



Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social and economic conditions downtown

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Campaign helps to recover and rebuild

After a large-scale disaster strikes downtown, image enhancement efforts are among the rebuilding activities needed to help bring downtown back to a new normal.

In June 2008, Cedar Rapids, IA (est. pop. 126,400), suffered a flood that was among the worst natural disasters in American history. The flood directly impacted all of downtown, wiping out the workplaces of hundreds, and destroying the homes of thousands of residents. The estimated damages totaled \$5 billion.

“Approximately 450 businesses were downtown pre-flood, and virtually every one of those was impacted in some way,” either through direct flood damage or forced evacuations, says Quinn Pettifer, marketing and community relations director for the Cedar Rapids Downtown District.

In response to the disaster, the Downtown District quickly assembled the “Rebuild Downtown” campaign.

Responding to the crisis

“We basically sat down about two days after the crest of the flood, and determined rather quickly that we were going to need to respond to people” seeking

information about their distressed downtown and the status of individual businesses, Pettifer says.

“The public’s first concern was going to be, ‘Is downtown going to be able to recover from something like this?’

“Pre-flood, downtown Cedar Rapids was really taking off. We had 35 restaurants, most of which were locally owned, and all within a very short walking distance from one another. We had several cultural and theatrical amenities downtown. We had

a lot of nightlife, bars, and things to do after work and on the weekends. We had several festivals and events throughout the year held downtown.

“So the big concern after the flood was, were we going to be able to be what we once were?”

Downtown’s response to that prevailing concern, Pettifer says, was “We need to prepare a campaign. Because of course, we intend to rebuild. And we not only intend to build to the way we were, but to take it a step further and be better than we were before.

“That’s our Midwest resilience factor, and how the Rebuild Downtown campaign was born.”



“We’re back” banners helped businesses triumphantly declare their return downtown.

www.DowntownDevelopment.com

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Connecting with business owners

The campaign serves several key purposes, the first of which is making the public aware of what businesses and institutions are coming back and/or planning to rebuild downtown.

“Cedar Rapids is a fairly big city, but it’s very community-oriented,” she says. “Everyone wants to know the status of businesses that were impacted. We’re big in numbers, and yet we’re very much a close-knit community.

To share this information most comprehensively with the public, the Downtown District partnered with the chamber of commerce, “and literally went through the city directory, trying to contact all businesses that had been impacted in some way by the flood. We wanted to survey not only how they were doing, but if they were impacted, how much they were impacted, and then ask, ‘Do you intend to rebuild in the downtown area?’ if they were in fact a downtown business.

“We compiled a list of those businesses that did say, ‘We do intend to rebuild downtown,’ and we actually did a radio, print, and Web campaign that

listed those businesses that said they did intend to rebuild downtown.”

Connecting with customers

The campaign included full-page ads in Sunday editions of the city newspaper in August and October, listing businesses that were coming back, as well as a full-page ad in the area business journal. There were also radio ads, each featuring three or four business owners declaring their intent to return downtown.

Those ads were “very well-received, and really gave people comfort,” Pettifer says. That’s because, as all downtowners know, people generally interact with downtown at the small business level, and it’s the businesses they frequent that people grow most attached to.

“You’ve got your hotspots like the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, and smaller places that people really grew to depend on in terms of entertainment, nightlife, and dining. They wanted to know if those places were going to return, and this was a way to respond to that, stopping the rumor mill and also providing some exposure for those businesses so that people would know that they were planning on rebuilding,” she says.

Keep businesses aware of news and meetings that can assist their recovery. The other purpose of the campaign was to keep people and businesses aware of downtown infrastructure developments, financial aid, and other news related to the rebuilding effort.

“News and updates were changing on a daily basis when it came to downtown, in terms of the recovery, the rebuilding process, and financial resources that were available,” Pettifer says.

“We had FEMA come in, we had the Small Business Administration come in, and there was a lot of new information out

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better than ever
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A city's heart is its
downtown,
its soul the
neighborhoods,
its spirit the
people.

A Downtown Declaration

The flood of 2008 shook our city to the very core, yet our message of resilience lives on. The Cedar Rapids Downtown District is dedicated to the revitalization of our community-east and west, better than ever.

We are proud to stand with these businesses that, like us, wish to rebuild and reinvest in what will be a vibrant downtown Cedar Rapids:

Resilience was the key word in this full-page ad in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*.

there, so we also served as a news and update hub for people as another piece of the Rebuild Downtown campaign.

“We would direct people to our website, and virtually every day, there would be new pieces of information to let them know what was going on and where to turn for help. For example, if they were a displaced locally owned business, unsure whether and where to register with FEMA, we would have that contact information. If there were city hall meetings or workshops made available by other organizations, we would post that information as well,” she says.

“So we enhanced awareness for those business-people who were directly impacted, and also for those genuinely concerned citizens. And that’s what we continue to do through the Rebuild Downtown campaign. We’re letting people know that we are coming back, and the progress that we’ve made.”

Recognizing businesses that have reopened.

Another objective of the Rebuild Downtown campaign is recognizing the businesses that have reopened.

“Right now, we are just over half a year past the flood, and 75 percent of the businesses have returned to the downtown area. That represents about 80 percent of the downtown workforce,” Pettifer says. “So

part of this Rebuild campaign is to also recognize and let people know who’s back.”

To help businesses declare their return, the Cedar Rapids Downtown District provides outdoor ‘We’re back’ banners that have the Rebuild Downtown logo, and the logo of the business that has returned.

“People have grown to look for those banners. It’s been a great success,” she says.

Over the summer, the Downtown District also partnered with Alliant Energy, one of downtown’s largest employers, to host a series of free luncheon events in the park. The last of the catered park lunch events, in September, drew nearly 2,000 people.

“Business owners would be able to bring their employees, and we would present the ‘We’re back’ banners, and recognize businesses that were back open that particular week. It was great,” she says.

“Part of the appeal of working downtown is the atmosphere, and being able to not only chat with your colleagues, but also catch up, go to lunch, and socialize with other people who work downtown. So that was huge — after you were back open, being able to visit the park and see how everybody’s been doing since the flood.”

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