

African-Americans seize the chance to push diverse Denver as a great place to live and do business.

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Behind the scenes, a few weeks before NBA All-Star Weekend, African-American entrepreneurs network at nanospeed, primed to promote themselves, their businesses and their city as a great place for African-Americans to live and work.

Power-walking to power breakfasts, BlackBerry wireless devices jammed to their ears, they tote leather briefcases packed with schemes and dreams. It's multitasking mania: scouting party venues, writing press releases, cold-calling businessmen and hitting up high school chums turned pro athletes - guys with the connections of champions.

Immaculately attired, they're sometimes mistaken for the celebrities they hope, with luck, to schmooze with.

"Magic Johnson is definitely a person I'd like to meet," says Bruce Hunter, publisher and chief executive of Core, a new business/lifestyle magazine aimed at Denver's multicultural community. "I haven't figured out a way yet, but I'm working on it."

Richard Lewis, owner of RTL Networks, ordered an extra 500 business cards. He's already an official NBA vendor - his company, which specializes in IT sales and service, will rent equipment as part of the infrastructure for the extravaganza. But his game plan includes a list of parties to network, at least one or two a night, including nightclub scenes and VIP lounge sessions, the hip-hop fashion show and the All-Star Gospel Concert at Heritage Christian Center.

"I see this as the consummate business opportunity to meet some of the other individuals involved in setting up this weekend," he says. "It's an opportunity to swim upstream and see if my company can do business on a larger scale with the NBA."

This marketing mentality pops up across town as local business people plan events to coincide with All-Star Weekend. People such as Damian Thompson are working hard to show visitors a great time. On a recent weekday, he scouts venue after venue for his VIP lounge party. "All-Star Weekend means a whole lot of networking with professional athletes, artists and entertainers," he says from his cellphone before checking out a local art gallery. His party, he says, "will offer more variety, as opposed to just a younger crowd. It will be more of a melting pot for everyone, instead of a rap-concert-party-type deal."

Former Nuggets player Roland "Fatty" Taylor plans to host the ABA Reunion Old-School Party at Invesco Field's United Club Lounge. Like many of the weekend's parties, his will benefit a local organization, the Colorado Hawks, a nonprofit that mentors inner-city youth and sponsors 10 Amateur Athletic Union basketball teams.

Musa Bailey, who runs Roadside Music Outreach Program for Youth, plans to throw networking parties every day during All-Star Weekend. "There are tons of local artists and musicians in town, and I want to get them to interact with out-of-town people who may not know much about Denver."

This month, two more Colorado events of importance to the African-American community take place. The National Brotherhood of Skiers, a black ski club, brought thousands of African-Americans to Vail, and Black Enterprise



Post / Kathryn Scott Osler

Denver entrepreneurs **Bruce Hunter**, left, and **Rich Lewis** discuss their new magazine, **CORE**, and business opportunities at the upcoming All-Star Weekend. Black Denverites see the basketball event as a chance to promote the city to other African-Americans as a great place to live and work

magazine hosts its seventh annual Ski Challenge, where black power players will network at the Vail Cascade Resort & Spa.

Some view this nexus of events as a prime opportunity to market Denver to African-Americans. "Ski events won't inspire people to move here because they're not going to move to the mountains," says Carla Ladd, president of Denver Black Pages, which helps Colorado's African-American small businesses expand their marketing efforts via the Internet. "The All-Star Game is right in Denver, and they can get a better feel for what's really going on here."

Peter Chapman, special assistant to the mayor for economic growth, says the All-Star Weekend provides "a powerful opportunity for us to showcase Denver to the African-American community that may not perceive it to be a wonderful place for African-Americans and other nonwhite communities."

As Denver plays host, it gets "the opportunity to be mentioned in the same sentence with cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles," says Eric L. Nesbitt, president of The Nesbitt Group, a real estate company in Highlands Ranch. "As a former attorney for the NBA, I have enjoyed All-Star weekends in at least five other cities and I know how much the African-American community enjoys the weekend," he says. "I hope that all visitors to the city will experience the same feelings that I have experienced as I approach my eighth year of living here: That Denver is a great city that offers a wonderful lifestyle."

Business is bustling

As the black population approaches the national percentage - 11 percent - Denver has a chance to become a Western hub for African-Americans. One big selling point for Denver: Black Enterprise magazine last year named it as a city with the potential to become the next Atlanta.

"If it were a stock, it's got the potential to rise to blue-chip," executive editor Alfred Edmond says. "Unlike people's perceptions of Denver, it has a black population approaching the African-American population of the nation, about 11 percent. It's reaching critical mass. There's enough of a black community to make it attractive to other African-Americans to live."

Features that made Atlanta the southeastern hub of black entrepreneurship already exist in Denver, making it a natural Western counterpart, Edmond says.

Denver's attractive business environment includes large corporations willing to do business with minority companies. Denver International Airport provides the transportation that companies need to ship their goods, as well as fly in busy executives. The social scene - clubs, major sporting teams and nearby skiing - also is essential in luring and retaining young professionals, he says.

Denver's black community is highly educated, with 65 percent of the population having continued their education beyond high school, according to 2003 census data. A higher number of college degrees has pushed the median income of African-American householders in Denver to \$37,108.

Blacks also are embedded within an already diverse population, Edmond says. The city recently made national headlines because racial and ethnic minorities now outnumber whites.

"That's not how people think of Denver," he says, who spoke at the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce a few years ago, an organization he says is one of the most active and effective of its kind in the nation. "Even I was taken aback by the size and sophisticated degree to which the chamber had been integrated into the business of the city of Denver. African-Americans were not only present in the city, but also playing key roles."

Black business is bustling. Data collected by the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce from the U.S. Department of Labor showed 4,926 black-owned firms registered with the state in 2003. Those businesses, largely located in Denver and the seven-county metro area, generated a combined revenue of \$512 million that same year. African-Americans in Denver and the rest of the metro area had a buying power of \$2.8 billion, and \$3.9 billion in the entire state, the chamber says.

But more pieces are needed for this economic machine to fully take off, says Wil Alston, the chamber's vice president. "We've been having the same conversations down here about visitors, tourism, people of color and how we can be a

part of that," Alston says. "When we hear that \$30 million is coming into town related to the All-Star Game, we know the black community doesn't have the infrastructure to catch some of those dollars. We don't have the slew of restaurants, the stores, the taxi cabs and hotels - the buckets, if you will - necessary to catch that money and have the impact in our community we would like it to have."

To address those issues, The Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau has convened a minority task force led by City Council president Elbra Wedgeworth to study how communities of color can better position themselves to capitalize on some of the tourism dollars coming into the state, Alston says.

Exploding the myths about Denver

City boosters know they're up against a lot of mistaken impressions about the city - that it's a cowtown, that it's cold, that its population is not diverse.

As president and CEO of Burks Communications, a Denver-based advertising, marketing and public relations firm, Susan Burks makes pitches for a living. Naturally, she has put some thought into marketing Denver to African-Americans.

"We have to be really focused," she says. "The question is whether we want someone like Magic Johnson to open more franchises here, or whether we're just asking people that when they think about quality of living, not to knock Denver off the list."

Don't expect a hard sell, though. Most marketing of Denver will be word-of-mouth and behind-the-scenes, conducted by an unofficial sales force comprised of African-Americans who already live here. People like Daniel Betts, deputy manager of recreation and facility services for the city of Denver.

Because he moved here only a year ago, he knows what he's up against. "My impression of Denver was somewhat limited prior to coming here," he says. "I thought it would be a cowtown, and far colder than Chicago, and I'm from Chicago. I know folks coming for All-Star Weekend have procrastinated on coming to Denver. They have a bad impression from the outside coming in, thinking it's not real diverse, and that there's nothing for minorities to do."

To update this image, Betts is organizing the "All-Star Basketball Series for Youth," a joint effort by Denver Parks and Recreation and the Community College of Denver on Saturday at the Auraria campus. The event will include the championship games of "Hoopin' with Hickenlooper," the citywide youth basketball tournament named after the mayor, plus a series of workshops with college professors and sports-industry professionals.

The marketing strategy of larger organizations, such as the Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, is deceptively simple: fun. "We think most people who end up investing in Denver start out as tourists," says Tom Clark, executive vice president. "But this is not a place where many African-Americans have been as tourists, especially from the coasts. So they'll come in for the All-Star Game and have a great time. They'll see the quality and vibrancy of the African-American community in metro Denver, both the entrepreneurs and the long-established, which really sends a great message to affluent folks with money to invest."

If it comes up in conversation, former Nuggets player Taylor says, he'll happily market Denver to his cohorts. "A lot of the guys are talking about retirement, and I can say, 'Hey, come here. It's good for the health, we've got good mountains, fresh air, wide open spaces without the hustle-bustle of back East.'"

This sounds like Hunter's pitch but with a twist.

"I see Denver on the cusp of really taking off," Hunter says. "It's a big city without the big city problems. In New York or Los Angeles, if you want to start a business and meet the top 100 CEOs, good luck. But it can happen in Denver because people here really want to help."

Hunter and Betts have teamed up, planning to create an upscale networking party at the Adam's Mark hotel, a fundraiser to generate scholarships for African-American and Hispanic high school students.

Meanwhile, consultant John Bailey is creating "Hoops & History," a high-profile event Thursday that will

simultaneously celebrate black history month and kick off All-Star Weekend by honoring the individuals and organizations that have contributed to Denver's African-American community. "Denver is a great place to live," he says, "but a lot has to do with

leadership, and the willingness of corporations to hire African- Americans, and real estate (agents) to sell homes, and not just in the northeast segment."

As for Lewis, he's already got large parts of his business rap worked out. "Most of my fellow African-Americans back East think of Denver as a tundra," he says. "But I went jogging this morning in a tank top, and I know they did not. There are lots of other things here that I think are phenomenal, like the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, only one of five such places in the country. It's a good place to see not just African- American history throughout the nation, but especially throughout Colorado and the Denver metro area. Many people don't realize that one-third of the settlers and cowboys here were African-American."

Bailey's vision is that Denver will become a Western hub for the national music scene. "My main goal is to make sure they see Denver is a beautiful place to be, with plenty of resources and talent. People will see there's a market here, and then it just becomes a business decision."

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