



Top 10 places to (fill in the blank) Why we read city rankings and why marketers love us for it

By Amy Hoak, MarketWatch

CHICAGO (MarketWatch) — For someone casually surfing the Web, lists that rank places can be oh so tempting to read. The most earth-friendly cities. The most haunted cities. The most sex-happy cities. The most bedbug-infested cities.

Try as you might to resist the urge to click, chances are your mouse will succumb.

There's an explosion of best and worst cities lists these days for a couple of reasons, said Bert Sperling, of Sperling's Best Places, a firm that analyzes data about people and places, and ranks them.

For one, lists are a way people can easily digest information at a time when the Internet puts so many facts at our fingertips, Sperling said. Rankings also can have goals of improving awareness: Men's Health's deputy editor, Matt Marion, said that the magazine's "MetroGrades" lists can identify health problems or successes in an area, and ultimately bring about positive change for a community.

But publishers also are finding that lists are a great way to get attention for their Web sites, Sperling said. "Some [lists] are pretty good and others are, well, they're mainly to drive traffic," he said.

[See our slideshow on 7 of the more-unusual 'best of' lists.](#)

From a marketing standpoint, a list can be an inexpensive way to sneak a brand into editorial content: "It's a marketer's dream to generate these lists," said Marian Salzman, president of Euro RSCG Worldwide PR, North America. As soon as you assemble the ranking, you've created a piece of news, she said, and in these times "there's a proliferation of new media outlets so there is a crying need for more content."

You can also blame human nature: Often we're simply curious about the winners and losers and how our home city stacks up, she said.

"People crave to know who is the top and who is the bottom," Salzman said. "We don't care about what is happening in the middle... we're interested in the fringe."

Ranking cities

Some city rankings raise consumer awareness and can play some sort of a role in helping people make smart decisions.

For example, lists of bedbug-infested cities were put out by both Orkin and Terminix earlier this year; Terminix found New York to be the most infested, while Orkin said it treated the most cases in the Cincinnati area. Atlanta recently topped a list of best places for college graduates, courtesy of Apartments.com and CareerRookie.com, and the most earth-friendly city in 2010 is Portland, Ore., according to RelocateAmerica.com.



The Kehoe House in Savannah, Ga., a bed-and-breakfast inn with a haunting reputation. But some lists are more entertaining than informative. Example: The most haunted city is Savannah, Ga., according to Rent.com.
[See the full list of haunted cities.](#)

Then there's the manliest city, a distinction awarded to Charlotte, N.C., by Mars Chocolate North America, which commissioned Sperling's Best Places to rank the manliest cities for one of its brands, Combos

To come up with a ranking, Sperling considered such data as the number of steak houses in each city, as well as home-improvement stores and Harley Davidson dealers. He also tapped Audit Bureau of Circulation data: "Manly guys are more likely to read Popular Science than GQ... they read Hot Rod and Car and Driver and less of Architectural Digest," he said.

[See the full list of manliest cities.](#)

America's most sex-happy city is Austin, Texas, according to Men's Health. The ranking is based on condom sales data from Nielsen, birth rates and sexually transmitted diseases data from state health departments and sex toy sales from specific speciality retailers.

[See full list of sex-happy cities.](#)

Hitting home

But Marion, of Men's Health, said the magazine is looking to give its readers more than just a good time when they rank cities in monthly "MetroGrades" lists. Most of the lists are related to health in some way, and they can serve as pats on the back for those that do well and warning signs for those that need improvement.

"The first one got a lot of attention from cities, and that was water quality... how safe is your water, how clean is it," Marion said. Since then, the magazine has covered a wide range of topics from the amount of sleep residents of cities get to their charitable giving to their fast food consumption, he said.

When city rankings come out, the results can become a local story.

Some cities promote their rank on RelocateAmerica.com's best places to relocate list, slapping the distinction on Web sites, light post banners or signs as you enter town, said Steve Nickerson, president of TrueV New Media, which operates the RelocateAmerica.com Web site.

"If [a city] is good in one thing or another, that becomes a big selling point, and it's easier for businesses to move there if they're somewhere else. They can entice employees to the quality of life," Sperling said.

Sometimes even ranking poorly on a list can have a silver lining. A poor grade can light a fire under local officials to address a problem and improve the city's reputation, Sperling said.

One of the first lists Sperling worked on was for Money magazine, which found that Flint, Mich., was the worst city in the country to live in. The ranking ended up being easy fodder for Michael Moore's film "Roger & Me," which examined the negative impact of General Motors downsizing in the area.

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