



Downtown Economics

Issue 149
January 2009

Ideas for Increasing Economic Vitality in Community Business Districts

Ten Things Your Organization Can Do During Difficult Economic Times

From the National Trust Main Street Center

The following suggestions were recently offered by the National Trust Main Street Center in response to current economic conditions. While the focus is on Main Street programs, the suggestions are applicable to other types of commercial district groups.

1. Re-think your "Shop Local" strategy.

Promote a "buy local" marketing campaign that invites consumers to consider the benefits of keeping shopping dollars local, to discover great locally made products, and to be "green" by supporting local businesses. The Andersonville neighborhood of Chicago has had tremendous success in building a strong independent business niche and encouraging people to consider shopping local first. Recently, Baltimore Main Streets continued its annual Miracle on Main Street holiday shopping promotion that featured dozens of exciting events including a "buy local" message with a "Do it all without the mall" slogan.

2. Bring educational resources downtown.

Creative partnerships with local colleges, school districts, and Small Business Development Centers can help you expand your services and provide access to local experts and even some volunteer labor. Some examples include a partnership between the Downtown Ellensburg Association (Wash.) and the Public Relations Student Society of America club at Central Washington University to develop a public relations campaign that pitches downtown success stories to offset negative economic news. The Marion Downtown Revitalization Association, Inc., in Marion, Va., collaborated with the Small Business Development Center at the local community college, the local SCORE chapter, and a downtown bank to sponsor a "Small Business Survival Breakfast." Holton (Kan.) Main Street and the Holton High School Computer Business Instruction Program have created student teams who are developing websites for local businesses and videos for business promotion.

3. Make marketing the top priority.

Now is not the time to cut back on advertising and marketing. They may be planning to spend less, but

shoppers haven't stopped buying entirely; your program should try to capture the dollars people are spending by using ads, story placement in the media, and business directories to keep your district in the public eye. One example is the Downtown Westfield Corporation's (N.J.) new "economy-based" advertising campaign, "Shop in Downtown Westfield. We have practically everything," which tells people they can find basic staples downtown instead of traveling out to big-box retailers on the highway. Many Main Street businesses also participate in cooperative advertising packages through which they pool their money to develop group ads that promote the district and sometimes highlight specific products or businesses. Along these lines, Main Street Libertyville (Ill.) has switched its advertising slogan from "Indulge Yourself" to "Unique Stores with Exceptional Values" to match the mood of shoppers this season.

4. Leverage new web-based tools.

Online tools from social networking venues like Facebook bring customers to the websites of Main Street business and introduce Main Street to a broader (and, often, younger) audience. To help local businesses capitalize on the power of the Internet, your Main Street program can provide workshops, training, and resources to business owners on ways to use these tools. The City of Fairfield (Calif.) and its Business Improvement District offer business owners a "How to Make it Through an Economic Downturn" workshop series, which features training in e-commerce, blogs, and digital advertising. Downtown Lee's Summit (Mo.) uses its Facebook page to update people on the latest happenings, ranging from holiday events to the availability of wifi downtown. It also lists downtown businesses that have Facebook pages.



5. Help your retailers re-focus.

Rather than responding to slow times by cutting back merchandise and hours, Main Street managers report their thriving local businesses have refocused their offerings and revisited their operations while business is slow. Encourage your business owners to do the same by making resources available to them and providing training opportunities and other assistance. Now is the time for strategic business improvement and better business planning. Help businesses research their customer's changing preferences. Offer business counseling/coaching services to business owners who may want to reposition by adjusting the products and/or services they offer to keep pace with those changes. Strategies to pave the way for repositioning include encouraging and helping businesses secretly shop their competition and offering a free Secret Shopper Service. Facilitate one or more of the following shifts: products offered, services offered, hours of operation, price points, and business concept.

6. Don't forget advocacy.

As competition for funding heats up in lean times, it's more important than ever to make the case for local revitalization efforts. The onus is on your organization to remind local officials, residents, business owners, and everyone else about the great work your organization does to keep the local economy going.

7. Give everyone a forum.

Some Main Street programs are reporting that many business owners not only look to the organization for guidance and advice: they also appreciate having a sympathetic ear to hear their concerns and a network they can use to discuss stresses. Many communities are reporting increased participation from independent businesses owners and are finding new ways to share their challenges and ideas. One example is Bristol, Vt., which has convened a mini "Economic Summit" of downtown merchants to brainstorm ideas to get through the tough economy.

8. Build excitement downtown.

Use retail promotions and special events to attract people to the district. Most Main Street programs organize holiday open houses that provide an extra incentive for shoppers to patronize the district's businesses. From coordinating with each business to offer hot cocoa and special services such as free gift wrapping to full-scale winter festivals, Main Streets throughout the nation are making the heart of their communities special destinations. For fun all season long, Folsom, Calif., and Durant, Okla., have set up temporary ice skating rinks in their downtowns to provide shoppers with entertainment and make

downtown special. Don't forget that your district should be the center of not only commerce, but culture and civic life. If commerce is slowing down, people may rely on a sense of community to get through the hard times.

9. Enlist the help of all local stakeholders.

Ensuring that downtown thrives benefits everyone and is everyone's responsibility. Enlist the support of the municipality and as many other stakeholders as you can identify that benefit from a strong commercial district. Some examples: The municipality in Twin Falls, Idaho, offers free metered parking on Saturdays; landlords in Summerville, S.C., have lowered rents; the Main Street program in the St. Mark's neighborhood in Boston holds its committee meetings in local cafés; and the local newspapers in Quakertown, Pa., did their part by featuring local businesses in print and offering bundled advertising rates.

10. Remain optimistic.

Stay the course. Main Street programs have a history in dealing with downtimes and have a track record of reversing negative trends. While the media publish stories of doom and gloom daily, nonprofit organizations historically weather economic downturns quite well. This recession should not mean the end of your organization, and donors will be more comfortable giving to Main Street if its board and staff are publicly optimistic. Consider developing talking points for board members to use in discussing Main Street's "party line" about its position during the recession.

Source: Based on the article "Soft Economy Creates Hard Challenges for Some Communities" as published by Andrea Dono of the National Trust Main Street Center.

<http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/soft-economy.html>

Content reprinted with permission

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

An EEO/Affirmative Action Employer, UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA requirements.