

Memorial Blood Centers Case Study

Catherine Roman

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Abstract

The Memorial Blood Centers of Minnesota has been continually serving the community since it was founded in 1948 to provide blood to patients in need. Unfortunately it has also faced an ongoing crisis since its inception, the lack of willing donors which leads to severe blood shortages that endangers the lives of the people the blood center is dedicated to serving. As a result, they have launched an ongoing crisis management public relations campaign with the goal of raising their visibility within the community, generating awareness of the need for healthy blood, and building a relationship with the people in their community. They have done this by partnering with local organizations to create blood drives, hosting an annual benefit event for donors, recipients, and sponsoring organizations, driving to on-site donations in the highly visible 'blood mobile', generating news worth press releases and annual community reports to keep the public informed, and finally creating programs designed to educate high school students about the need for repeat blood donors. These measures have proved successful, though there is still more the Memorial Blood Center can do to increase its visibility and achieve its ultimate goal of not having any blood shortages in the area they serve.

The Memorial Blood Centers of Minnesota is an independent nonprofit organization located in Minnesota dedicated to providing blood products as well as biomedical services to benefit the community. It operates eleven donor centers, which together provide blood and blood components to over 30 hospitals in Minnesota and northern Wisconsin (Appendix A). These centers allow the organization to provide a variety of technical services including paternity testing, reference lab work, virology testing, research and consulting, organ, stem, and marrow transplant support and nucleic acid testing. Thanks to the dedicated and knowledgeable staff, the Memorial Blood Centers has become a national leader in transfusion medicine, which allows them to provide technical services to clients throughout the U.S. helping save not only lives near the metro area, but elsewhere as well. Despite its prestige, the blood center has been forced to battle several ongoing public relations ‘crisis’. The most important of these is a severe shortage of people who are willing to donate blood. As a result, the Blood Centers has enacted a public relations campaign to combat this issue using several tactics to try and inspire community involvement and education. The only question is whether these tactics have been successful or not.

The Memorial Blood Centers of Minnesota was founded in 1948 as a result of a realization springing from WWII, that the U.S. needed a coordinated system to receive, store, and distribute blood. The center operated for several years under the name Minneapolis War Memorial Blood Bank and originally welcomed labor unions, lodges, and business groups to donate blood through organized blood clubs. As a result, people began banking blood for others under a reciprocity agreement, which quickly caught on and spread to other communities within the state. In the several ensuing decades, the

Blood Centers expanded its programs adding virology services, the rare blood donation program, and tissue compatibility testing. By 1992, the name had changed to the Memorial Blood Centers of Minnesota and the main building had been moved to its current location. Shortly afterwards, several new blood banks sprung up in partnership with the Memorial Blood Centers bringing its total locations up to 11. Since its beginnings, the Memorial Blood Centers has collected, tested, and distributed over 3,000,000 units of blood and has saved an estimated 6,000,000 lives as a result of their blood programs.

Unfortunately, this amount of blood simply isn't enough to alleviate the Blood Centers' ongoing crisis, an extreme blood shortage that threatens the lives of many patients within the hospitals they service. This is particularly true considering 70% of staffed hospital beds within the Twin Cities depend on the center for blood. This is a problem on a national level, not just within the Minneapolis area. Over 4,500,000 people need blood transfusions each year in North America. This equates to around 43,000 pints of blood needed every day. In fact, every two seconds someone in North America requires blood. These blood recipients do not only include accident victims (as is the popular belief), but also cancer patients, burn victims, people undergoing surgery, and people suffering from anemia (Appendix B). Sadly, while 37% of the U.S. population is eligible to donate their blood, less than 10% actually do. This leads to dangerously low levels of blood in stock, which often results in people who need blood not being able to get it and dying as a result. This also means that many patients on organ donor lists are unable to receive available organs because compatible blood cannot be found to support the transplant. These problems are especially evident during the summer months as well

as the winter holidays because people are more likely to be moving around and thus are at high risk of suffering an accident. However, most blood centers often run low on blood types O and B at various times of the year, not just during specific seasons since these types of blood are rare. This is a huge detriment to hospitals because the majority of modern medical care depends on a steady supply of blood from donors because blood cannot be synthesized in labs. There simply is no possible substitute for volunteers.

The need for blood donation is evident, and the population has heard of the shortages before. However, people still do not donate nearly enough blood mostly because they are easily able to dismiss the promotional messages. In fact, 17% of non-donors cite their primary reason for not giving blood as they never think about it. An additional 15% cite that they are too busy to take the time to donate. The sad fact is that it only takes an hour total to donate blood. Apparently most people remain unaware of this fact, just as they remain unaware that there is a fairly high chance that they will be a blood recipient at sometime in the future because data suggests that approximately 25% of Americans will need blood at least once in their lives. It is important to teach people that donations are quick, relatively painless and just one pint of their blood can be used to aid three people. It is also important to show them that just a small change in the behavior of potential blood donors could save millions of lives. If every donor gave blood just three times a year (donations are possible every 56 days so people can donate a maximum of six times per year) rather than the average two times for repeat donors, blood shortages would become rare. Additionally, if just 1% more of the U.S. population donated blood, shortages could be completely eliminated for the foreseeable future. This is the ultimate

goal of many blood centers serving the community because it means that their constituents are not in danger of dying while waiting for blood that they so badly need.

The Blood Centers has created an ongoing ‘crisis management strategy’ in order to combat these critical shortages by employing a number of public relations and marketing campaigns designed to educate the general public about the importance of saving lives through donating blood. However, the Blood Centers, as a non-profit organization, faces several unique problems, most notably that only 2% of its annual budget is allocated for public relations activities (Appendix C). This means that it needs to be careful of how it promotes itself. The Memorial Blood Centers needs to pick and choose its campaigns resulting in a very specific goal. It wants to raise awareness of the Blood Centers and for its volunteers by inspiring a community feel and emphasizing its main message, that blood is the ultimate renewable resource. Giving it saves lives without posing any significant risk to the volunteer.

One of the most important and noticeable ways the Memorial Blood Centers promotes its message that blood saves lives is by partnering with various organizations within the metro community and hosting donation events. These events target a variety of audiences depending on whom the blood center has partnered with. For example, if the partner is a church then the target audience tends to be the congregation of that specific church. If the partner is the University of Minnesota or the Minnesota Vikings, the target audience tends to be very different. However, all of these groups are targeted mostly because they are all members of the community that is served by the Memorial Blood Center, and everyone is needed to donate blood, not just a specific demographic. As a

result, the core message is always the same as well, that the community needs blood in order to save the lives of the people within it.

During these donation events, the partnering organizations work to attract a large number of people who are willing to learn about the importance of blood donation and physically volunteer themselves. These can often take place on site because the Memorial Blood Centers owns a 'blood mobile' which is essentially a truck that houses all the tools the center needs to conduct donation events wherever they are needed. This goes back to one of the Center's core principles, community involvement particularly because these charity events take place directly within the community. A close connection with the community is what allows the Blood Centers to conduct these drives and find success doing so. According to Wendy Capetz, a member of the marketing and communications department at the blood center, because the Memorial Blood Centers has been serving the community since 1948, it is very easy for them to gain sponsors and maintain long standing relationships with them. In fact, she mentioned that many of the partners involved with their donation programs have had a relationship with the center since its inception and as a result have a very strong corporate giving program with proceeds given directly to the center (personal communication, April 23, 2010). However, there are many newer organizations that have formed ties with the Blood Centers as well. Many of these groups call the center and directly request involvement while other are scouted out by donor recruitment teams that are sent out by the center to solicit involvement.

Even though the Blood Centers conducted over 2,100 blood drives last year, the most attention getting events are those that include high profile or large-scale partners. Two of the most notable for the blood center is their partnership with the University of

Minnesota and with the Minnesota Vikings. These events not only gain publicity just by occurring, but they also merit public relations action to promote them on the radio, through organizational websites, and even in press releases to newspapers. These large-scale donations are also particularly useful public relations events because the Blood Centers' public relations team works together with the partnering organization's team to generate even more attention. For example, the partnership with the Minnesota Vikings proved mutually beneficial because it promoted the Vikings as a team involved with the community and charity work, and it brought a lot of attention and participation in the blood drive because well known players showed up to the event. Several other promotional activities were also announced in connection with the blood drive including contests to win a trip as well as drawings for Vikings gear. Clearly partnering with popular organization helps the Memorial Blood Centers' goal of increasing awareness of the importance of blood donation because it gathers a far larger audience than its smaller counterparts. It also become a news worthy event so the center gets a lot of exposure thanks to earned media. These donation events are clearly highly successful at increasing visibility as well as fostering community relations and as a result should be continued.

It is also worth noting that the blood mobile itself is yet another public relations technique because it enhances awareness of the organization by displaying its logo and the people save by blood donations on the side while it drives down the street for everyone to see. It also furthers community involvement because it allows people the comfort of donating blood on site. Finally, the Blood Mobile is a good source of brand equity for the Blood Centers because everyone who sees it knows exactly what the vehicle is for and whom it belongs to.

However, the Memorial Blood Centers also does more promotional events that generate a lot of PR as well. Its biggest one is the ‘What’s Your Type?’ benefit which aims to bring blood donors, community organizations, and blood recipients together to support the cause. The benefit also aims to raise money and increase awareness of the Blood Centers’ mission and to inspire community involvement. Tickets to the benefit cost \$75 with all proceeds going to financially support the Blood Centers, allowing them to purchase necessary supplies. For example, last year the benefit generated enough revenue that the Memorial Blood Centers was able to purchase a new blood mobile to replace some of its outdated models. The ‘What’s your Type?’ benefit includes food and beverages provided by 15 locally owned restaurants, live auctions, and a concert featuring local artist Tim Mahoney. This local emphasis and target audience again fosters relationship building while the theme of the evening continues to support the Blood Centers’ main message, that blood donation is vital to the health of the community.

However, the Blood Center’s newest and possibly most important campaign is their high school out reach program. Basically representatives from the Blood Centers travel to high schools and organize donations in order to educate the youth of the nation about the importance of blood donation while they are still young and idealistic. This is also a way for them to expand into a newer demographic since the average blood donor is very different from the typical high school student (Appendix D). In this way the center hopes to create life long donors, especially because it is possible for a person to donate nearly 42 gallons of blood in their lifetime if they begin at age 16 (the legally eligible age to donate blood) and continue to donate every 56 days until they are 78. The center provides an educational pamphlet titled the High School Workshop. This pamphlet

includes information about setting up donation events, basic information about blood and blood components, requirements for donation, and a parental permission form for donors who are only 16 years of age. This out reach program has resulted in a huge number of participating schools and lead to an increased awareness of the Blood Centers.

It also helps that the Memorial Blood Centers understands that the youth market is heavily into social media. As a result, the Blood Centers has supplemented this educational visit and donation partnership with schools with other communications techniques that target high school students. Last year the center created a Facebook account as well as a Twitter account. This allows the technology savvy youth to follow the actions taken by the center as well as to gain information on upcoming charity events. Employing social media is also important to the mission of the blood center, promoting the importance of blood donation, because it allows for greater exposure since people are able to 'become a fan' of the center which then appears on all their friend's news feeds furthering the reach of any public relations attempt.

It is important to understand that while these charity events do a lot to grow the supply of blood and money given to the Blood Centers, they are by no means the centers' only means of public relations activities. It is also known to distribute its information via direct mail specific to particular events as well contribute press releases for news worthy events and radio advertisements on stations such as AM 500 in order to promote their activities. However, the blood center also takes care to keep stakeholders involved and knowledgeable about the brand. Every year the Memorial Blood Centers generates a report to the community which is posted online and illustrates the revenue of the brands as well as how they spend their money, the major donators of the year and several other

important tid bits of information that the community is entitled to. This emphasis on community involvement also fosters a strong relationship with stakeholders because the center demonstrates care for their opinions.

All of these techniques have demonstrated at least some measure of success. The Blood Centers' main goal was to increase awareness, not necessarily to gain a specific number of donors and in that regard I believe they have succeeded. This is backed up by raw data demonstrating that Minnesota, and especially Minneapolis demonstrate a strong interest in blood donation. Google trends reveals that Minnesotans are third in the nation for searching for information on blood donation while the city of Minneapolis itself ranks is number six on the same list (Appendix E). Clearly the Memorial Blood Centers must be doing something right if it has demonstrated results showing that Minnesota has one of the country's largest interests in donating blood.

Luckily for the blood center, they are in a unique position to appeal to a broad range of people with very few threats. This is especially obvious when examining it on a SWOT analysis:

Strengths

- Mature organization
- Good community relations
- Staffed by leading experts in the field
- Offers a variety of specialized services
- Very good reputation
- Well-known partners

Weaknesses

- Does not operate on a national level
- Access to fewer resources than larger organizations
- Very small communications budget

Opportunities

- Access to a huge youth market
- Growing trend towards community service
- Access to a large population
- Smaller size makes a 'local' connection easier
- Many groups asking to work with them

Threats

- Fears about donating blood
- Ignorance about blood's importance
- 17% of the population doesn't think about donating
- 13% of population believes they don't have time to donate
- False perceptions

Luckily for the Blood Centers, it has been doing an extraordinarily good job promoting its services. I would recommend they continue along the same path, specifically continuing to offer large scale blood drives, especially those partnered with huge, well known organizations or featuring local celebrities who will draw in a crowd. I also recommend that the center continues their What's Your Type benefit because it is important to allow volunteers to see that their efforts really did save a life and have a tangible impact on the world. Talking to someone whose life was directly saved by your

blood would quickly make anyone a repeat donor. This event also fosters good will within the community and provides the center with a large amount of earned media, which is invaluable to their organization. I also believe the blood center needs to continue to emphasize the community in its public relations activities. It is important for people to feel included and updated on the results of their financial and biological donations. As a result, annual consumer reports and a visible presence within communities are invaluable to the center.

One of the few suggestions I would tell them to alter however is how they go about advertising to the youth. This is a potentially huge and relatively untapped market for blood donation, though many of us would love the chance to donate and feel like we are doing a difference in the world. As a result, I would tell the Blood Centers to continue to market to a younger generation, but to tweek the way they advertise, as well as to slightly alter their market. The center puts a huge emphasis on high school students, but with one of the largest universities in the nation just down the street, they really should take advantage and do more to appeal to college students looking to do some good and make a difference in the world. We would defiantly show up for blood drives if we knew where they were better. More posters should be placed around the campus to attract student attention, the drive should also be featured in the daily, and an email announcement would really make sure people were aware of the event.

However, the most important change they could make regarding the youth demographic is to alter they way they try to reach them online. Clearly social media is the communication wave of the future, with many college students only responding to it. However it is also clear that the messages simply aren't reaching the younger generation.

This is most likely because nobody is particularly aware that the Memorial Blood Centers even has a facebook page. If they could make this more widely known, more people would be able to get involved and as a result, even more people would be exposed to the center's message.

Despite a lack of budget for communications activities, the Memorial Blood Centers has done extremely well promoting their message and fostering relationship-building activities. Between press releases, high school outreach programs, benefit events, and donation actions, Minnesota has become one of the areas of the country most interesting in donating blood. Now all the Memorial Blood Centers has to do is continue its activities while promoting themselves on social networking sites to college students and highschoolers. If they do so, there is no telling their potential for success. Who knows, they may even be able to completely eliminate blood shortages in the state of Minnesota.

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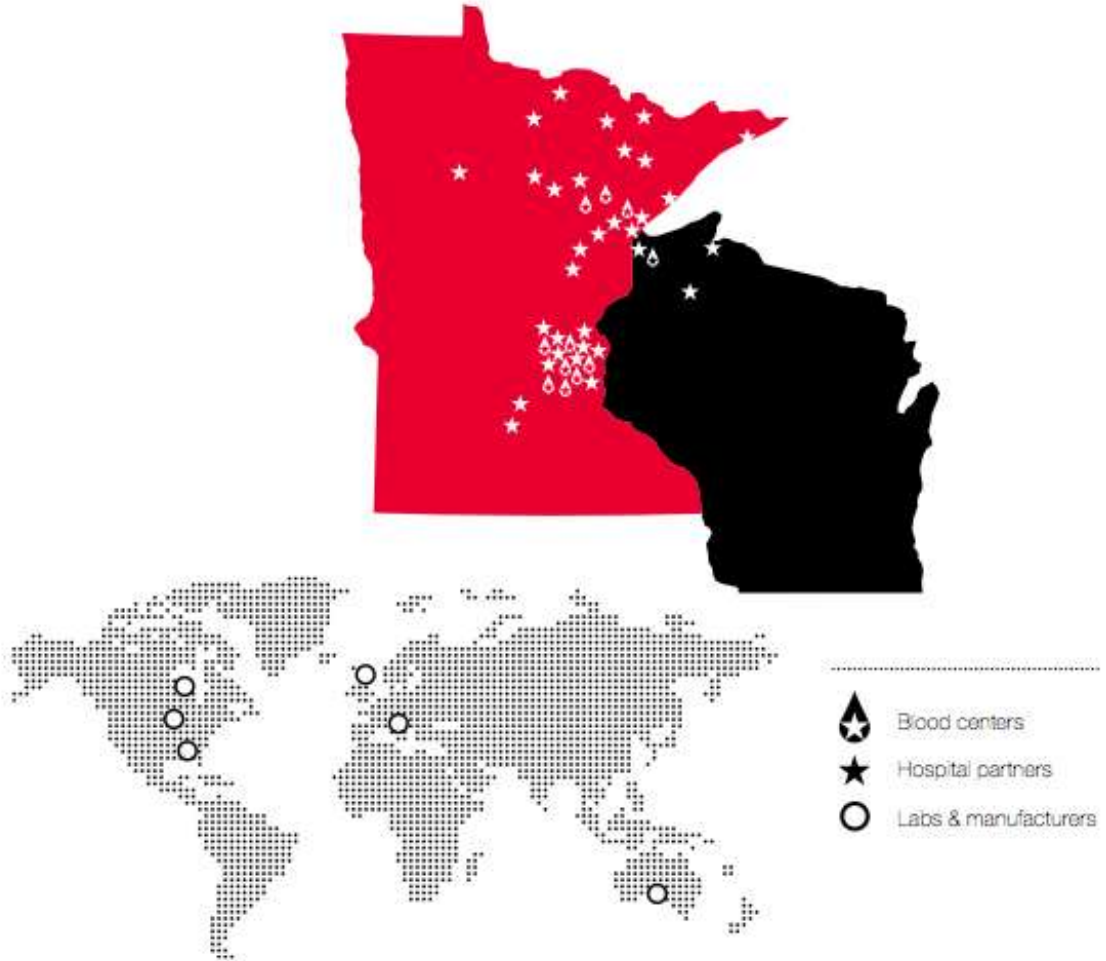
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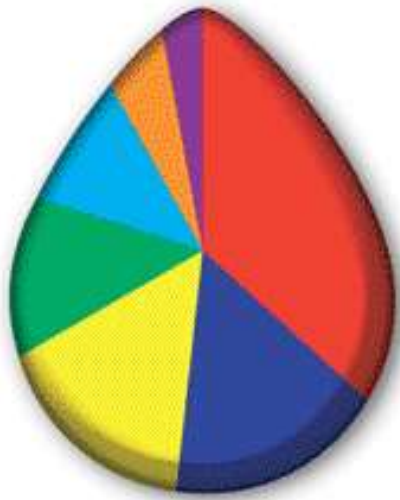
Appendix A

Service Area of the Memorial Blood Centers



Appendix B

How Donated Blood is Used



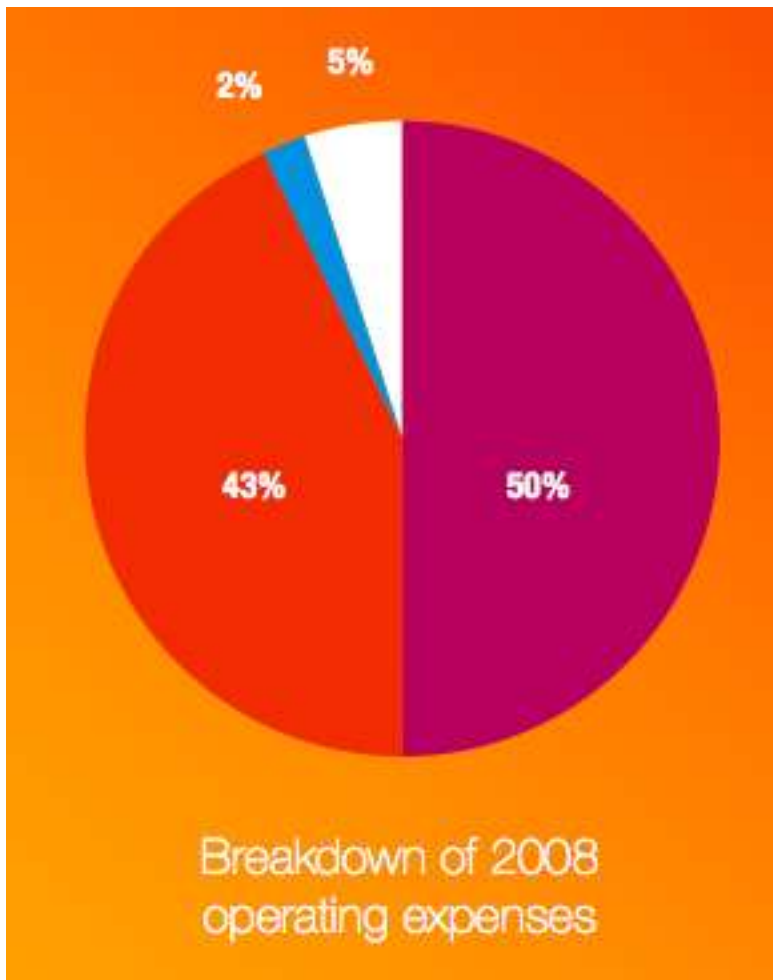
The red cells from your donation are used in the following ways:

- 34% Cancer and blood diseases
- 19% Other causes of anaemia
- 18% Surgical patients including open heart surgery and burns
- 13% Other medical problems including heart, stomach and kidney disease
- 10% Orthopaedic patients including fractures and joint replacements
- 4% Obstetrics, including pregnant women, new mothers and young children
- 2% Trauma including road accidents

Source: Bloodhound Study (ARCBS and Monash Institute of Health Services Research) 2007

Appendix C

Memorial Blood Center Finances



- 50%: Collections, testing and laboratory supplies
- 43%: Employee talent and related costs
- 2%: Marketing, communications, development
- 5%: Other

Appendix D

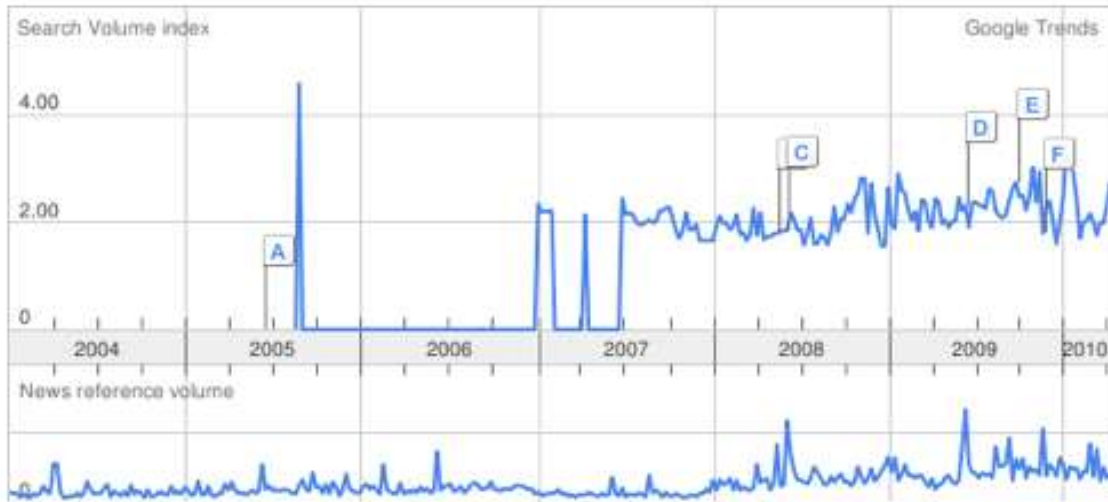
Blood Donor Demographics

Who Donates Blood in the United States?

Median Age	38 years old
Male	53% of Red Cross donors
Female	47% of Red Cross donors
Repeat donors	79.3% of Red Cross donors
First-time donors	20.7% of Red Cross donors

Appendix E

Google Search Trends About Blood Donation



Subregions

1. [Indiana](#), United States
2. [Maryland](#), United States
3. [Minnesota](#), United States
4. [Utah](#), United States
5. [Wisconsin](#), United States
6. [Nebraska](#), United States
7. [District of Columbia](#), United States
8. [South Carolina](#), United States
9. [Iowa](#), United States
10. [Connecticut](#), United States

Cities

1. Madison, WI, USA
2. Indianapolis, IN, USA
3. Columbus, OH, USA
4. Baltimore, MD, USA
5. Salt Lake City, UT, USA
6. Minneapolis, MN, USA
7. Austin, TX, USA
8. Boston, MA, USA
9. Raleigh, NC, USA
10. San Antonio, TX, USA