Downtown Promotion Reporter

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

Economic Impact

Visitors don't plan trips based on geographic boundaries

Just as downtown businesses are realizing that advertising the downtown as a whole benefits individual merchants, whole communities are reaping the benefits of a more regional approach to marketing their assets.

"We know that people travel from place to place and town to town and don't necessarily travel by county or state lines," says Lisa Challenger, director of Worcester County Tourism in Snow Hill, MD (est. pop. 2,103), who heads up the multi-state Tourism, Arts, and Downtown Development initiative. The TADD effort was launched by the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development. "Then it became more of a grassroots thing and has just grown from there."

The program is meant to attract visitors into downtowns as they travel through a region by highlighting what each community has to offer. To prevent the program from becoming a jumble of "every downtown, we set one criteria," says Challenger. "We decided to reward the towns that had gone through the effort to become designated Main Street communities or arts and entertainment districts. Maryland has programs for both of those."

Originally an in-state effort, TADD eventually expanded to encompass neighboring Delaware. "They had been participating on the sidelines, and wishing they could do something like this, so we said 'Let's do this together.' We had the Delaware Division of Arts decide on their criteria because the two states do not have the same programs. They came up with the towns they wanted to showcase."

When TADD launched, it worked with *Maryland Magazine* on promotion, "which gave us a great kick start," Challenger says. Rack cards were developed to highlight the selected communities, and an Eat. Drink. Buy Art. campaign was launched, complete with a website, a Facebook page, and a 16-page brochure highlighting member communities. A passport contest was also created to encourage people to visit as many member towns as possible. Special weekly contests were offered on the new website to encourage people to post photos and comments, and to answer some of the questions posed in the brochure.

TADD also issues an e-newsletter which highlights a different community each month, as well as providing readers with information on arts-related events in all of the member communities. "And we are now developing a mobile app that will include all 18 towns, and also looking at arts programming on the local NPR affiliate and doing a weekly show on that station," says Challenger.

"It's been very good for us," says Lee Nelson, Executive Director of Downtown Milford, Inc. in Milford, DE (est. pop. 10,122).

It has raised our profile all around the area.

"My information is mostly anecdotal so I can't say it's increased business 120 percent, but it has raised our profile all around the area and we've had people coming into town to look at our public art."

Find a common theme

The Eat. Drink. Buy Art. campaign educates visitors about what each member community has to offer, and encourages more exploration, Nelson says, noting that the definition of art is very three-dimensional, incorporating culinary arts, performing arts, and the larger concept of the creative economy. Each downtown organization is responsible for maintaining its own segment of the website and keeping activity listings current. "It works well. It's nice to have that collaboration. At times, we tend to think too narrowly. This is a great way for us to all share and partner," he says.

There are currently a dozen Maryland communities and six Delaware communities participating in TADD, represented by various downtown arts, tourism, and economic development organizations. "We are all interested in using art as a tool for economic development and tourism," says Nelson. "The rationale behind TADD is very simple. When people are visiting the area from D.C. or Baltimore, they are not particularity concerned with where states stop and start, or our counties, or even our towns. They are just interested in what is available in all of these areas. So let's present the whole area, and not worry about where Delaware and Maryland begin and end. If you have a critical mass of interested participants, the cost to each organization drops dramatically. You are not paying the whole amount for marketing, which is divided 18 ways and you can afford to do a lot more." The partnership also allows communities to cross-promote, and tourists to develop itineraries that include visits to TADD communities on their way through the region to destinations such as the resort community of Ocean City, MD, he says.

Share the workload

To make this type of initiative work, each community must have one organization willing to serve as a point of contact, and, "that would really make it happen," says Nelson. "It doesn't happen by itself. And you have to be able to look at the big picture, and understand that this is not a zero sum game. It's not, 'If they go to you they don't come to me so I don't want to do that.' The object is to make the pie bigger, not to divide it into more pieces."

Some communities are taking a more active role in TADD than others, Nelson says, but, "everyone has an equal say even though we have different sized towns. It's nice to be able to work together and to combine the uniqueness of our towns."

"It's a really great group," says Challenger. "We are not formalized. We are not a 501c3. We don't have a board or a president. It's just a big group ad hoc effort, and it's kind of nice that way." TADD meets quarterly, moving the meetings around between member communities each time. "There are just so many benefits, and it's not really that time consuming or difficult to put together, so I would just say, do it. Wholeheartedly go for it. It's only going to bring good stuff."
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