

Downtown Promotion Reporter

The tools you need to bring more people and more business downtown



Promotional Tips & Ideas

Some of the best marketing responds to pressing needs and emerging opportunities

Excellent work in advocacy, marketing and promotion, earned Emporia, KS (est. pop. 24,870), five Kansas Main Street Awards. The Main Street organization's approach illustrates the value of using marketing to first address specific needs and then to capitalize on any latent or hidden opportunities for downtown.

One of the most effective projects was a customer-needs survey, which uncovered several opportunities for downtown merchants and downtown marketing.

Simply ask students what they want. The Excellence in Business Development award was given to Emporia Main Street for its efforts in Business Enhancement Surveys, which the Business Enhancement Committee coordinated with the local Future Business Leaders of America.

"We developed a perception survey as a research project that we
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Business Recruitment & Retention

Three-point business recruitment plan relies on marketing at every stage

To cope with ever more vacant space downtown, the City of Sebring, FL is embarking on a business recruitment and retention program. The first step saw consultant Casey Wohl plowing through an extensive marketing analysis and plan completed by the City and setting a firm course of action.

Wohl, owner of Gray Dog Communications, grew up in the area and was hired by the City in February to develop the *Downtown Sebring CRA Business Recruitment and Retention Plan*. In addition to the data, she relied on her own history with the city (est. pop. 10,470).

"I remember all the stores my mom shopped at — they were all located downtown," she says. "There was an evolution where businesses started moving to the major highway that runs through our town. Without directional signage to downtown and with big box stores all along the highway, business owners were looking for high traffic counts. Now because the
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Bingo-like auction of inexpensive items develops new ventures. Quarter Mania brings people out for surprise fun bargains, while helping to develop home-based businesses into potential store operators.3

Interactive maps can demystify, debunk fears about parking. A "Where to Park?" campaign addresses concerns pointing to city-managed lots with interactive information.4

Looking Ahead to June. The month for Father's Day, weddings, and graduations, June is also an opportune season to celebrate downtown history and culture.6

What's needed in a business recruitment packet. Be sure your packet includes these elements to help entrepreneurs decide to invest. . . .9

Get word out: In a tough economy, downtown is where it's at. Consider these four key advantages that downtowns offer businesses, and stay positive.10

Implement a destination-building recruitment plan *(continued from page 1)*

highway is cluttered with businesses, we're actually seeing some specialty businesses migrate back to downtown. We're going to see them migrate faster with new incentive programs. We also need to create more events and more destination retail to make people realize that we have a lively downtown," she says.

To that end, three sets of actions will guide future business development in downtown Sebring: New business recruitment, current business retention, and building a more cohesive downtown district.

Marketing and promotion are instrumental in each of these areas. "If we don't tell people in the community or surrounding communities about these incentive programs that we have, then we can't expect people to come. I'm going to meet with rotaries, chambers, and civic groups to give presentations about the incentive programs that we have. There could be retirees here who want to open small shops. Those are people we're trying to reach. We're really trying to cast the net wide," she says.

Lay groundwork for new business recruitment

As a first step in the process, Sebring will create business recruitment materials, which highlight the benefits of locating downtown including newly developed incentives. The action steps are:

Establish a business recruitment committee.

The goals of this should be to encourage entrepreneurship; maintain and develop the downtown as a mixed-use, multipurpose center; and strengthen existing businesses and the business mix.

The committee should consist of five to seven people and may include business owners, real estate professionals, building owners, bankers, chamber and economic development representatives, and elected officials. It should serve as the management entity for recruitment efforts, focusing on those properties and areas that are critical to the success of downtown.

Develop financial incentive programs. Incentives must address critical priorities/issues that benefit the overall downtown, as well as each business owner.

Develop a business recruitment packet. The packets should be available in print form and electronically (See box, page 9, about what to include).

Implement services to retain current businesses

The second step will be to develop programs and services to strengthen and retain existing businesses. Here, the marketing work will focus on a new image awareness program, which will tackle the overall image of downtown and issues related specifically to parking.

Provide business training as well as technical assistance. Workshops in areas such as marketing, merchandising, accounting, and employee training would be helpful, as well as professional design assistance to improve buildings and landscaping.

Create a low-interest loan pool. Often business and property owners have the desire to make improvements, but do not have readily available cash to do it. Work with local banks to form a low-interest loan pool for business diversification or expansion, and property improvements.

Support expansion/diversification candidates.

Ensure that businesses' needs are being met in order to accomplish their goals, provided the goals are consistent with the downtown markets, niches, and strategy.

Create and enforce a downtown parking policy. Convenient parking and customer access are critical to any successful business. Therefore, priority for on-street parking in downtown must go to customers, not business owners or employees. However, if owners/employees are to use designated parking lots, the lots must be accessible, well-lit (for safety) and paved. The walking routes to and from the lots also must be well-lit and have sidewalks.

Once appropriate designated parking is in place, business and property owners could be asked to sign a voluntary policy or agreement to use designated lots — and to require their employees to use them.

Business owners could watch for violators, and tickets should be issued accordingly. Fines could go into a fund for downtown events, promotion, beautification, etc. If designated employee parking is created, and a reasonable parking policy is enacted and enforced, downtown businesses should not experience a parking problem for their customers.

Implement image/awareness promotions. One of downtown's greatest challenges is the impression that it is in decline. Effective promotion requires expertise and should be marketed as a cohesive group of goods and services. Promotion should be targeted strategically to downtown's markets, and focus on its unique

characteristics and mix of products and services.

Positive changes in downtown should be publicized at least monthly, so customers are intrigued to come and see for themselves what's happening. By creating a "buzz" of interest, downtown begins to build momentum for revitalization efforts. This assists existing business owners and helps attract new ones.

Create a more cohesive downtown

Finally, Sebring will focus on developing a supportive business environment. A key step here will be to develop area-wide marketing campaigns and cooperative advertising opportunities.

Implement cooperative promotions to reach strategic targets. Downtown events and promotions should target specific markets, and then all (or most) businesses should cooperate in promoting that event or theme. Examples of cooperative promotion efforts include seasonal streetscape banners, a business directory/map to downtown, advertising, direct mail campaigns, and niche events. Businesses should also cross-promote for each other.

Address pedestrian customer comfort issues.

Downtown is a pedestrian-oriented district, and as such, it also should be a pedestrian-priority area. Pedestrians who feel comfortable and safe will spend more time (and money) in downtown.

To ensure a comfortable place, consider downtown as "home." In this context, is the "home" inviting? Does it feel comfortable? Are the hallways well-lit? Are there places to sit and relax? Entertaining things for kids? Social places for adults? Downtown needs to consider enhancements to make people feel more comfortable (like crosswalks, lighting, benches, awnings).

Engage citizens in improvements. If downtown is the heart of the community, then all citizens have a stake in its success — everyone "owns" downtown. However, many citizens do not feel a sense of ownership. A downtown revitalization effort presents many opportunities for citizens to become engaged in the process. Tap into the community's volunteer spirit to accomplish some short-term projects downtown, so that citizens can reconnect with their town center.

Track performance. The success of downtown revitalization efforts should be tracked and quantified. Factors to measure include storefront vacancy

rate, event attendance, business sales, foot traffic counts, amount of publicity generated, community participation, buildings rehabilitated, amount of public and private sector investment per year, etc.

Volunteers (youth, seniors) could assist with the tracking efforts (for example, youth doing court-ordered community service time could conduct foot traffic counts). A simple tracking database should be established and maintained so that results can be collected quarterly and tracked for effectiveness over time.

Stay connected through meetings. In Sebring, the establishment of regular monthly meetings has become a success with downtown merchants, tourism officials, chamber reps, elected officials, residents, and others interested in the success of downtown. These should be continued and coordinated/hosted by the CRA to provide a neutral presence at the meetings.

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What's needed in business packet

Be sure that your business recruitment packet includes the following facts and visuals to help entrepreneurs make the decision to invest in downtown.

1. Demographics. Best displayed as maps, tables, charts, and graphs.
2. General market data. Include housing market, employment rates, existing business mix, current investment rates, tourism information, traffic counts, and pedestrian foot traffic numbers.
3. Current and planned projects. Include the location, intended use, size, and completion date. Most effectively portrayed in map format.
4. Commercial and office property listing. Should include maps and contact information.
5. Business basics/start-up information. Useful to both potential and existing businesses.
6. Beautification summary. An overview of downtown's beautification efforts to date.
7. Marketing and promotion summary. Strategic marketing services to promote downtown are a competitive advantage over and above strip malls.
8. Tax credits, employee training, and other benefits available to downtown businesses.

Source: Downtown Sebring CRA Business Recruitment and Retention Plan, Gray Dog Communications.



Web Extras

To read the plan in its entirety, visit www.DowntownDevelopment.com and click on Web Extras.