

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

Ten realistic retail themes for a vibrant downtown

By Bill Ryan, University of Wisconsin-Extension

Based on market analysis findings of many communities, coupled with business examples being submitted to the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Innovative Downtown Business online clearinghouse, 10 broad categories of retail are emerging as good fits for downtown. These can include both chains and independents and should be considered when downtown develops its business expansion and recruitment wish list.

1. Lifestyle and wellness

retail: An innovative example of a business designed to respond to busy lifestyles is Meal Time in downtown Platteville, WI. This independent business allows busy people to prepare their own healthy meal, take it home to freeze or bake at their convenience. The business creates late afternoon traffic for the nearby wine and cheese store and fitness center.

Ladles to Linens in Winnsboro, TX, a gourmet kitchen shop, allows shoppers to take evening cooking classes. Shoppers are drawn from as

far as Dallas, and often end up staying downtown for a visit to the spa and the nearby cafe.

Earth Rider is a bicycling business in downtown Broadhead, WI that supports a lifestyle of fitness, achievement, wellbeing, and quality of life through cycling. The business combines a retail store, rentals, tour packaging, and a bicycling-inspired inn, providing an escape from urban stress.

2. Community gathering place businesses: Downtown's central place and sense of place make it uniquely suited for people to congregate for social or community purposes.

The Red Mug Coffeehouse in downtown Superior, WI has carved out a niche not only as a coffee shop, but also as a culturally aware store promoting the arts and organic/fair-trade food. They have become a gathering spot to organize community-oriented events geared toward education and activism.

3. Retailers that celebrate local heritage: The character of traditional downtowns is well suited to businesses that sell products to

celebrate the past. While antique shops are common examples of such stores, other retailers also celebrate a community's past.

In Prairie du Chien, WI, the wood counters and floor found in Hamann's Variety Store add to the nostalgic atmosphere of the community. Candy purchased at the old wood counter remind many parents of the corner stores of their youth while creating the same kind of memories for their kids.

Sarah Winter Clothworks has helped call attention to the textile-manufacturing heritage in Willimantic, CT. Clothing is designed, cut, dyed, and sewn by hand onsite using natural fibers such as hemp and organic cotton. Because the products they sell are made in their store, the business is creating a connection that celebrates local heritage.

4. Stores that entertain: 'Shoppertainment' is a concept adopted by certain major chains in recent years. But entertainment can be part of the downtown retail experience on a smaller scale.

The Mustard Museum in downtown Mount Horeb, WI, has become a draw to many visitors because the business promotes inside jokes through products such

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as “Evaporate Your Eyeballs Hot-sauce” and collegiate T-shirts carrying the name “POUPON U.” Similarly, Das Wurst Haus in Lanesboro, MN lures customers in for German deli food (sausages, mustards, breads) with the sound of an accordion and the smell of great food.

5. Stores that celebrate local arts: Often people look to downtown as a place where local products are sold. Unlike the regional mall, downtowns often have stores showcasing locally made jewelry, art, and gifts.

Wind, Water and Light in downtown Champaign, IL features original pieces in a variety of mediums from 180 local and national artists. They developed a reputation as a gallery that educates its customers about the art, the process, and the artists.

6. Stores that educate: Businesses that provide the community with education to accompany their products often find downtown the most attractive place to do business.

The Family Piano Co. has played an active role in the revitalization of downtown Waukegan, IL. Not only does it sell and service pianos, but the shop offers tours, lessons, and performances. Scrapbook Attic in Fremont, OH sells scrap-booking essentials, but also offers free workshops.

7. Stores with a community and global perspective: A growing segment of the population is interested in supporting businesses that help the local economy and contribute to a better world.

Autumn Leaves has developed a niche in Ithaca, NY as a used bookstore with the selection and quality of a new bookstore. It partici-

participates in the Ithaca HOURS program, a local currency effort in which 600 businesses participate. By participating, these businesses help keep dollars local and promote growth of the Ithaca economy. A quarter of the merchandise at Earth and State, a pottery and gift store in Media, PA, is Fair-Trade certified. The focus at Earth and State is on local artists, but integrated with pottery and pieces from all over the world.

8. Gift and indulgences stores: Chocolate Harbor in St. Clair, MI is committed to the old-fashioned method of making everything from scratch. Customers can watch as they make caramel or fondant in the open kitchen, or view the making of fine German chocolate and hand-dipped truffles.

Evolutions in Design in downtown Wausau, WI is a full-service floral business with five staff designers to help customers craft their own unique arrangements. The floral business also has a large retail area, where shoppers can buy items ranging from jewelry and gifts to furniture and local artwork.

9. Unique destination retailers: Many one-of-a-kind and innovative businesses successfully operate downtown. In Faribault, MN, Burkhartzmeyer Shoes prides itself on its understanding and care of feet. They retain two certified pedorthists (people trained in foot care), to assist customers in finding the perfect shoe. They attract customers from up to 50 miles away and have benefited from physician referrals.

10. Neighborhood-serving retailers: The growing downtown housing market requires conveniences to support quality of life.

Town Meat Market in Garden City, NY is an example of a full-service butcher characterized by high-quality products and exceptional customer service. Their specialty is dry-aged prime beef, but their selection of meats also includes fresh fish, lobster, chicken, pork, veal, lamb, and a variety of sausages. They offer a door-to-door delivery service that operates six days a week.

In Newport, VT, the Pick & Shovel Do it Best store is one of 4,100 independently owned hardware and home improvement retailers that are members of Do it Best Corp., which claims to be the only full-line, full-service buying cooperative in the hardware, lumber, and building materials industry. The Newport store serves the surrounding neighborhoods by filling local product gaps such as pet supplies, storage and organizing, electronics, and office supplies.

Restaurants are also a key component to bringing people back downtown and can contribute to a vibrant retail center. While dining places add to downtown vitality and extend commercial activity into the evening, too many can give the appearance of a food court. Similarly, too many drinking establishments may actually discourage retail development. Accordingly, a balance between retail and food and beverage establishments is necessary.

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