

Downtown Lynchburg Association

INNOVATION

As stay-at-home orders and business restrictions were implemented in early 2020, small businesses were either shuttered or operating at minimal capacity. They looked to us for help, and we were ready and willing to be of service. We created the Downtown Recovery Initiative (DRI) to provide direct support to small businesses. We were confident that this work would make an impact but first we needed to get it funded.

We looked for ways to leverage corporate support to get the community involved. At that time, virtual events were becoming commonplace, but we knew that we needed to create something unique if we wanted to reach our goal.

We started by looking at our strengths – marketing, branding, citizen engagement, and fundraising. We considered donor psychology and outlined efforts that might spark them to give. When the concept of a “telethon” was thrown on the white board, we knew we had our big idea.

While we did draw inspiration from telethons of the 1970s (and a little from Leslie Knope), this idea was uncharted territory for our team, our city, and possibly for our industry. But we found that as we moved through it, it was exciting to innovate. Rather than paying for airtime, we streamed live online. Donations were collected online or by phone calls answered by board members. Promotion relied on social media and email marketing rather than traditional advertising.

The desired outcomes were clear: fund the DRI, provide visibility for downtown, and rally the community around local business.

OUTCOME

DOWNTOWN-A-THON had two goals – to raise awareness of downtown businesses and fund the Downtown Recovery Initiative (DRI). It was a success on both accounts. We hit our fundraising goal of \$50k and over 6,000 viewers tuned in during our 12-hour live stream. Overall, we received 5,200 visits to the telethon webpage, with 60% on event day. We provided exposure and new potential customers for downtown businesses both during the event and through promotion around the event. Our collective Facebook and Instagram marketing reached over 136K. Our YouTube subscribers increased by 64% from this event alone.

While the visibility of this effort was focused on one single day, the impact can be felt for months and maybe years to come. The Downtown Lynchburg Gift Card program, a key component of the DRI, was launched at the telethon. To date, we have sold and given away over \$35,000 in downtown cash, which can be spent at over 35 downtown locations. We installed takeout patios, executed marketing initiatives, and hosted shopping events. As the work continues, the public can look forward to placemaking initiatives, a business attraction campaign, and continued activities to attract and support existing local businesses.

While we do not anticipate hosting another DOWNTOWN-A-THON this year, the model exists and can be replicated for any DLA crowdfunded project.

Ultimately, the lasting impact of this program cannot be quantified. It was more than a fundraiser. It brought our community together around the love of our businesses, our neighbors, and our city.

EXECUTION

Planning the DOWNTOWN-A-THON was as detailed as planning a festival. Every aspect was carefully constructed and scheduled to the exact minute.

We began the task of producing professional videos in advance to keep our event-day gathering numbers small. The majority of these segments were broken into one of the following categories that could showcase restaurants and retail: Coffee Talk, Snack Break, Drinks with Donors, Shopping with Charese, restaurant interviews and musical performances. A Downtown Recovery Initiative commercial was also produced to keep our mission top of mind.

We developed an exciting brand and marketing plan that would cut through the noise and ensure high virtual attendance. We

added downtown gift card giveaways throughout the day to keep people engaged for many hours. A web page was created to host the live content, but also to view exclusive swag and make donations with minimal clicks.

On the day of the event, each staff member had a role to ensure effective execution – director, promotion, donation manager, and host. In an effort to engage more community members and keep live content fresh, we invited six co-hosts to rotate throughout the day. We worked with four professional videography companies, ensuring a high-quality production.

REPRESENTATION

One of the stated values of DLA is a “dedication to inclusivity,” and we approach each project with this in mind. As we developed content, we made a conscious decision to highlight each downtown business only once to provide equitable exposure. We are proud that our downtown is home to so many minority-owned businesses, and we made sure that our content schedule reflected that. We also featured a range of musical entertainment, and our co-hosts represented business owners, downtown residents, donors, sponsors, and media.

From an access standpoint, anyone with an internet connection could watch – no tickets required, no invitation necessary. Our video segments were saved into easy-to-access blogs that are still permanently accessible on our website.

From a giving standpoint, the response was surprising, as we received donations from people living in six different states! By offering monthly giving options, we also made becoming a donor and investing in the city center even more accessible.

This project was fully planned and executed by DLA, but there were so many people that made it possible – eight local business sponsors, four video production companies, six community co-hosts, 50 featured downtown businesses, and over 200 individual donors.

REPLICATION

DOWNTOWN-A-THON is achievable by any organization, especially those who are strong in event planning, video production, and/or marketing and promotion. That said, it is possible to contract out many components of the event. For example, our organization is strong in promotion and event planning, and we do have some video production skills. But our knowledge of television production/live streaming is limited. Therefore, we relied on the expertise of Watts Creative, our live production partner. We also partnered with the Academy Center of the Arts, our event venue and a key cultural organization, to handle the lighting and sound. They also acted as our safety consultant, having put in place a strict protocol for their space weeks before our event. Lastly, we supplemented our in-house video production capacity by partnering with four local media companies to produce content.

An organization considering hosting a telethon should give themselves plenty of time to plan. It took us three months to flesh out the concept, produce content, establish a stream schedule, create donation systems, promote the event, and plan for the fulfillment of donor gifts. All in all, successful replication will rely heavily on strong project management and on collaboration with key partners.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

DOWNTOWN-A-THON was a very simple concept – to expose more people to small businesses in downtown at a time when supporting local is at its greatest need through an old-school telethon. In some ways, this event clearly and directly aligns with our mission to create a strong, vibrant, and welcoming downtown with a unique and historic character more than our largest festival ever did. Plus, the day-of execution involved just a few individuals. Aside from the pressure of live performance for 12 hours and ensuring internet was up and running, the only stressor was deciding from which restaurant we would be getting our lunch delivery. The juxtaposition of this event to live, in-person events was striking.

The complexity came into play much earlier with the coordination of asset gathering in a socially-distanced world. We had to figure out how to create the illusion of “live performances” even though they were all pre-recorded. Our interviewers were seated a minimum of six feet away from their guests – even the ones they were married to – in order to send a message that our organization prioritized safety. Lastly, we added to complexity by setting a lofty goal to fill a 12-hour run.