



Wilmington Downtown Incorporated

INNOVATION

Innovation permeated the entire project as we supported the community at large and area businesses. Pre-storm, staff realized that computers, email and landlines would not be enough to reach most stakeholders. We went door-to-door to gather personal cell phone numbers and built a list of 75+ business owners for emergency calling or texting. We also became versed on FEMA programs and the application process. Other innovations happened post-storm. National and regional media outlets broadcasted stories of doom and despair for weeks. Even though most downtown businesses were open within a week after the storm, customers were not returning. We coined the term "OverFlo" to communicate that downtown was over Florence and then directed a month-long campaign to communicate this message and raise money for recovery efforts. The heart-shaped graphic and upbeat message allowed us to tailor messages and highlight various economic drivers in downtown with a different emphasis each week, such as Music OverFlo, Food OverFlo and Arts OverFlo. We used earned, donated and social media to get the word out. Another innovation happened when the Governor wanted a downtown tour. Rather than focusing on damaged buildings, we arranged visits to businesses that had already re-opened, with a full gaggle of reporters in tow. The Governor met merchants and heard how they quickly re-grouped and re-opened. Four small businesses were all featured in this earned media opportunity that was followed by a news conference with the shops in the background.

OUTCOME

OverFlo was more successful than we imagined. The campaign raised over \$128,000 for six charities, including the Food Bank and the Salvation Army. This money has impacted thousands of regional residents and we awarded the funds on Giving Tuesday. WDI created a subpage on its website to provide information and updates. This subpage included an overview of the campaign and had 4,511 visits from late-September until the campaign's sunset in mid-December. The OverFlo Facebook page had 30,810 impressions and a reach of 18,635. Thirty-seven businesses developed specials and donated a portion of the sale to OverFlo. As many businesses lost sales due to the storm and others lost inventory or product, we deliberately left the type of special and the amount of the donation up to the discretion of the business. Over \$34,300 was raised. The all-day, free, community concert on October 20th attracted about 1,000 people spurring customer traffic from noon to 8pm. All told, the event generated \$23,640 in sales and sponsorships. We also partnered with a local promoter for a ticketed concert featuring national recording artist Lukas Nelson. The show sold out the 1,100 seat venue in less than 24 hours and the band waived its performance fee. This generated \$38,200 in ticket and concession sales. The outcomes from messaging about downtown being open for business are difficult to measure.

EXECUTION

Pre-storm preparations removed BID items like hanging flower baskets and street banners to prevent them from becoming projectiles in hurricane winds. We secured the office and computers, expanded communications capacity with merchants, re-verified local emergency contacts and obtained FEMA protocols. As the storm left, a new threat arose as officials predicted record rain levels would cause massive flooding in downtown within days. Even though a catastrophic flood was unlikely, WDI took no chances. We found and secured the donation and delivery of over 600 sandbags from Uptown Greenville (NC) and deployed the bags 48 hours before the river's projected cresting. While the catastrophic flooding predictions proved wrong, we heeded warnings and seamlessly implemented a remedy. Another aspect of the recovery revolved around economics and psychology. Sales at downtown businesses plummeted as fewer people were patronizing shops, restaurants and venues. In the big picture, almost everybody in the community had damage and some lost everything. We needed to show compassion, help our merchants and demonstrate an optimistic path forward. OverFlo delivered a clear, concise message to meet these ideals. The campaign officially ended with a ceremonial check presentation on Giving Tuesday.

REPRESENTATION

Before Hurricane Florence came ashore, three major stakeholders independently suggested that WDI stage a benefit concert. While infinitely easier to do on our own, WDI instead gathered these disparate supporters into a task force to lead the effort. The group had eight members, all with limited involvements in WDI. WDI employees staffed the project, including the accounting duties. We hosted a planning meeting that attracted almost 50 people, including elected officials and local media. While we had already brainstormed the OverFlo name and a benefit concert, the assembled group enthusiastically suggested doing more. One of the attendees, a graphic designer – was so inspired that he generated and donated a logo within two hours of the session's end. Other attendees with local media outlets immediately agreed to donate advertising space. Over three dozen merchants signed on to offer specials. A formal community engagement occurred because the concert location was a City-owned parking lot. WDI sought City Council permission to use the lot for free and special permission to sell beer and wine. These were unanimously approved at a public hearing. Community engagement also happened through the sale of over 300 tee shirts, 50 hats and stickers.

REPLICATION

Every organization should have disaster preparation and recovery plans and the ability to connect with emergency leaders beyond just fire and police. As most communities activate an Emergency Operation Center, we suggest knowing someone there to report problems and get answers. Similarly, be sure to have and distribute FEMA application information. Research IDA members who have dealt with similar issues. For hurricanes, we received insight from IDA professionals in New Orleans, LA; Mobile, AL; and, Greenville, NC. Pre-storm networking goes a long way. The toughest decision to replicate is staying or going. This is deeply personal and family safety is paramount. WDI did its homework in a way that others can follow. We monitored the forecasts and knew we could ride out a Category 1 storm. We reviewed flood maps and knew this posed no threat to our home. As a fire station was literally one block from staff's residence and an electrical substation was within three blocks, we were confident that the power loss would be days rather than weeks. These assumptions were all validated. Replicating these steps can speed recovery efforts. While downtown (and staff) was fortunate to come through relatively unscathed, WDI got a head-start on the recovery process.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Developing the tagline and campaign was a stroke of simplistic brilliance. The name is a mash-up of "getting over Hurricane Florence." The heart shaped logo communicates "we care" and the blue wavy lines reference the ocean and storm. The yellow represents the sun coming up. We could easily apply adjectives like Music, Arts, Shopping, etc., in front of the OverFlo word to highlight various economic sectors. The complexities occurred in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Forecasters feared record flooding in downtown four days after the storm. We took immediate steps and found sandbags. We then found a passable route to get the sandbags into town as the City was inaccessible at times due to floodwaters. We borrowed a forklift from a brewery to unload the delivery truck and speed delivery of the bags before the river crested. We unraveled an almost impossibly complex problem. We faced other intricacies, too. While most of downtown had electricity restored within four days, one entire block remained dark. Similarly, downed-trees needed removal from sidewalks and parking spaces and other infrastructure needed attention. While important to downtown, we had to straddle the complex line of constituent advocacy while understanding that crews had higher priorities elsewhere.

EVENT AND PRESS LINKS

<https://blog.o2fitnessclubs.com/overflo-benefit-concert>

<https://untappd.com/v/cape-fear-wine-and-beer/43594/event/299234>

<http://www.encorepub.com/overflo-ing-palates-new-anthem-and-bennys-big-time-pair-up-for-fundraising-effort/>

<http://www.encorepub.com/getting-overflo-downtown-businesses-campaign-to-raise-relief-funds-for-area-nonprofitsthroughout-october/>