Downtown Partnership of Colorado Springs: Downtown Ventures

INNOVATION

Virtual First Friday incentivized creative-sector businesses to improve their digital patron engagement strategies, with emphasis on online sales and social media content creation. This would have been desirable under the best of circumstances, but with pandemic closures it proved critical for survival.

Noted one retailer, "I'm doing Virtual First Friday until the end of time. I've gotten engagement online from people who never would have come to the store in person, but because they saw my pop-up artist talks on First Friday, they now consider themselves patrons of my business."

Another gallery owner agreed: "I've reconnected with patrons who say my virtual shows are the first time they've been able to 'visit' my gallery in months. Especially for elderly folks and parents of young children, Virtual First Friday is the only way they're able to participate in the arts. They don't ever want me to stop."

Helping small street-level retailers drive and fulfill sales online has been an area of emphasis for Downtown Partnership's marketing team for years, but putting program and grant support behind this effort was a crucial win in the challenged retail landscape of 2020. True, retailers were extra-motivated to participate because many of their accustomed income streams and customer engagement platforms were suddenly stripped away, but their participation was rewarded not only with microgrants to help pay their bills, but also with a groundswell of support from patrons online. Data showed repeat patronage month-after-month, legitimating business owners' efforts to leverage the program's digital resources.

OUTCOME

Program outcomes included improved online presence and boosted revenue for creative-sector street-level retailers, regional marketing reach with "buy local art" COVID relief messages, nationwide patron response, and notably strong engagement from residents of neighborhoods surrounding downtown expressing gratitude for such a robust and organized way of supporting local creative businesses and artists through the crisis.

About 30 percent of receipts submitted by patrons for the challenge included messages of appreciation along the lines of this message, copied verbatim: "Thanks for helping the local art galleries! Please let me know if there is anything else you need from my end to help. And thank you again for giving the $50 incentive, really makes a win-win for all during this time!"

The primary problem solved by Virtual First Friday was the major loss of revenue posed by the mandatory closure of galleries when the State of Colorado entered lockdown. At the outset, few downtown creative businesses maintained online galleries or shopping platforms, so the impetus and resources provided through Virtual First Friday led to a rapid and dramatic ramp-up in online sales and marketing capacity, benefits that will endure post-COVID.

Between self-reported sales and grants, Virtual First Friday put over $80,000 back into the hands of local small business owners in just 15 hours of online event time, spaced out to cover the most critical months for retail galleries. Because the program relied on patrons to send in receipts, the actual economic impact is estimated to be 50 to 100 percent greater.

EXECUTION

From inception to execution, the project was pulled together in two weeks. This was of necessity, as statewide lockdown was announced March 16 and the next First Friday was April 3. In that time the Virtual First Friday concept was created and pitched to the lead grantor; the core project team was assembled; partnerships were secured for web hosting and digital asset creation; galleries were recruited to participate; online sales platforms were set up; digital gallery tours, performance videos and art slideshows were created; a schedule of live virtual events and shopping links were posted on the Virtual First Friday web portal; and the promotion was publicized and pitched to local media. This resulted in a half-dozen features and nearly $21,000 in reported sales over the first three-hour event.

With more lead time between the first event and the second (May 1), the team clarified the microgrant challenge mechanics, simplified sales reporting, recruited more participating venues, and provided additional content and sales tools. Otherwise the project remained unchanged, as the partners felt tweaks would cause unnecessary confusion. The concept continued to work well, and was revived in December after a five-month hiatus with little difficulty and robust participation.

REPRESENTATION

From the outset, the Virtual First Friday promotion was driven by a "rising tide" philosophy. Though the initial grant that made the promotion possible was offered to Downtown Partnership, we immediately recruited allies in neighboring gallery districts to participate, and they shared equally in microgrant payouts to art businesses.

This decision was made recognizing that a majority of members of the public who view themselves as local art supporters do not distinguish by district, and value the chance to discover new artists, so each addition to Virtual First Friday made the promotion more robust. We observed high levels of cross-pollination, as patrons heard about the promotion from one business and then subsequently made purchases at several others, each time sending in their receipts to be matched as microgrants for the businesses. In this way, the promotion gained regionwide traction and participation rates doubled from one month to the next. This behavior was mirrored by those who chose to participate by viewing online galleries and watching video content rather than making purchases, so we take this as evidence that the promotion succeeded in including people at diverse socioeconomic levels as well.

REPLICATION

The Virtual First Friday promotion was replicated, with refinements, over five dates in 2020. The basic template of using challenge funds and a partner-driven marketing campaign to spur patronage of local small business can easily be replicated using simple, readily-accessible tools: most importantly a public-facing web portal linking to partner businesses and content, with use of social media ads and press releases as supporting factors. Basic knowledge of video creation software and online merchandising are a plus for participating merchants, but not essential, as several senior-owned or tech-averse businesses still managed to participate successfully using Square, PowerPoint and phone-based sales.

This promotion was presented, by request, statewide to Colorado Creative Industries and to the Colorado Funders Forum in Q2 2020 with the express goal of spurring other communities to try it on behalf of their own small local creative businesses, either as a COVID relief tool or as a seasonal promotion.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The central challenge of Virtual First Friday was giving patrons easy access to businesses that had been forcibly closed due to statewide COVID-19 mitigation efforts. This was made more complex by the fact that pre-COVID, a majority of creative-sector business owners did not perceive themselves as having the tech skills to create online galleries or virtual shopping platforms.

We met this challenge on the patron side by creating peakradar.com/virtualfirstfriday, a one-stop shopping and content portal housed within the region's cultural calendar. Galleries submitted content for the portal via a simple Google Form.

On the business/content creator side, we spent significant time working with local digital strategists and influencers to create tutorials for creative businesses, covering how-tos on setting up online sales via Square, recording video, creating digital slideshows, and optimizing content for social media sharing. One-to-one coaching proved key to success, as many gallery owners were skeptical at first but agreed to give the promotion a try after talking through their concerns with Downtown Partnership staff or their district heads. For those who needed more technical help, DP was able to refer to two local businesses, Formstack and WebRiQ Goes Mad, to provide pro bono web development services.