



Downtown Norfolk Council

INNOVATION

We hosted a brainstorming session with stakeholders, got creative with our budget and decided on four holiday placemaking initiatives:

- Impulse – partnered with shopping center in the heart of downtown to activate vacant third anchor space with a free interactive first-to-market art installation.
- Whimsical Holiday Directional Signage – worked with local theater’s set designer to create custom, Instagram-worthy directional signage featuring holiday attractions at key locations throughout downtown.
- Holiday Experience Maps and Positioning – created custom illustrated map with icons of featured holiday events and attractions. Packaged up holiday events and happenings with itinerary and listicle-type content using illustrated elements and icons to be more consumer-friendly, shareable and create a visual consistency across channels.
- Peppermint Alley – enhanced a street that is a major point of connectivity downtown with peppermint themed lighting and giant candy sidewalk art.

These holiday placemaking initiatives were developed so we could better engage the community with free seasonal experiences and activations that were sharable, inspirational, memorable and unique to Downtown Norfolk, making us stand out in the region.

OUTCOME

Our holiday placemaking initiative had an extremely positive impact throughout the holiday season:

- Social media: 53,231 engaged users and 22,450 likes during the holidays.
- Website: traffic was up 28% over 2018 and 33% over 2017.
- Media value: \$594,494.
- Holiday experience map distribution: first time we have ever had to reprint holiday collateral due to demand.
- Embraced by the community: city offered us free branding on gateway flags at major entry points in the city showcasing the new holiday icons and branding. The mall offered us free placement on the exterior of their ice rink in response to how well-liked the new branding was.
- Attendance increase: ice rink where art installations were located saw a double digit increase for the first time in three years.

The directional signage positively benefitted our featured partners by increasing awareness and driving traffic to their attractions. Our businesses benefitted by the connectivity and increased visibility and foot traffic between the shopping center and dining and retail in the core of downtown from Peppermint Alley.

The new placemaking initiatives and existing downtown holiday events and traditions were branded and packaged for the community to “Experience the Magic of the Holidays downtown.” This branding and comprehensive snapshot of all there is to do during the holidays benefitted the community by allowing them to develop their own holiday itineraries and must do-experiences as well as to better visualize attractions and where they are located, reinforcing downtown as a very pedestrian-friendly destination.

EXECUTION

Each of the new holiday placemaking initiatives had its own set of obstacles and lessons. But by working with our partners, internal team and city staff with a collective can do attitude to achieve our festive downtown additions, we not only accomplished our goals, but we were all still on Santa’s good list when our initiatives launched on-time, on-budget and on-point!

- Impulse – working with our partner, MacArthur Center, to find the funding, validate the expenditure and return on invest-

ment to our board was the first priority. Next, were the logistics including security, hours of operation, installation and plans for promotion.

- Holiday Directional Signage – communicating our “Seussical” and photo-op worthy vision for design, getting approval for locations, and logistics for install.
- Holiday Experience Positioning – working with design team to create custom illustrations that were distinctly downtown Norfolk, deciding what attractions to feature and determining how to package it all up for marketing and promotion of the holiday season downtown.
- Peppermint Alley – working with city to sign off on idea, how many giant peppermint candy sidewalk clings can we afford, working with property owners for power and logistics.

REPRESENTATION

The initiative was inclusive of all of our existing holiday events, traditions and partner attractions. We made additions that were beneficial to the downtown community as a whole and then more effectively packaged our holiday offerings for consumers. All of our initiatives were free for the community to experience making it inclusive for all. Our purpose was for all of these new initiatives to further establish downtown as a holiday destination, whether people are seeing a Broadway show, shopping or dining, we want the experience to be one that is unique to Downtown Norfolk. The Downtown Norfolk Council spearheaded the initiatives, with the support of a number of partners essential to accomplishing our goals including attractions, our shopping center, the city, property owners and local businesses.

REPLICATION

Every downtown organization should have the goal of keeping their downtown competitive and a place that other destinations strive to emulate by always innovating and improving. While this placemaking initiative focused on the holiday season, the concept could absolutely be applied other times of the year and other circumstances. The issue prompting this placemaking initiative was the realization that when it came down to it, we were not delivering on our promise of being the region’s premier holiday destination. Our offerings were too similar to other town centers and districts, and we needed to take steps to start to change that by creating new experiences and positioning.

Of course, this challenge is not unique to our downtown, but something we all face on a regular basis. No matter the season or situation, in order for downtown districts to be successful and thriving we must always be ready and willing to put the work in to continue to create distinct and unique spaces and experiences for the community.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Our holiday placemaking initiative can be considered complex, but by having an engaged team with a “can-do, must-do” attitude coupled with positive partnerships and relationships with our attractions and city staff, what could have been a daunting undertaking, especially during the same time frame when we are working to produce our largest event of the year, The Grand Illumination Parade, it was not only achievable, but more successful and smoother than we could have imagined.

Communicating the goal of our holiday placemaking initiative to our partners, board and city staff was key. Simply stating that we wanted to allocate considerable budget and staff time for new holiday initiatives would not have gotten us the support and buy-in we needed to bring these ideas to life. We had to make clear the importance of our new initiatives for our downtown businesses and community as a whole, as well as the rationale and how we planned to measure our success.

While there are challenges and unknowns with any new undertaking, by making sure the goals of the initiative were clear and embraced by our partners, board and city staff, the process was overwhelmingly positive and successful.