



Downtown Economics

Issue 136
December 2007

Ideas for Increasing Economic Vitality in Community Business Districts

Ten Realistic Retail Themes for a Vibrant Downtown

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Based on market analysis findings from many communities, coupled with business examples being submitted to the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Innovative Downtown Business online clearinghouse, ten broad categories of retail are emerging as "good fits" for downtown. These can include both chains and independents and should be considered when a community develops its business expansion and recruitment wish list.

1. Lifestyle and Wellness Retail – An innovative example of a business designed to respond to busy lifestyles is *Meal Time* in downtown Platteville, WI. This independent business allows busy people to prepare their own healthy meal, take it home to freeze or bake at their convenience. The business creates late afternoon traffic for the nearby wine and cheese store and fitness center. *Ladles to Linens* in Winnsboro, TX is a gourmet kitchen shop, offering a wide variety of cooking supplies and allows shoppers to take evening cooking classes. Shoppers are drawn from as far as Dallas and may stay downtown for a visit to the spa and the nearby café. *Earth Rider* is a bicycling business in downtown Broadhead, WI that supports a lifestyle of fitness, achievement, well-being, and quality of life through cycling. The business combines a retail store, rentals, tour packaging and a bicycling inspired inn providing an escape from urban stress.



Earth Rider in Broadhead, WI is a bike shop on the first floor and a five-room bike-themed hotel on the 2nd floor.

2. Community Gathering Place Businesses – Downtown's "central place" and "sense of place" make it uniquely suited for people to congregate for social or community purposes. The *Red Mug Coffee* in

downtown Superior, WI has carved out a niche, not only as a coffee shop, but also as a culturally aware store promoting the arts and organic/fair-trade food. They have become a gathering spot to organize community oriented events geared toward education and activism. *Just Food Coop* in Northfield, MN is a full-service natural foods grocer, featuring organic and locally produced high quality items. The business is cooperatively owned by 1,600 community members. Customers browse the unique selection of foods and talk with other customers or store employees. It has become a community meeting place.

3. Retailers that Celebrate Local Heritage – The character of traditional downtowns is well suited to businesses who sell products to celebrate the past. While antique shops are common examples of such stores, other retailers also celebrate a community's past. In Prairie du Chien, WI, The wood counters and floor found in *Hamann's Variety Store* add to the nostalgic atmosphere of the community. Candy purchased at the old wood counter remind many parents of the corner stores of their youth while creating the same kind of memories for their kids. *Sarah Winter Clothworks* has helped call attention to the textile manufacturing heritage in Willimantic, CT. Clothing is designed, cut, dyed and sewn by hand onsite using natural fibers, such as hemp and organic cotton. Because the products they sell are made in their store, the business is creating a connection that celebrates local heritage.

4. Stores that Entertain – "Shopper-entertainment" is the concept adopted by certain major chains in recent years. But entertainment can be part of the downtown retail experience on a smaller scale. The *Mustard Museum* in Downtown Mount Horeb, WI, has become a draw to many visitors because the business promotes laughter and entertainment through products such as "Evaporate Your Eyeballs Hotsauce" and collegiate T-shirts carrying the name "POUPON U." Similarly, *Das Wurst Haus* in Lanesboro, MN sells German deli food (sausages, mustards, breads) in an entertaining way. Owners lure customers in with the sound of an accordion and the smell of great food.

5. Stores that Celebrate Local Arts – Often people look to downtown as a place where local and authentic products are sold. Unlike the regional mall, downtowns often have stores showcasing locally made jewelry, art and gifts. *Wind, Water and Light* in downtown

Champaign, IL features original pieces from 180 local and national artists. The gallery includes jewelry, glassware, fiber arts, ceramics, metalwork, woodwork, sculpture, paintings, and photography. They developed a reputation as a gallery that educates its customers about the art, the process and the artist.

6. Stores that Educate - Businesses that provide the community with education to accompany its products often find downtown an attractive place to do business. The *Family Piano Co.* has played an active role in the revitalization of downtown Waukegan, IL. Not only do they sell and service pianos, but they offer shop tours, lessons, and performances. *Scrapbook Attic* in Fremont, OH sells scrap-booking essentials, but also free workshops and cropping time at their workshop. For families, *Wooden You Know* is an independent store that sells toys geared toward educational play. The store chooses quality products with high safety standards, often chosen from small US manufacturers who use renewable resources and promote fair trade.

7. Stores with a Community and Global Perspective – A growing segment of the population is interested in supporting businesses that help the local economy and contribute to a better world. *Autumn Leaves* has developed a niche in Ithaca, NY as a used bookstore with the selection and quality of a new bookstore. It is an exchange bank for the Ithaca HOURS program, a local currency effort in which 600 businesses participate. By participating, these businesses help keep dollars local and promote growth of the Ithaca economy. *Earth and State* in Media, PA is a pottery store that carries an eclectic variety of gift items, including musical instruments, candles, local crafts and music. A quarter of the merchandise at Earth and State is Fair-Trade certified. The focus at Earth and State is on local artists, but integrated with pottery and pieces from all over the world. The *Earth Rider* bicycle store and inn (mentioned earlier) demonstrates a respect for the environment through its green business practices, promotion of bicycling, and commitment to preserving community heritage as demonstrated through its building rehabilitation.

8. Gift and Indulgences Stores – *Chocolate Harbor* in St. Clair, MI is committed to the old fashioned method of making everything from scratch. Customers can watch as they make caramel or fondant in the open kitchen, or view the making of fine German chocolate and hand dipped truffles. *Evolutions in Design* in downtown Wausau, WI is a full service floral business with five staff designers to help a customer craft their own unique arrangement. *Evolutions in Design*, also

has a large retail area, where shoppers can buy items ranging from jewelry and gifts to furniture and local art.

9. Unique Destination Retailers – There are many one-of-a-kind innovative businesses that successfully operate downtown. *Hoffman's Patterns of the Past* in Princeton, IL was called a "Sea of China" by the Chicago Tribune as it displays over 175,000 patterns of china. The business draws in customers from throughout the U.S. and supports a vibrant downtown with complementing restaurants, antiques and other gift and home stores. *Burkhartzmeyer Shoes* prides itself with its understanding of and care of feet. They retain two certified Pedorthists to assist customers in finding the perfect shoe. They attract customers from up to 50 miles away and have benefited from physician referrals. Known for its informal friendly atmosphere and long history, *Baumgartners Cheese Store* in downtown Monroe, WI builds on Wisconsin's dairy reputation by offering a wide variety of award-winning cheeses as well as specialty food items like sausage, landjaeger, mustard, and rye bread.

10. Neighborhood Serving Retailers – the growing downtown housing market requires conveniences to support quality of life. Town Meat Market in Garden City, NY is an example of a full-service butcher characterized by high quality products and exceptional customer service. Their specialty is dry-aged prime beef, but their selection of meats includes fresh fish, lobster, chicken, pork, veal, lamb, and a variety of sausages. They offer a door-to-door delivery service six days a week. In Newport, VT, *Pick & Shovel Doit Best Building Materials* demonstrates a commitment to surrounding neighborhoods by filling local product gaps including, appliances, clothing, sporting goods, toys, pet supplies, laundromat, and more.

Restaurants are also a key component to bringing people back downtown and can contribute to a vibrant retail center. While dining places add to vitality and extend commercial activity into the evening, too many can give the appearance of a "café court." Similarly, too many drinking establishments may discourage retail development. Accordingly, a balance between retail and food and beverage establishments is necessary.

Nominate an Innovative Downtown Business

Go to:

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

Click on Recommend a Business.

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