

A wind of opportunity in the East

Mention Norfolk, Suffolk or Cambridge and many people will recall picture-perfect holidays among the windmills and yachts on the Broads, punting on the Cam or strolling on the glorious beaches from Hunstanton to the Deben Estuary. If the locations are good enough for Shakespeare in Love and James Bond, it's not surprising it is an artist's paradise too. But these days the windmills one sees across the region are at the cutting edge of technology and herald opportunities for PR practitioners. East Anglia, already known for Cambridge's Silicon Fen, is set to experience a new boom as a major centre for renewable energy.

At a recent conference hosted by the East of England Energy Group, keynote speaker Rob Hastings, director of marine estates for the Crown Estate, outlined how the latest round of offshore wind farms along the east coast will make the North Sea equally as valuable as it has been for oil and gas, with a likely investment of £60bn to £80bn by 2020. And this is on top of the ongoing developments in oil and gas.

Naturally there will be massive opportunities for PR agencies, not only to manage the reputations of businesses wanting to get a share of the action, but also to deliver community consultation and stakeholder management programmes for those already in the game. This also implies a greater emphasis on public affairs activity at local and regional level. The growing need for consultation and stakeholder management means agencies must be fully conversant with the use of social media, already the communications channel of choice for pressure groups worldwide. It also suggests local and regional knowledge is arguably an even greater PR asset outside the capital, particularly where major national and international brands need to engage at local level.

After all, one cannot afford to miss not only the key movers and shakers but also the powers behind the throne, who are often leading business people in unrelated sectors. Looking to the tools of our trade, East Anglia has a very strong media and creative sector, thanks in part to the presence of major national publishers Archant and regional TV and radio stations headquartered in Norwich. There's a new wind blowing here too – the drive into online communications, whether it's search expertise or online video as a PR tool, such as our own TribeTV service. The region is seeing significant capital investment in cutting-edge facilities such as Europe's largest permanent digital screen gallery at The Forum in Norwich and EPIC, one of the most advanced broadcast production facilities in Europe.

We expect the skills base in agencies to shift significantly to reflect the growing importance of all aspects of digital media, including video. Digital activity will also free agencies from any accusation of parochialism, as the web knows no geographical boundaries.

Turning to the established regional economy, there's a resilience driven by the large number of small and medium enterprises and family-run businesses that have a lower-risk and lower-gear approach to business than those hitting the credit-crunch headlines. Many of these are already looking ahead to new ways of working, new markets and new revenue streams, seizing opportunities to gain market share as a result.

Bigger businesses based in the region are at the forefront in their own sectors, such as Group Lotus with its focus on alternative fuels, and Palm Paper, building the world's largest newsprint plant. The region is also home to innovators in financial services, again exploiting the online market to grow business.

Ignore East Anglia at your peril – this region will play its part in driving the recovery into a new economic reality.