



10 Steps to Downtown Revitalization

By Jim Hunt, Founder of Amazing Cities

Probably no other area in your city or town gets as much criticism as your downtown business district. Whether you are in a small town or large city, the health of the community is often gauged by the condition of the downtown. With growing drug problems and increasing homeless populations, even thriving downtowns are dealing with problems that did not exist a decade ago. Add to this, the increasing shift to online shopping and you have a challenge to even the healthiest downtown business district.

While there is no “magic” solution to revitalizing your downtown business district, there are several strategies that can help change the trajectory and begin to put your

downtown on the road to recovery. The good news is that even small steps can stand your downtown out from the crowd. Here are the 10 Steps to Revitalize your Downtown:



Public Art can provide a needed lift to a Downtown Business District.

1. **Gather Data**-It is surprising how many cities and towns do not have an accurate count of businesses and other organizations operating in their downtown business districts. This information is critical to begin the revitalization process. It is important to know where you are, to move forward. Existing businesses are the most important building blocks in the process and not knowing who and where they are, can doom your revitalization efforts. Larger cities may have staff and sophisticated GIS systems that can generate these reports, but even small towns can create a database using simple tools. The important thing is to begin and develop as comprehensive amount of data as possible. As we will see, this data can be used in a variety of ways to assist in communication, success levels and accountability. Information on property status is also important and can give you a visual look at the clusters in your business district that can determine where dollars can be spent on public infrastructure and other investments.

2. **Identify your Team**-A key component of any revitalization process is to identify the team and define areas of responsibility. A successful plan will involve a large group of diverse individuals and organizations. Identifying these members will insure that everyone is working towards the same goal and communicating amongst all the team members. If an outside facilitator is used, it is important that they know who is doing what. Surprisingly, each community is different and often community leadership can be found in unusual places. Dig deep, by spending a little time researching existing programs and organizations, you may discover groups who are willing to be part of the team, but had just never been asked. Gather contact information and any special skillsets of the team

members and keep a steady stream of information flowing to them.

3. **Develop the Plan**-Any successful project requires a written plan with carefully developed goals and objectives. While this may seem obvious to many, you would be shocked at how many groups begin their revitalization journey with a strong desire to “change things” and little else. They undertake a cleanup or other activity and find that they lose momentum when it doesn’t turn things around overnight. While planning is difficult work and takes a good deal of time, it is crucial. As mentioned before, it is always good to have a professional planning organization on board, if funding permits. If that is not possible, looking to a college or university in your area can sometimes bring you a talented individual with the time and energy to assist the community. More and more, colleges and universities are putting focus and resources into their local communities and student interns and classes can provide needed “troops” to gather data and do other outreach to the community.
4. **Plan for an Early Victory**-With many communities, there have been numerous, failed or less than successful efforts to revitalize their Downtown Business District. This creates a feeling that nothing is going to be successful and can derail a new effort. Look for an easy victory in order to “prime the pump” and give the team members some opportunity to celebrate and attract attention. This is also important to instill trust and solidify partnerships. I have seen where local governments are often reluctant to jump on the bandwagon and when an effort has an early victory, it provides an incentive to support the effort. Numbers count and having a big turnout for a downtown meeting or doing a successful façade grant or some other accomplishment can get

attention and keep team members and volunteers enthused.

5. **Become a Public Relations Manic**-With today's multiple social media outlets and the remaining traditional media operations (TV, Radio, Newspapers), a story about a city or town working to rebuild and revitalize their Downtown Business District is media "gold". Send out multiple press releases and post regularly on social media. Film You-Tube videos on every aspect of your work. When you meet, make sure it is documented with pictures, videos and testimonials. Create fun activities and be sure they make the rounds on social media. Interview anyone who will give you a kind word. Do before and after pictures of projects. Make a sign at a local print shop that you can put in every video or picture. Since social media is not limited to your town or region, make sure to identify "your" project. Call your local television and radio station and ask them to come to an event. Often, they are looking for positive stories to balance the overwhelming amount of blood and gore that seems to fill the airwaves. Be consistent and don't be afraid of posting too much. (How many gecko ads did you see this week?) People have a huge capacity to absorb a lot of media, so be the one that is always posting. You will become a local legend.
6. **Be the Change You Want to See**-Make sure that you are walking the walk. When you hold meetings, make sure you are patronizing a Downtown business. When you buy donuts for a fundraiser, use a local bakery. Business owners are sometimes skeptical of "revitalization" efforts, but they know business when they see it. A luncheon or fundraiser held in a local restaurant will often result in a supportive owner who will jump on the bandwagon. Too often, we pinch pennies when organizing revitalization efforts and starve the remaining businesses who have held on to their businesses.

One individual started a personal “buy local” effort in his town and posted it on Facebook. He videoed his crusade and highlighted local businesses. In a few weeks, others joined in and it caught on. Refer customers to local businesses and comment on social media when you have had a great meal or used a local meeting place. Ask others to support the Downtown merchants and report their experiences. The power of numbers can create a movement and help efforts to revitalize.

7. **Engage the Local Government**-Downtown

Revitalization efforts are often undertaken without participation of the local government. This can be due to tension between the “politicians” and the business community or some incident in the past. While these issues are sometimes hard to get over, most local governments have resources that can aid in revitalization efforts. I have found that it is best to engage local governments as information providers in the beginning and then to chart a path forward. Local police are critical to making a Downtown Business District viable and communication is important. Many times, the local police are overwhelmed by serious crime and are not as diligent on minor property crimes such as vandalism or graffiti. When local groups offer to address cleanup of dump sites or graffiti covered walls, the police realize that this can help address some of the serious issues facing them. Code Enforcement can help when stubborn and/or absentee property owners fail to keep their properties up to standards and pull down the whole district. Public Works departments are often willing to assist in hauling the debris collected by community cleanup campaigns. While these seem small contributions in the scheme of things, a supportive relationship with local government can yield huge results.

8. **Develop Public Art**-One of the most impactful ways to revitalize Downtown Business Districts is to encourage public art. This can be dozens of small projects or a large centerpiece project. The cost can be adjusted to fit available funds. Public Art can also be a good way to attract donors who want to be remembered in the community or a business who wants to invest in a “lasting” project. Large murals, statues, interactive displays, temporary installations are all good ways of bringing public art to the business district. Public Art also energizes an eclectic group of artists and followers who can be the dreamers, who will create the district of the future. Many cities have used public utility boxes as the canvas for local groups to express themselves. From Los Angeles to small towns in Iowa, these ubiquitous metal boxes are springing up with beautiful designs and the public seems to appreciate the appeal that it brings to a Downtown.
9. **Focus on Wayfinding**-Long-time residents and businesses often overlook the need to help visitors and newcomers navigate a Downtown Business District. Cities and towns that have invested in improved wayfinding have seen the investment pay off with new customers for local businesses. Many visitors to the Downtown fear being lost in an unfamiliar area and avoid the Downtown. With clean, new signage and well-lit streets, the business district can look “hip” again. The East Liberty section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is an example of a Business District that has revitalized and improved their wayfinding and overall appearance.
10. **Celebrate, Celebrate, Celebrate!!!**-The final tip for successful revitalization of a Downtown Business District is to celebrate success whether big or small. New business openings should be cause for celebration. An old building being remodeled should bring out a crowd and the plans should be described for all to enjoy. The small town of Logan,

West Virginia used a collapsed building as a cause to celebrate when they planted a garden and painted a huge mural to commemorate the newly gained lot. One thing that all Downtowns need is people and there is no better way to generate a crowd than to hold a parade, a Winter Festival, a Summer water balloon fight, a sandwich eating contest or anything that can draw a crowd. Port Townsend, Washington takes a “town photo” each year and has them displayed in the City Hall. The pictures go back many years and it has become a tradition. It also brings out most of the residents to enjoy the vibrant downtown. Akron, Ohio developed sand volleyball courts on vacant lots in the downtown and dozens of young people bring picnic lunches on hot Summer days.

Downtown redevelopment and revitalization is neither fast nor easy. It takes a dedicated team, working together on a shared vision to find success. There will be scores of doubters and naysayers but if you keep your eye on the prize, you can achieve great things.

A vibrant Downtown Business Districts is one of the most exciting things in any city or town. Places to meet and socialize are going to be needed more than ever and our Downtowns are perfectly suited for creating the “places to remember” in this digital age.

Keep listening to the Amazing Cities Podcast and we will be talking to leaders from throughout the United States who have done some Amazing things.

Good luck and remember to ALWAYS BE AMAZING!

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