

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

St. Louis is a world-class city

By Charles D. Schmitz | Posted: Wednesday, June 30, 2010 12:00 am |

St. Louis is a world-class city, of that I have no doubt. But the truth is, the perception of St. Louis does not equal that reality, and we need to fix that.

The solution may be simpler than you think. It is time to change the perception of our town — both internally and externally.

As a behavioral/social scientist who has studied people, relationships and perceptions for nearly four decades, I know that the perception of something can be far more powerful than its reality. Perception is reality. Change the perception, change the reality.

In mid-June, I had the pleasure of participating in the annual St. Louis Regional Chamber and Growth Association leadership trip. This year they visited Indianapolis.

It was clear from the opening meeting that the Indy community had learned its talking points. The one refrain that we heard over and over went something like this: "Indianapolis is the 14th most populated city in the United States." However, when I looked out the window of the various venues I kept saying to myself, "This place doesn't look like the 14th largest city!"

I look out at St. Louis and its multiple skylines all the time and think to myself, "This is a big city!"

So the question of the day is this: Why are we the 53rd largest city in the United States and Indy the 14th largest city?

And trust me on this. The "14th largest city" refrain is an impressive talking point. The "53rd largest city" refrain makes us sound like a third-class city.

Now, let's get to the truth of the matter. Indy and Marion County, Ind., merged in meaningful ways in 1970 to become the "City of Indianapolis." Voila, instant 14th largest city. And guess what, it is working for them.

Think of all the positive publicity they are getting from that simple act. And before readers start getting all upset about the loss of local autonomy, Marion County and the City of Indianapolis became a city and they still have multiple school districts and municipalities.

If we merged St. Louis City and County, we would be the seventh largest city in the United States. Yes, seventh.

And friends, let's face it, when we walk down the streets of any city in the world and someone asks us where we are from, we always answer St. Louis. Why? Because we are St. Louis. That's our global identity. And make no mistake about it, it is in our best interests to tell it like it is — we are the seventh largest city in the United States.

If we simply got everyone on board to do the half-dozen things we needed to merge St. Louis City and County into one large city, without losing the individual identities of our many municipalities, the Top 10 Cities in the United States by population would be as follows:

1. New York City
2. Los Angeles
3. Chicago
4. Houston
5. Phoenix
6. Philadelphia
7. St. Louis
8. San Antonio
9. San Diego
10. Dallas

Being a Top 10 City changes the world's perception of who we are and will bring opportunities our way that we could only have dreamed about.

And here's a few final thoughts: Folks say we have a high crime rate in "St. Louis." Not so. The combination of St. Louis City and County actually leaves us with a crime rate that is relatively low among large metro areas.

Some folks say we have a high dropout rate and poor schools. Not so. Our overall dropout rates are lower and our schools are better than the national average.

All of the negative rankings about St. Louis change to the positive with the combining of City and County. This is an important residual. It encourages people to come here,

holds people here, causes others to invest in us and makes all things become possible. Change the perception, change the reality.

In the world we live in, our failure to do this simple act will relegate us to the ash heap of history. On the other hand, merging the city and county into a "city" as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, will increase our status, bring us unimaginable opportunities and change the perception that we are a third-rate city with a rank of 53 to our deserved lofty ranking of seven.

The choice is ours.

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