

Trend 7: An expanding role for partnerships

Enhancing the downtown customers' experience may demand downtowns expand their scope of cooperation with attractions outside downtown. It may require that old foes like competitive shops or restaurants mend fences. It may force downtown to plan marketing more comprehensively and for the longer term. This all leads to trend number seven: the expanding role of partnerships.

"District features, special programs and shops should be presented as a coherent, quality package. Competitive rivalry within a business district or even among nearby communities doesn't serve anyone well if the goal is to attract visitors and shoppers," says Kathleen Wolf, a research scientist at the University of Washington.

Creating a consistently positive retail experience will always require teamwork and cooperation. "Shoppers may be goal oriented, but they enjoy a collection of products and services that create a pleasant, memorable experience. Merchants must work together to create one or a series of destination districts that welcome and satisfy," Wolf says.

For example, for many years, sponsored trolleys would provide complimentary rides to retail destinations around downtown Red Bank, NJ, on weekends between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In another example, the Mill Valley Film Festival runs a cross-promotion in partnership with businesses in downtown Mill Valley, CA, and nearby downtown San Rafael.

Eagerly received by downtown merchants and commerce champions as a foot traffic generator, the "That's the Ticket" cross-promotion was aimed at making the festival and its host downtowns livelier places. The simple idea: Motivate event-

goers to dine, shop, and stroll before and after the movies they are coming downtown to see.

During the festival, 41 businesses in downtown Mill Valley, and 43 businesses in downtown San Rafael had special offers or discounts described on the festival's website, along with links to their own websites. Participation was convenient and easy, and cost businesses nothing beyond the discounts they were offering to customers holding film festival tickets.

"We left the parameters very open to increase merchant participation. They could make any offer that they wanted. The only restriction we had was that they continue the offer for the entire month of October so that we could create buzz. We didn't want to just do it for the 10 days of the festival. We wanted to create buzz on both ends of the festival," says Joanne Webster, director of the San Rafael Business Improvement District.

"It's a win for the festival because it adds value — it makes it a better experience. It's a win for anybody who goes to the festival because once they've spent \$10 or \$12.50 on their festival screening, they get all this added value from these other places.

"Then, obviously, it's a big win for the merchants, too, because we're promoting them," says Jeromy Zajonc, community manager for the film festival.

The trend toward partnerships is also seen in downtown-wide promotions and more targeted activities, which attract a specific type of customer such as women, seniors, dinners or brides.

In the many years that Naperville, IL, has been hosting "Ladies Night Out," there has been an increasing number of stores that participate as well as shoppers that

attend. "I see more and more downtowns promoting events like these," says downtown manager, Courtney Brown.

While each event is different, one thing is clear: To keep women engaged, fresh new themes and in-store activities are a must.

A Thursday in early October is the right time for "girls" to head to downtown Rochester, MI, for a VIP Girls Night Out event with the clever tag line: Sass in the City.

Rochester takes a high glitz approach to the event with their Tuxedo Brigade, a group of men who are on hand to open doors, carry purchases and act as the paparazzi by taking pictures of all the action.

Participants may also enjoy a free limo ride around downtown. And, of course, 39 participating stores and restaurants offer a wide range of special discounts, demonstrations, samples, and activities.

The Prior Lake, MN, Chamber of Commerce is also targeting women with its twice yearly ladies' Thursday night event. "We do it in the spring and fall. Each one has a different theme. We max out at 450 ladies" says Sandi Fleck, executive director of the Chamber.

"We try to make it unique every single time. Something's always different." One event was a Pajama & Spa Party. "The ladies will come in their pajamas. Some of them will dress for the part and some of them won't," Fleck says.

Other themes included Patriot Day, cowgirls, Halloween, and the 1950s. "We had 'Elvis' show up that time."

Events that highlight downtown's restaurants, bistros and pubs are another sign of the trend toward partnerships. Successful dine-around programs that offer quality and value for today's frugal consumer pack a big economic punch.

During the inaugural "Dine Downtown" San Jose in 2009, three- and four-course prix-fixe menus at \$20, \$30 and \$40 were offered at 27 restaurants. All participating restaurants saw an increase (up to 40 percent) in reservations and new customers, and said that Dine Downtown attracted their target audience and was successful from a marketing standpoint.

The downtown BID in Albany, NY, hosts a spring and a fall "Restaurant Week." In October, 2010, fixed-price three-course meals were offered at 18 restaurants. The events have been going on since 2004, and in that time the estimated economic impact has been more than \$3 million.

In New Rochelle, NY's BID, restaurants offering al fresco dining complete with free Wi-Fi were highlighted during a 2009 "Dine Downtown" event. Because so many customers asked about outdoor dining, the BID is working to win City approval for sidewalk dining, and providing each restaurant with sidewalk fencing featuring the Dine Downtown logo. Free Wi-Fi is provided via the BID's Outdoor Wi-Fi Network.

