

Part I: Downtown organizations tackle many diverse challenges

The work of the typical downtown organization encompasses a wide range of activities calling on diverse skills and abilities from an often largely volunteer staff. Over time, priorities change and shift, and certain activities recede as the organization tackles new and more pressing issues.

Results of the recent Downtown Research & Development Center survey show the current priorities for downtown organizations of all types. The four most pressing priorities are Recruitment and Retention, Marketing and Promotion, Visioning, and Capital Improvements.

The data also points out the trend for downtown organizations to begin with a narrow scope of work and to expand their priorities as the organization matures. A similar trend is seen based on city size, with organizations in smaller cities focusing on a more limited set of activities while organizations in larger cities tend to have the resources to tackle multiple issues at the same time.

The survey also looked at how priorities had shifted from 12 to 24 months earlier. Clearly, the recession has had an impact. The vast majority of respondents note that retail vacancies and struggling merchants have led to an increased focus on Recruitment and Retention and Marketing and Promotion. As the executive director of one Main Street program notes, “We’re putting more emphasis on getting new or relocating businesses into town and working with existing businesses to overcome economic hurdles. We need to keep the commercial vacancy rate down and the tax base up.”

Methodology

The Downtown Research & Development Center Priorities Survey was conducted online in May 2010. Over 300

Table 1. Breakdown of respondents by city population

Population	Share of Respondents (%)
10,000 and under	30
10,001 to 30,000	28
30,001 to 60,000	10
60,001 to 100,000	20
100,001 to 300,000	6
300,001 and over	7
Total	100

Table 2. Breakdown of survey respondents by location

Location	Share of Respondents (%)
Pacific	21
Mid-Atlantic	16
Mountain	15
New England	12
South Central	12
Canada	10
South Atlantic	5
West North Central	5
East North Central	3
Total	100

** For the purposes of the survey, the geographic regions are defined as follows.*

East North Central: IL, IN, MI, OH, WI

Pacific: AK, CA, HI, OR, WA

Mid-Atlantic: DC, DE, MD, NJ, NY, PA

South Atlantic: FL, GA, NC, SC, VA, WV

South Central: AR, AL, KY, LA, MS, OK, TN, TX

West North Central: IA, KS, MN, MO, ND, NE, SD

New England: CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT

Mountain: AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, NV, UT, WY

Canada: Countrywide

Table 3. Breakdown of respondents by type of organization

Organization	Share of Respondents (%)
Main Street program	37
Downtown association	17
Special assessment district	17
Hybrid	11
Other	11
Merchants association	5
Chamber of commerce	2
Total	100

downtown organizations provided data about their city, their organization and their work. Throughout the report all numbers and percentages have been rounded, which results in minor discrepancies in the totals.

In the survey, participants were asked to rank their level of involvement in 10 activities, which are commonly undertaken by downtown organizations. In the following pages, this data is presented in four ways. First, we look at the relationship between the organization type and work priorities. Second, we look at the relationship between the city size and work priorities and third, we look at the relationship between the age of the downtown organization and work priorities. Finally, we consider how priorities have changed over the past 12 to 24 months. Each of these topics is considered in a separate section, which includes tabular data and descriptive text.

Definitions

For the purposes of this survey, six types of downtown organization are defined as follows.

- **Main Street Program.** Accredited program of the National Main Street Center.
- **Special Assessment District.** Legal entity allowing for an assessment on

property within a defined area. Revenues from this assessment are then directed back to the area to finance a wide range of services. Such districts are called business improvement districts, business improvement areas, and special improvement districts, among others.

- **Downtown Association.** Not-for-profit corporation working to create a more vibrant community for businesses, property owners, residents, employees, and visitors.

- **Hybrid Organization.** Includes elements from two or more of the other types of organizations on this list, such as a Main Street program that operates a Special Assessment District.

- **Chamber of Commerce.** Not-for-profit business organization focused on ensuring the viability and success of commerce in the area. Downtown revitalization activities may be handled by a special division of the chamber of commerce.

- **Merchants Association.** Not-for-profit retail trade group focused on enhancing the local business environment.

- **Other.** Not classified elsewhere. This category is made up almost exclusively of governmental entities tasked with downtown revitalization.

Core activities

Ten core downtown activities were also defined. For some questions participants were able to detail their “Other” activities as well.

- **Maintenance.** Includes the removal of litter and graffiti, power-washing sidewalks, shoveling snow, landscape maintenance, and other upkeep work.

- **Security.** Includes the deployment of uniformed security and hospitality personnel, cooperative arrangements with the police, and more.

- **Marketing and Promotion.** Includes festival and event programming, retail sales promotions, image enhancement, advertis-

ing and public relations, wayfinding, and related activities to promote the downtown.

- **Business Recruitment and Retention.** Includes market research and analysis, incentives, business incubators, outreach to new or expanding businesses, and other activities to attract and retain businesses.

- **Advocacy and Enforcement.** Includes assistance in the enforcement of laws governing such things as sidewalk vending, street performances, panhandling, vehicle loading and unloading; and advocacy on such issues as street furniture standards, building code compliance, and public behavior and civility.

- **Parking, Transit and Transportation Management.** Includes planning and advocacy for public parking improvements, management of parking facilities, maintenance of transit shelters, and promotion of parking and public transit.

- **Urban Design.** Includes the development of urban design guidelines such as those for streetscapes, signage and lighting; and the management of facade and storefront improvement programs.

- **Social Services.** Includes homeless assistance, job training, and senior and youth programs.

- **Visioning.** Includes district visioning initiatives and strategic planning for the downtown area.

- **Capital Improvements.** Includes advocacy for appropriate lighting, street fur-

Table 4. Breakdown of respondents by years in operation

Age of organization	Share of respondents (%)
Less than 1 year	14
1-2 years	21
3-5 years	32
6-10 years	27
11 years or more	5
Unknown	2
Total	100

niture, trees, planters, and park and public space enhancements.

- **Other.** Includes any work not mentioned elsewhere.

Participant Profile

Participants represent cities of all sizes, and geographic regions in the United States as well as a small number from Canada. They represent all types of organizations working to revitalize central business districts. And they represent both newly formed (less than one year in operation) and well established (11 years or more in operation) downtown organizations.

In general, the distribution in terms of population, organization type, and age reflect very closely what we would expect to see in the nation overall.