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This is the man who helps get Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard on CNN — and how much he's paid

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Indianapolis Star

In the weeks before Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard appeared on CNN International touting the city's high COVID-19 vaccination rate, New York-based marketing consultant Rob DeRocker pitched the idea of Carmel as a “vaccine oasis” to national media outlets.

The Canadian Broadcasting Company took DeRocker's pitch and interviewed Brainard at the end of July. So did CNN International in early August.

DeRocker, of Rob DeRocker & Associates, has done public relations consulting for Carmel since 2010 when the city first paid him for services, invoice records show.

For the past decade, DeRocker has often been the man behind how Carmel makes it into national news outlets, such as the New York Times and National Public Radio. And the city pays for that exposure.



In 2020, Carmel paid DeRocker more than \$133,000. The city has paid DeRocker nearly \$80,000 as of the end of July 2021, according to city invoices.

Marketing experts told IndyStar that paying for these efforts help local governments share their stories and gain a reputation with a wider audience. When national audiences know a city's story, it can have an impact on business and the local economy, experts said.

What Carmel pays for national exposure

A Washington D.C.-based firm referred DeRocker to Carmel in 2010.

DeRocker made a trip to the Hamilton County city at the time, when Carmel was building the massive Palladium at the Center for the Performing Arts.



“At that point, I thought, you know, this is worth a go. I don't know if we can get any national press out of this, but it seems to be an interesting story. It's worth a shot,” DeRocker said. “I had no idea that there would be that much interest to last this many years.”

Carmel has paid DeRocker just over \$1 million since 2013, an average of more than \$10,000 a month, according to invoice records. Those invoices are paid through the city's community relations and economic development department budget.

Brainard said DeRocker's work is important for driving interest and investment in the city from other parts of the country.

“Getting our name out and then having a good connotation associated with that name, is very important for attraction and capital,” Brainard said. “It’s good for workforce development.”



Carmel already has communications staff located in Central Indiana. The city’s Community Relations department coordinates news releases, media interviews and events for Carmel locally.

Local staff, however, does not have DeRocker's connections to national and international media outlets, Carmel spokesman Dan McFeely wrote in an email.

DeRocker also has relationships with consultants that guide companies on where they want to locate businesses, McFeely said.

"We consider Rob an extension of our staff and stay in continual contact with him so that he can discover story topics and reach out to his contacts in the national media," McFeely wrote. Brainard says DeRocker, who is based in Sleepy Hollow, New York, is an asset to the city because of where he's located. "It's helpful because there's so much media in New York," he said.

How DeRocker shares Carmel's story

Invoice records show DeRocker has worked on garnering stories on Carmel's 100-plus roundabouts to Brainard's views on the environment.

DeRocker said he looks for the "man bites dog stories," or stories that are unusual and might grab people's attention. For Carmel, that can be the city's planning and development or Brainard as a seven-term Republican mayor who believes in climate change, DeRocker said.

In May, DeRocker arranged a New York Times story on Discovering Broadway, an organization that brought the team for the Devil Wears Prada musical to Carmel, according to invoices. That month, Carmel paid DeRocker \$11,586 for activities such as arranging the New York Times interview, traveling to Carmel and organizing an Instagram Live video featuring Carmel's roundabouts with ESPN, according to the invoice.

DeRocker has arranged for Brainard and Carmel to make it in international news outlets, like the Canadian Broadcasting Company in July and a newspaper in southwest Germany in 2015, records show.

In January 2016, Carmel paid \$10,000 to DeRocker for activities the month before such as the results of the German newspaper story and pitching stories to media outlets tied to the fifth anniversary of the Palladium, according to the invoice.

DeRocker at the end of 2019 and in early 2020 attempted to land Carmel in a Hallmark movie, according to city invoices.

In one invoice, DeRocker wrote that he wanted to "explore possibilities for Carmel's Christkindlmarkt to become a future setting for a Hallmark or other Christmas film."



“Number one, there'll be excitement in Carmel, and then, of course, if the movie ran and it was successful, you have a lot of beauty shots, and that's the kind of thing you can play for years,” DeRocker said in an interview with IndyStar.

That effort was unsuccessful, but Carmel still paid for DeRocker's work. Between October 2019 and March 2020,

DeRocker listed efforts toward a Hallmark film in invoice reports to the city.

Should other cities make this investment?

It's not unusual for cities and towns to take efforts to spread their name in other parts of the country, said Kim Saxton, clinical professor of marketing at the IU Kelley School of Business. "Towns often will do things to get broader coverage than you would expect, I mean we have billboards here for Petoskey in Michigan, so it all depends. It makes sense depending on what the city is trying to accomplish," Saxton said.

Hiring a national firm can help cities that want to build national recognition, and that can help in terms of investors and companies who want to support or move to a community, Saxton said.

"If you're trying to build a national reputation, and I think Carmel is, between the Palladium and the roundabouts they're clearly distinguishing themselves as a place to be," Saxton said. Two neighboring cities have not gone Carmel's route.

Indianapolis and Fishers do not have consultants that pitch stories about the cities to national media outlets, representatives told IndyStar.

The challenge, though, is that it's hard to measure the effectiveness of public relations, Saxton said.

"You have to invest in having somebody who's making contacts and putting your name in front of reporters, but then you never

know if the reporters are actually going to do anything with it,” Saxton said.

But, DeRocker said national media during the past decade have been interested in Carmel, and they continue to be.



"For all my efforts, it's still not as if Carmel's been overexposed," DeRocker said. "It's not like the New York Times is tired of talking about roundabouts."

Brainard said getting the city's stories out into the world is critical.

“In Indiana and the Midwest in general, I think sometimes we tend to be humble people not talking about our accomplishments, but perhaps we need to to succeed, to be more competitive,” Brainard said. “Carmel is a great place, we need to

let the rest of the world know about that, and that's why we use Rob, it's some of the best value we get."

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