



Downtown Economics

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Ideas for Increasing Economic Vitality in Community Business Districts

Innovative Downtown Businesses

New Website Showcases Businesses that are Bringing People Back Downtown

By Bill Ryan and Dale Mohr*

Downtowns no longer have the traditional department stores that once anchored their "main street," and long gone are the days when they were the one-stop shopping center for the community. Consumers have become more sophisticated and competition has intensified. Further, in today's competitive retail market, chains continue to bypass downtown in their site selection process. One may ask; is there anything we can do to help downtowns strengthen business activity?

There is hope for increasing business activity and bringing people back downtown. A number of vibrant communities have retained and increased retail activity in their central business districts by focusing on unique and innovative businesses. These vibrant downtowns often have a number of retail and service establishments that are able to successfully co-exist with the retail giants by building on their downtown's unique sense of place and by offering products and services not found in the big box stores.

Creation of a Web-Based Clearinghouse

To help generate ideas for successful downtown business expansion and recruitment, the University of Wisconsin-Extension has created a web-based clearinghouse of innovative businesses that are bringing people back downtown. The website offers brief case studies that include products sold, niche developed, market segments served, and synergy created downtown. The businesses are searchable by category (such as home furnishings, clothing, sporting goods, hobby, books, and restaurants) and size of community. This website will be used to:

- Provide ideas to local economic development professionals to support their business retention/expansion and recruitment efforts.

- Provide existing and prospective entrepreneurs with profiles of businesses that are successful in small-city downtowns throughout the county (with a focus on the Midwest).

Business Selection Criteria

One of the most important criteria used in selecting businesses for the clearinghouse is the businesses' ability to increase pedestrian traffic and sales volume in their downtown area. Often this is by offering unique products and services. While businesses are selected on the basis of how innovative they are (not necessarily how financially successful they are), selection criteria favors establishments that have been in operation for three or more years.

The clearinghouse contains a one-page description of each business including:

- Background on business and community
- Products sold & niche developed
- Market segments served
- Contributions to the business community

Recent Featured Businesses		
Walkabout	Antiques and Used Merchandise Stores	Eagle River, WI
HoopLa!	Gift Stores, Office Supplies & Stationery	Portage, WI
Hanler's	Gift Stores, Office Supplies & Stationery	Shullsburg, WI
Hamann's Variety Store	General Merchandise Stores	Prairie du Chien, WI
The Family Piano Co.	Sporting Goods, Hobby, and Musical Instrument Stores	Waukegan, WI
Burkhartmeyer Shoes	Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores	Faribault, MN
Rad Dee Frida	Antiques and Used Merchandise	Madison, WI

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/downtowns/innovative/>

Examples of Innovative Downtown Businesses

Each business has a different story to tell and a lesson for other downtown business operators. The examples already posted to the website offer some useful and unique ideas such as:

- Provide day-to-day necessities lacking in a small community (Pick & Shovel Building Materials, Newport, VT)
- Meet the needs of local 'do-it-yourselfers' (House of Homebrew, Green Bay, WI)
- Attract patrons through the re-use of a downtown landmark (Tittletown Brewing Company, Green Bay, WI)
- Provide authentic local products in a friendly atmosphere (Baumgartner's Cheese Store, Monroe, WI)
- Provide inspiration and fun through products that spark the imagination (Gepetto's Workshop, Stevens Point, WI)
- Provide old world charm and service (Hamann's Variety Store, Prairie du Chien)
- Develop a distinct product niche and market broadly (Hoffman's Patterns of the Past, Princeton, IL)
- Make music and the arts available to everyone (The Family Piano Co., Waukegan, IL)
- Specialize in foot care, not just shoes! (Burkhartzmeyer Shoes, Faribault, MN)

Eventually, hundreds of businesses from small to medium sized downtowns will be posted to the site. The site is intended to provide existing and prospective entrepreneurs with innovative ideas for their downtowns, and provide local economic development leaders with realistic direction for their business expansion and recruitment efforts.

Finally, the site is designed to serve as a companion resource to the online Downtown & Business District Market Analysis toolbox. <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/dma/> Good market analysis can be strengthened with real-life examples of businesses that are bringing vitality back downtown.

Nominate an Innovative Business in Your Downtown

This web site is continuously growing based on your nominations. To recommend a business for inclusion in the Innovative Downtown Business clearinghouse, go to:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/downtowns/innovative/>

The click on "recommend a business".

For more information, email bill.ryan@uwex.edu

* Bill Ryan is a community business development specialist with the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Center for Community and Economic Development. Dale Mohr is the Community Resource Development educator with the University of Wisconsin-Extension in Oconto County.

Contact: Bill Ryan, Center For Community & Economic Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
610 Langdon Street, Madison, WI 53703-1104

PH: (608)265-8136; FAX: (608)263-4999; TTY: (800)947-3529; HTTP://WWW.UWEX.EDU/CES/CCED

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