



# TURNING EVENTS INTO LASTING ECONOMIC IMPACT



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Community events attract large crowds and generate awareness, but they are not consistently translating into sustained economic benefits for downtown businesses. Visitors, sometimes thousands, often attend the event itself, interact primarily with temporary vendors, and leave without shopping, dining, or engaging with local businesses in the downtown. As a result, downtown activity and spending decline significantly once the event ends.

## Why it matters

Events can attract thousands of visitors, but if attendees do not engage with local businesses, the community misses opportunities to generate lasting economic benefits, build repeat customers, and create a vibrant downtown beyond event days.

## Step by Step Actions

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### Strategy 1: Passport Program

A downtown passport program is a shop-local promotional campaign where visitors collect physical stamps or digital check-ins on a card or app by visiting participating local stores and restaurants. Completing the passport enters participants into drawings for grand prizes, cash, or gift baskets, driving foot traffic to small businesses.

- 1. Business Recruitment** - Recruit 10-20 downtown businesses to participate.
- 2. Create Passport Card and System** - Create a simple passport card requiring visitors to visit 5-7 businesses and collect a stamp, sticker, or checkmark.
- 3. Assemble Incentives** - Offer incentives such as: free drink, raffle entry, downtown gift card, event ticket, local merchandise.
- 4. Launch and Promote Program** - Launch the program during a festival, market, art walk, or downtown event. Promote the passport through social media, event materials, business storefronts, and community websites. Encourage visitors to explore multiple businesses by creating suggested routes or themes.
- 5. Collect Passports and Award Prizes** - Collect completed passports and award prizes. Promote through social media, websites, etc.
- 6. Track Results and Adjust and Expand as Needed** - Track participation by monitoring: passports distributed, passports completed, participating businesses, and customer feedback. Adjust and expand the program based on results.

## 2

## Strategy 2: Extend business hours beyond event days

Another strategy is to encourage small downtown businesses to extend their business hours beyond event days. This could be done seasonally and/or by choosing one day a week during which downtown businesses stay open later than normal. This could also be done in conjunction with a downtown art walk, showcasing local artists and local businesses.



- 1. Identify Peak Visitor Periods** - Review visitor patterns, event schedules, tourism seasons, and busy weekdays to determine when extended hours will have the greatest impact.
- 2. Recruit Participating Businesses and Establish Consistent Extended Hours** - Secure commitments from a core group of downtown businesses willing to participate in an 8-12-week or seasonal pilot program. Select a specific day and time (e.g., Thursdays until 8 p.m.) and encourage all participating businesses to follow the same schedule, staying open later on those days.
- 3. Create a Unified Brand, Support Businesses in Using it, and Promote** - Develop a simple message such as "Open Late Thursdays," "Downtown After Hours," or "Shop Local After 5." Offer shared marketing and promotion, small grants or incentives (if available), window decals and promotional materials, and technical assistance. Promotion could be done through social media, community websites, email newsletters, local media, event promotions, and downtown signage.
- 4. Add Small Activation Activities** - Encourage businesses to offer specials and discounts, live music, product demonstrations, tastings, and family-friendly activities.
- 5. Monitor Participation and Evaluate Results** - Track the number of participating businesses, customer traffic, sales increases, and visitor feedback. At the end of the 8-12 weeks, review business feedback and performance data to determine whether to continue, expand, or modify the program.

## 3

## Strategy 3: Redesign event layouts to drive movement

Redesigning event layouts to encourage movement helps distribute visitors throughout downtown, ensuring that more businesses, attractions, and public spaces benefit from event traffic. By strategically placing activities across multiple locations, creating clear walking routes, and incentivizing exploration, communities can increase visitor engagement, boost business visibility, and create a more dynamic and connected downtown experience.

- 1. Map the Event Area** - Identify all event spaces, downtown businesses, attractions, parking areas, and pedestrian routes. Determine where crowding typically occurs.
- 2. Identify Anchor Destinations and Distribute Activities** - Select key businesses, community spaces, or attractions that can serve as activity hubs throughout downtown. Spread entertainment, vendors, food, children's activities, and performances across multiple blocks rather than concentrating them in one location. Partner with businesses to host live music, artist demonstrations, tastings, pop-up exhibits, and family activities.
- 3. Develop a Downtown Activity Map, Create Walking Loops and Install Wayfinding Signage** - Design clearly marked routes that connect all event areas and lead visitors past retail businesses, restaurants, and attractions. Use signs and banners such as "Continue Inside," "Next Stop -->," "More Activities This Way," or "Explore Downtown." Provide printed and digital maps showing activity locations, business locations, walking routes, and points of interest.
- 4. Connect Vendors to Businesses** - Place vendors near storefronts or require partnerships with businesses to encourage shared customer traffic.
- 5. Promote Exploration Incentives** - Add scavenger hunts, passports, raffles, or prize drawings that encourage visits to multiple locations.
- 6. Monitor Visitor Movement** - Observe foot traffic patterns and gather feedback from businesses and attendees to identify areas for improvement.

## Who to involve

Identify and invite representatives from:

- City government
- Chamber of Commerce
- Downtown business owners
- Arts and culture organizations
- Community groups and volunteers
- Tourism representatives
- Event organizers
- Local sponsors, and property owners



- Economic Development Organizations
- Community organizations and volunteers
- Downtown Retailers, restaurants, breweries, and service providers
- Festival vendors and food trucks



## Potential Timeline

**Phase 1** - Recruit businesses, establish partnerships, create branding, design passport program, establish extended-hours pilot, map event layouts.

**Phase 2** - Launch passport program, implement extended-hours pilot, test redesigned event layouts, and collect performance data.

**Phase 3** - Evaluate performance, modify programs, recruit additional participants, expand successful activities.

**Phase 4** - Continue successful strategies, conduct annual review, establish next year goals and budget.

## Costs

These strategies include costs associated with staff time, promotional materials, social media advertising, prizes and incentives, temporary wayfinding signage and event layout planning and design.