

Downtown Little Rock Partnership

INNOVATION

We wanted to continue on our theme of bringing people to parts of our downtown they would not see, or were not aware of. To be completely honest, we had no idea how this would turn out, but we wanted to create a fun event in a unique space and mimic the 1980s as much as we could. Immediately upon announcing the concept, we had a volunteer committee on board. The brainstorming led to some fantastic ideas for the event and new partners for our organization. Every idea led to a new challenge that we were able to overcome, and when the announcement video went viral, we knew we had something that caught people's eye.

OUTCOME

It was fantastic. It was one of the most diverse, excited crowds we have ever had for an event, and everyone left with big smiles asking when we were going to do it again. We had old white guys and young black guys side by side playing video games and racing slot cars. We had drag queens dancing and professional ballet dancers performing to "I Wanna Dance With Somebody." Local police security had to work hard to not grin at the John Cusack "Say Anything" guy, or the guy who showed up with Doc Brown and Marty McFly tattooed on the back of his calves. We were able to bring people to the space who had no idea it even existed, and this is turning out to be quite a benefit. A few months after the event, the state of Arkansas decided to move many of the state agencies out of the building. As a result of our efforts in raising awareness about the mall, retail-type tenants, including one of the sponsors of the '80s party event, have expressed interest in filling the ground-floor spaces, and we are currently working with the state to make that happen.

EXECUTION

We announced the event with a Marty McFly impersonator recording a video that was viewed over 55,000 times. We completely transformed a quiet, drab building into a retro nightclub for several hours on a Saturday night. We removed two sets of doors from the mall and drove a Delorean inside and parked by the entrance. We brought in five stand-up arcade games from the '80s; a six-car slot car racing game; Dippin' Dots (the ice cream of the future!); a Video DJ to play mashed up '80s videos and music; and plastered the walls with movie posters, concert announcements, and shoe advertisements from the era. The production crew we hired decorated the atrium with lights and set it up with plenty of sound. Smirnoff vodka set up a booth to distribute "samples" and the mall's interior diner-style restaurant had a limited menu of burgers, fries, and hot dogs. When the people showed up, they were ready to dance, and everyone was dressed in '80s-inspired gear of some sort. The place absolutely went wild when we brought in the Marty McFly impersonator, only to be topped by Tom Cruise in a Maverick flight suit.

REPRESENTATION

The general public was invited to the event, which was ticketed. As I mentioned earlier, we had no idea who would show up, but we thought we were primarily marketing the event to appeal to the 20-somethings. Our expectations were far exceeded. Every demographic you can think of was well represented that evening, and everyone was smiling. As a result of the concept, we were able to bring new sponsors on board, who are now participating in other events we produce. More than 550 people came through the doors that evening, and when they were leaving, the most often repeated question was, "When are you going to do this again?" While the Downtown Little Rock Partnership produced the event, we worked with the Pulaski County Sheriff's Office, the State of Arkansas, the Little Rock Convention and Visitor's Bureau, the City of Little Rock, Slick's Diner, and about 30 volunteers to pull this off.

REPLICATION

If you have a good idea, a bold imagination, a unique space, and a great volunteer committee, a version of this can be replicated time and time again. This year we are going to do a '90s-themed event in the same space. This shows that people are thirsty for something unique, and if you build and promote it, they will come.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The challenges were there, but we found ways to overcome them, albeit with a bit of luck. Using social media, we found a Delorean locally that we were able to rent. We wanted the Delorean INSIDE the mall, so we had to convince the State of Arkansas to let us remove two sets of glass doors and frames to bring the car in. We found a Marty McFly impersonator a few hours away, and were able to secure his services. As you will see in the videos, he is a dead ringer for Michael J. Fox. We worked with a local production company to develop the dance area; lights; and video screen, which we were able to hang from the second floor. The State of Arkansas was a huge help, making sure all the neon signs were working again and helping with access and clean-up. It was the effective use of social media in the promotion of the event leading up to it that really paid off.