

Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC)

INNOVATION

The purpose of the Cincy Card Connection program was to support local businesses in downtown Cincinnati during the COVID-19 pandemic, when retailers, restaurants, bars and arts institutions were struggling to stay in business. The intended audience was primarily those who support downtown Cincinnati, including those who visit, live, or work in and around the downtown area and wanted to support their favorite establishments. The desired outcome was to give local businesses an immediate cash infusion at the start of the pandemic through the purchase of gift cards. This financial boost was to result from our “buy one gift card, get a second gift card free” promotion, and the unique approach was that the matching gift card would be purchased at a similar – but different – business. Our organization raised the funds that were used to buy the matching gift cards, which were purchased and delivered once a customer provided us with a receipt showing a prior gift card purchase from a downtown establishment. By purchasing the matching gift cards from a similar, but different, business, we were helping support two businesses at once.

OUTCOME

When the Cincy Card Connection program launched in April 2020, it was such a success that the initial matching fund of \$37,500 was depleted within 24 hours. However, receipts from gift card purchases continued to pour in through our online submission tool. Rather than turn off the submission tool, our organization immediately pivoted to try to raise additional funds so we could match the gift card purchases that were being submitted. We managed to raise another \$84,500 dollars for matching purchases. When we finally turned off the submission tool after four days, the program had raised \$250,000 between original and matching gift card purchases, giving an immediate cash infusion to 157 downtown Cincinnati businesses. Based on the success of the first round, we launched Round 2 of the program in May 2020, securing a new \$175,000 matching pool through contributions from 14 local organizations. The second round shifted focus to provide more benefits to retail and service-based businesses, as 90% of the first round purchases had gone to bars and restaurants. Additionally, 100% of matching gift card purchases in Round 2 went to minority- and woman-owned businesses. In total, the Cincy Card Connection generated nearly \$675,000 in financial support to local businesses in downtown Cincinnati. The program resulted in 4,667 gift cards purchased, supporting 284 businesses.

EXECUTION

This was a well-organized program from start to finish. It began by creating the framework and the rules around which matching gift cards would be purchased, and then working with key partners to secure the matching funds needed to make the program work. It also involved a robust communication campaign that required communication with business owners, key stakeholders, and the media. Spreading the word about the campaign from the start was critical to its success. The matching portion of the program was designed to provide an easy way for participants to submit their receipts for gift card purchases and enroll in the program. The data was entered through a Google form, which was then used by staff to match gift card purchases with a similar business in the same category (retail, bar/restaurant, or service business). The Cincy Card Connection website included a database of downtown Cincinnati businesses with gift card programs and included links to purchase a gift card at each location. For Round 2, the program was modified to focus on retailers and personal service businesses that did not receive the bulk of the funding in Round 1 to help maximize the benefit across all types of local businesses.

REPRESENTATION

For Round 2 of the Cincy Card Connection program, the focus was on providing increased support to minority- and woman-owned local businesses. After reviewing the results of Round 1, our organization recognized that we needed to spread support to more retail and service based businesses. We also realized that we had an opportunity to support more minority- and woman-owned local businesses by making 100% of purchases from those businesses. This not only helped support the businesses, but was the impetus for several of our 14 funders to contribute to the matching pool, including P&G's Hispanic Affinity Group, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, The Dianne and J. David Rosenberg Fund, P&G's Asian Pacific American Affinity Group and P&G's Supplier Diversity Group, The Kroger Company, and four minority-owned small businesses in the construction field: Jostin Construction, TriVersity

Construction, Battle Axe Construction, and The Painting Contractor. During Round 2, retailers and personal service businesses were matched at 100% of the purchase amount, bars and restaurants were matched at 50%, and 100% of matching gift cards were purchased from minority- and woman-owned businesses. In total, \$315,000 in gift cards were purchased from 65 minority- and woman-owned businesses through the program.

REPLICATION

The Cincy Card Connection program can be used as a tool for other downtown districts to provide a financial boost to their local business community, since the process and framework created for this program is not specific to one geographic area. In fact, this program has become a national model. Other cities with programs modeled off the Cincy Card Connection program include Northern Kentucky, Pittsburgh, Columbus and Sugar Land, Texas.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The initial challenge of the program was in establishing a system to ensure that funding was allocated as equitably as possible among the hundreds of participating local businesses. Each participating location was assigned a specific category, and when a gift card was purchased from that location, this purchase was matched with a purchase to a similar business in the same category. This process was tracked in detail through a Google form, which allowed staff to track the dollar amounts in each category, and maximum funding allocations were established. Any business making more than the break-point had no additional gift cards purchased, to help spread the benefits to other businesses.

An additional challenge involved the distribution of matching gift cards, which required significant staff time for purchasing gift cards, stuffing envelopes and mailing. We could have made the process much easier by handling everything online and only working with businesses that had online gift cards; however, that would have limited the number of businesses that could participate. We wanted to be as inclusive as possible in our effort, so we took on additional complexity on the fulfillment of gift cards in order to make sure every business was eligible to participate.