

Downtown Committee of Syracuse, Inc.

INNOVATION

The project came about following our economic development team's attendance at the 2019 IDA convention in Baltimore. Here, our staff heard presentations from multiple presenters on the topic of storefront improvement, highlighting examples from communities across the U.S.

Comparing this content with the existing conditions in downtown Syracuse's 82-block district, we realized many of our downtown Syracuse businesses lacked guidance and examples necessary to 1) identify themselves through clear, simple, easy-to-read signage, 2) create attractive window displays, 3) illuminate their products and the sidewalk, and 4) create a safe and inviting threshold and outdoor space.

The intent of Storefront Tips is to provide a useful tool to local small businesses, particularly those new to brick and mortar and those who want to retool/rebrand to reach new customers. As businesses implement the recommendations outlined in the guide, a cumulative positive effect will be an overall more welcoming, eye-catching, and safe downtown streetscape.

OUTCOME

The Storefront Tips guide was designed to be timeless and will facilitate new business design and strategy in downtown Syracuse for years to come. We printed 500 copies and also created a digital format, with a goal of providing a copy to every new and existing downtown businesses.

As we hear of new businesses planning to open, we provide a copy to the owner as part of our Welcome Kit, so that when the time comes to open their doors, they have an open sign, a sandwich board, posted hours of operation, lighted window displays, and a welcoming front entrance.

In lieu of a strong local city sign ordinance, the Storefront Tips guide steps in to set clear expectations, provide examples, and get better results. Ultimately, legible and attractive signage, transparent and illuminated windows, unique window displays, and well-groomed outdoor space contribute to a more inviting, cohesive streetscape and a more successful business district.

Through the distribution of the publication, we've initiated open dialogues with business owners. These conversations focused not only on physical storefront opportunities, but also on current COVID-19 resource challenges impacting commerce in the downtown area. In this vein, distributing Storefront Tips is an ice-breaker that leads to a constructive exchange of ideas and helps us brainstorm new programming to assist our ground-floor businesses.

EXECUTION

Economic development staff composed the written guidelines between February and March 2020. Then between March and April, marketing staff compiled photos to illustrate the concepts. Both departments then worked closely with the third-party design team on a series of themes, layouts and revisions through June 2020. From conception to final publication and distribution in July 2020, the process was complete in less than six months.

The result is a high-quality piece that was well-timed for distribution during the pandemic and that will be relevant for years to come. We are planning to continue distribution of the piece to all new downtown businesses over the next two to three years, with opportunities to revise the digital version to reflect emerging best practices in the future.

REPRESENTATION

The Downtown Committee of Syracuse – downtown’s professional downtown management organization – led this effort to capture best practices from global cities and illustrate them for our local businesses.

Our team hand-picked each image for the brochure, ensuring that the places and the people in the images reflect our multi-racial, multi-ethnic community. We featured both local downtown Syracuse businesses and images of businesses in other countries, to denote the global appeal of these strategies and to hedge against potential local business closures that would render local examples obsolete.

We shared the final draft with the City of Syracuse and several of our well-established downtown businesses to get their feedback and make any further adjustments prior to finalizing the draft for publication.

REPLICATION

The Downtown Syracuse Storefront Tips guide is replicable for any central business district. The guidelines and examples provided for signage, lighting, windows, and outdoor space apply across localities and industries (e.g. restaurant, retail, personal services, etc.), and pertain to any walkable streetscape, across many different climates and seasons.

The tips provided are practical and useful to both commercial tenants and building owners. Many of the tips require little cost to implement, while others offer ideas for permanent capital improvements (e.g. clear window glazing, façade improvements.)

The Storefront Tips guide intentionally uses few local photo examples in order to minimize the impact of future local business closures. By highlighting international examples, we also introduce lessons that are true best practices – timeless tips that cross cultural and language barriers to create an inviting public realm.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Between conception and execution of the project, a global pandemic had made its way to central New York, interfering with day-to-day business operations. Our Downtown Committee of Syracuse staff worked remotely across teams and with outside consultants to provide content and design feedback for the publication. We distributed the final version in both hard copy and digital formats, expanding the publication’s reach at a time when only about half of our downtown’s street-level businesses had reopened their doors.

While opportunities to improve storefront design may be obvious to outside observers, recognizing deficiencies and making changes may be difficult for a business owner who is addressing day-to-day challenges of opening and operating a business. Storefront Tips is meant to encourage owners to step back, take a fresh look, and identify opportunities to reflect their brand in a unique way.

The recommendations outlined in Storefront Tips are simple, clear, and timeless, so that when an owner is ready to take that step, the examples and advice are available. Now that businesses are starting to reopen from the pandemic, we can redistribute the publication to owners looking to rebrand, capture new market share, and continue to adapt to new consumer preferences.