

Whiskey Acres event highlights value of branding

“Great whiskey isn’t made. It’s grown.” This is much more than a tagline, Whiskey Acres President Jamie Walter said. It’s a commitment to the marketplace about what makes Whiskey Acres different from every other distillery.

Walter addressed the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp. on Sept. 11 at the distillery on the Walter family farm on Keslinger Road in Afton Township. During his presentation, Walter discussed the history of Whiskey Acres and the importance of its brand to production and marketing.

Walter also offered suggestions to DCEDC as it considers a branding initiative as part of the DeKalb County Thriving! Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

Establishing the distillery arose from a desire by Jamie and his father, Jim Walter, to diversify the family business from production of commodity grains to value-added business. With some background in the wine industry, Walter was aware that wineries rely on the genetic characteristics of grapes to create varieties of wine.

DeKalb is well-known for yellow dent corn. Bourbon is a whiskey defined by the requirement that it be made of at least 51% corn and manufactured in the U.S. So, the idea was to make different flavors of whiskey using different varieties of DeKalb



DCEDC VIEW

Paul Borek

County corn.

After preparing a business plan, they hired the former master distiller for Maker’s Mark bourbon, Dave Pickerell, in 2013 to help build the distillery, create recipes and contribute to the development of their brand.

The value of branding is to identify and communicate what makes you different. For Whiskey Acres, the distinction is that it is a farm and everything used its spirits are grown on-site. It is an estate distillery. Few distilleries have that distinction.

“DeKalb County, Illinois, really is the Napa Valley of corn,” Walter said. “We have the richest, deepest, most fertile soil of almost anywhere in the world. It is the perfect place to grow high-quality grain and convert that grain to bourbon.”

After five years of operation, Whiskey Acres now produces about 100,000 bottles of whiskey a year and employs 24 people.

Walter offered the following advice regarding branding: First, decide what message you are trying to convey. Be authentic, clear and concise. Develop a memorable logo and tagline to communicate that message.

Despite their background in marketing, Walter and partner Nick Nagele decided to work with an advertising agency to build their logo. It consists of an ear of corn shaped like a whiskey bottle.

Once you have your logo, Walter advised, “make sure that you are consistent – hyper consistent. Use it everywhere and often. It is the easiest way to convey your message.”

Walter encouraged establishing relationships with media to generate articles and interviews in news outlets and trade journals. Public relations exposure is a good low-cost means to promote a business brand.

Promoting the logo or tagline on branded merchandise such as T-shirts or hats is a great way of creating walking billboards, paid by customers or followers.

Social media “has been an exceptionally efficient and effective way to capture a lot of eyeballs when you don’t have a lot of money,” Walter said. While they post on Twitter and Instagram, Facebook has allowed them the opportunity to generate more content and tell their story.

Once you’ve established your brand, Walter advises ramping up the story. At Whiskey Acres, they did this by promoting the “From Seed to Spirit,” tagline. “We do it all, from the time the seed is put into the ground, until the spirit is poured out of the bottle,” Walter explained.

Now established, Whiskey Acres has licensed brand extensions, or co-branded products, including bourbon maple syrup, barbecue sauce, cookies, coffee and chocolates.

Walter also advised that brand logos and taglines be trademarked and copyrighted, and that you need to be prepared to defend those when they’re infringed upon.

Regarding branding DeKalb County, Walter advised that branding can’t overcome structural deficiencies. We need to do everything we can to improve and strengthen the Illinois and DeKalb County business climates.

Walter recommends that a DeKalb County branding initiative recognize the rich and successful agricultural economy. With proximity to Chicago, fiberoptic capacity and Northern Illinois University, the county has the tools to accommodate ag technology. AgTech is one of the fastest growing segments of the ag sector and should be at least a part of DeKalb County’s brand and business development plans.

Finally, Walter said that the county must determine what it wants to be and who it wants to attract. “Branding without a purpose is a waste of money,” he concluded.

• *Paul Borek is executive director of DeKalb County Economic Development Corp.*

Chamber welcomes Open Door Health Center



Photo provided

The DeKalb Chamber of Commerce board members, ambassadors and staff recently welcomed Open Door Health Center-DeKalb to the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce and congratulated the center on expanding the practice into the community. Open Door Health Center provides health care, behavioral health and substance abuse services for the family members of its patients and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender who are ages 12 and older. The center is at 215 N. Fourth St. in DeKalb. For information, visit <https://odhcil.org>.

Chamber welcomes Sears Hometown Store



Photo provided

The DeKalb Chamber of Commerce board members, ambassadors and staff, along with Mayor Jerry Smith, recently welcomed Sears Hometown Store to the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce. Sears Hometown Store is under new management. The store offers name-brand appliances from refrigerators, stoves and freezers to washing machines, ranges, tools and more. Sears Hometown Store is at 2359 Sycamore Road in DeKalb. For information, visit www.searshometownstores.com.