

8 Amazing Facts About Downtowns

1. The heart and soul of every community, besides its people, is its downtown. The health of a community can instantly be portrayed by the vitality of its downtown. It is the litmus test for all your economic development efforts – both tourism and non-tourism. Downtown provides that all-important first impression of the community that answers the questions: “Is this a place I’d want to live? A place my employees would want to live? A place I’d want to hang out? Show off to friends and relatives?” If you want people to visit your community, to open or relocate a business there, or move to your town, downtown needs to be a place they’d enjoy spending time in.

2. The number one activity of visitors throughout the world is shopping, dining and entertainment in a pedestrian friendly setting. It’s typically not the reason we go to a destination, but it is the top diversionary activity of visitors once they’re there.

3. Consider this: The average visitor is active 14 hours a day, yet they only spend four to six hours with the primary activity that brought them there. Then they spend eight to ten hours with diversionary, or secondary activities. Diversionary activities are things they could do closer to home but will do while in town. As an example, Branson, Missouri hosts 7.5 million visitors a year, and the average visitor will see one or two shows a day, totaling approximately four hours. The 49 theaters are what brings them to town (the primary lure), but once there, they spend the rest of their time shopping, dining, at theme parks and attractions, or on recreational pursuits: hiking, biking, boating, fishing, golf, etc.

4. Here’s the amazing statistic: Secondary activities are where 80% of all visitor spending takes place. It’s ok to be a “diversionary” activity. When we’re out fishing or hiking or biking, we are not spending money. When we are competing in a sports game, we are not spending money. But when we’re done, guess what? We’re off looking for the nearest watering hole, great shops, restaurants, and entertainment. Why did Disney build Downtown Disney outside of Disney World? To capture that other 80% of visitor spending. Smart move.

5. Curb appeal can account for 70% of visitor sales at restaurants, golf courses, wineries, retail shops, and lodging facilities. Amazing isn’t it? You could spend millions of marketing dollars to pull people into your community, but none of that will make a visitor walk into a restaurant or retail shop and say, “Here’s my credit card.” The merchant must do that. It’s that old adage of “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” Many merchants have no idea how to pull customers in the door by presenting a beautiful, welcoming entry with planters, benches, attractive signage and window displays.

We all travel. Have you ever uttered these words: “That looks like a nice place to eat.” Other than asking a local, or finding where the most local pickup trucks are parked, this is our only other clue to help make a decision.

6. If local residents do not hang out in your downtown, neither will visitors. Visitors are not looking for “best kept secrets” or “solitude” when downtown. They are looking for places where other people go. They want to be in a lively, thriving environment. If downtown has the activities and attractions to draw residents, visitors will want to go

there too. The number one reason people travel is to visit friends and relatives. When they visit you, where do you take them? That's what I thought.

7. Then there's the 10+10+10 rule or the "Rule of Critical Mass." After researching 400 towns and downtown districts in the U.S. and Canada, we found the minimum critical mass it takes to make downtown a destination. In just three lineal blocks (not square blocks) you must have a minimum of ten places that serve food: soda fountain, bistro, café, bakery, confectionary, sit-down restaurant, coffee shop, to name a few. The second ten are destination retail shops. These are NOT big box and chain stores, but ten specialty shops. These might include galleries, clothing, outfitters, artisans in action, wine shops, books, antiques (not second hand stores), home accents, gardening and gourmet cooking stores. And the third ten: Places open after 6:00, preferably entertainment.

8. And that brings us to today's most important and amazing statistic. **A full 70% of all consumer spending (locals and visitors alike) takes place after 6:00 pm. Are you open?** And you wonder why downtowns are dying while lifestyle retail centers are thriving.

For you in the tourism industry, consider this: people spend the night where there are things to do after 6:00. Not just dining, but also shopping, activities or entertainment. Few people, particularly leisure travelers, want to be holed up in a hotel room twiddling their thumbs watching reruns of Fear Factor.

These few statistics are why more and more Destination Marketing Organizations are now being forced to step out of the comfort zone of focusing all their efforts on marketing, and into the realm of product development. After all, a good product sells itself, and many downtowns need work to become a good product. Tourism and downtown professionals should be joined at the hip. Get cozy.

- Roger Brooks

The Four Ingredients for Reinventing Downtown

With the rise of strip malls, expansive parking lots and freeways, downtowns have spent years on the decline. But after decades of suburban sprawl, people want vibrant downtowns again. Whether they are visiting a new place or hanging out close to home, they want ambiance, entertainment, shopping and good food. They want to stroll from shop to shop, and sit at an umbrella table for coffee and people watching. They want places that are open late and offer things to do after dark. They want a sense of community that only a great downtown can offer. This is the age of "Third Places."

How does a community bring their downtown to life? Turn it into a thriving "Third Place?" DDI has worked with communities all over North America and we've discovered the key ingredients to bringing a downtown to life.

1. Create a Third Place

People are looking for that “Third Place” – a place to gather with friends and neighbors during their leisure time; to socialize, relax, shop, dine, and play together. According to Ray Oldenburg (The Great Good Place), the “First Place” is where you live, your home. The “Second” is where you work. The “Third Place” is where you go to hang out, spend your leisure time. Throughout history, downtowns have provided an essential “Third Place” for their communities. If your downtown is a vibrant place where locals go to shop, dine and hang out, visitors will go too. But if locals don’t hang out there, visitors won’t either.

A vibrant downtown will have a variety of shops and restaurants clustered in a small area. It will be pedestrian friendly and beautified with street trees and flowers, creating a pleasant ambiance.

2. Stop being all things to all people

The days of being all things to all people are as gone as the industrial revolution. People are bombarded with thousands of advertising messages, and this oversaturation causes people to simply tune out things they don’t feel apply directly to them. The solution? Focus on what makes you unique, worth the drive, and promote the heck out of it. Don’t try to be the “something for everyone” destination. That kind of promotion is ineffective and largely ignored. What makes your downtown special? What makes it a better experience than hanging out in the downtowns of your neighboring communities? Discover what makes your downtown special and focus on it. Being all things to all people means you get lost in the shuffle and become nothing, to anyone.

3. Jettison the Generic!

If your marketing messages could apply to just about any community, anywhere, it’s time to take a fresh look at what makes you unique. Remember “stop being all things to all people?” It’s worth repeating, and it has to carry into your marketing messages. “Something for everyone,” “Unique,” “Discover,” and the most overused of them all, “A great place to live, work, and play,” are just some of the phrases you should avoid at all costs. If it is so generic it could apply to anyone, throw it out! Tell people what makes you special. Generic messages are meaningless and ineffective. Repeat after me, “Jettison the generic!”

4. Downtowns and Tourism Organizations Work Together

Tourism is the front door to your non-tourism economic development efforts, and creating a great downtown is a big part of that process. Downtowns and tourism organizations should be joined at the hip. Working to create an inviting downtown will enhance all your tourism and economic development efforts, as well as creating that “Third Place” that locals and visitors are looking for.

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