in local tax revenue**. While tourism fuels economic activity, it cannot reverse population decline. Between 2010 and 2022, Winnebago County's population decreased from 295,000 to 280,000, while residents aged 65 and older increased from 13.9% to 18.8%. Without action,

workforce sustainability and community vibrancy were at risk. *Made for Rockford* directly addresses that challenge, uniting employers, civic partners, and residents around one shared message: Rockford is a place to belong.

Program Outcomes: Results That Matter

The grant from the Woodward Charitable Trust has made possible tangible, high-impact outcomes across recruitment, community engagement, and perception change.

1. High-Impact Marketing Campaigns

“Welcome Home” Campaign

Launched during the 2024 holiday season, the “Welcome Home” campaign invited former residents and holiday visitors to rediscover Rockford, not just as a place of memories, but as a place to build their future.

This multimedia effort, made possible through Woodward Charitable Trust funding, combined digital ads, social media, and eye-catching billboards strategically placed across high-traffic corridors in Winnebago County. Between December 2024 and January 2025, the ads were seen more than **two million times**.

The messaging, **“Come home for the holidays. Move home for the grandparents.”** leaned into nostalgia, emotion, and belonging. It struck a chord with those who already knew and loved Rockford, turning sentimental visits into serious considerations about returning for good.

“Make It Make Sense” Campaign

Building on the success of the “Welcome Home” effort, *Made for Rockford* launched the **“Make It Make Sense”** campaign, a bold, data-driven initiative that met potential residents where they were.

Using **geo-targeting technology**, the campaign digitally followed holiday visitors after they left Rockford, serving them customized follow-up messaging that highlighted why staying or coming back *just makes sense*. Across **digital, radio, and out-of-home platforms** in major Midwest metros, Rockford’s message reached audiences in **Chicago, Milwaukee, and Madison**, positioning the community as the smart, affordable alternative to larger markets.

Results

Over six months, this campaign achieved nearly **nine million total impressions**, delivering a consistent and persuasive narrative of **affordability, accessibility, and quality of life**.

The results were extraordinary. Combined with the “Welcome Home” campaign, *Made for Rockford* drove **over 132,000 visits to MadeforRockford.com**, a stunning increase from fewer than 100 just six months earlier. These numbers demonstrate far more than simple awareness; they show **curiosity transforming into engagement**, and engagement evolving into genuine interest in relocation.

2. Personalized Recruitment Tours

More than 80 customized community tours have been designed and hosted for job candidates and their families, showcasing Rockford’s neighborhoods, schools, parks, and amenities in a way no brochure or website can. These tailored experiences, developed in partnership with major employers such as Woodward and our health systems, help candidates see not just a job, but a life in Rockford. Each tour is personalized to the individual’s interests and family needs, creating authentic connections that make relocation feel natural and exciting. Employers consistently cite these tours as one of the most persuasive recruitment tools available.

3. Welcoming New Residents / Retention

To strengthen retention and connection, *Made for Rockford* has hosted three New Resident Mixers since late 2024, welcoming nearly **200 newcomers**. Each event at Lucha Cantina, Embassy Suites, and Anderson Japanese Gardens has grown in enthusiasm, reflecting the community's increasing momentum and the growing number of people choosing to call Rockford home.

These gatherings help newcomers build friendships, explore local venues, and connect with community ambassadors, giving them both a sense of belonging and a deeper appreciation for the area, key factors in helping new residents put down roots and stay.

4. Employer Support Tools

The Woodward grant helped develop vital tools that now empower employers and recruiters:

- An online **Recruiter Portal** making high-quality videos, photos, and one-sheets showcasing Rockford's assets available to download and share with candidates
- A **Cost-of-Living Calculator** illustrating how Rockford compares to peer cities
- A **New Resident welcome guide** to help HR professionals support new employees

5. National and Regional Storytelling

Favorable media coverage has continued to expand Rockford's reputation across national outlets such as **Forbes, Business Insider, Viator, and Group Tour Magazine**.

To build on this success, *Made for Rockford* hired a **professional Public Relations firm on behalf of the community** to strategically position Rockford's story on a national level. This partnership has generated press coverage, influencer visits, and journalist features that have reached millions of potential residents and investors.

Well-known influencers and travel writers with hundreds of thousands of followers have visited Rockford, documenting its **renewed vibrancy and community pride** on digital platforms.

In addition, *Made for Rockford* is partnering with "**Our City, Our Story**", a local documentary-style video series that spotlights the city's unique people and inspiring comeback stories. One recent episode even prompted a former resident to move back, proof that authentic storytelling can directly drive relocation and re-engagement with the community.

Community Partnerships

At the heart of *Made for Rockford* is collaboration. Our success depends on a network of partners who share our belief that welcoming and retaining people takes a community-wide effort.

The **Made for Rockford 'Go Team**, a group of more than **40 passionate local ambassadors**, serves as the "first friend" for those moving to Rockford. These volunteers lead neighborhood tours, attend mixers, and help new residents navigate everything from finding local coffee shops to discovering community events..

Through our partnership with **Rockford Promise**, we connect with local students pursuing higher education away from home, reminding them that opportunity awaits right here. Personalized postcards and social media outreach let them know their hometown is cheering for them and that Rockford is ready to welcome them back when they launch their careers.

We also work closely with the **Greater Rockford Chamber of Commerce** in multiple ways, including connecting new business owners and their families to the community, helping them establish roots beyond the workplace. The chamber also partners with us in supporting national earned media efforts led by our public relations agency, Development Councilors International.

Partnerships and Leveraged Support

Your investment helped establish credibility that continues to attract additional partners and funders. *Made for Rockford* has now secured **nearly \$1.4 million in multi-year support**, including:

Partner	Commitment	Timeline
Wooward Charitable Trust	\$150,000 annually	2024, 2025, and 2026
UW Health	\$50,000 annually	2025 and 2026
Mercyhealth	\$50,000 annually	2025 and 2026
OSF Saint Anthony	\$125,000 total	2025–2027
State of Illinois	\$500,000 grant	2024–2026
Greater Rockford Chamber of Commerce	\$60,000 annually	2025 and 2026

This broad coalition underscores the belief shared by employers, government, and civic leaders alike: *Made for Rockford* is essential to solving the region’s talent and perception challenges.

Conclusion: A Story of Return and Renewal

Rockford’s story is evolving from resilience to renaissance. What was once seen as an industrial past is now celebrated as an affordable, creative, and community-driven place to build a future.

Made for Rockford has become the voice of that transformation, and the Woodward Charitable Trust helped make it possible. Your partnership has not just supported a campaign; it has fueled a movement that is attracting families, strengthening businesses, and reigniting pride in our region.

With your continued support, we can ensure that this moment of momentum proves for thousands more to come, that they, too, are *Made for Rockford*.

Sincerely,



John Groh
President/CEO

