



*Virginia*

Technical Brief  
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Virginia Main Street

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# MONITOR

# Virginia Main Street



**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING  
AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**  
*Partners for Better Communities*  
[www.dhcd.virginia.gov](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov)



The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's Main Street Program provides downtown revitalization technical assistance to Virginia communities, using the National Main Street Center's Four Point Approach™ (Organization, Promotion, Design & Economic Restructuring) to comprehensive preservation-based revitalization of historic commercial districts.

## **Web site**

[www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet/](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet/)

## **Blog**

[dhcdvms.wordpress.com/](http://dhcdvms.wordpress.com/)

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Virginia Main Street

Building Economic Vitality Downtown



## Getting feet on the street - structuring promotional campaigns that bring 'em out

An effective promotional campaign fosters a positive image of Main Street. It brings potential customers downtown and infuses the commercial district with a renewed vibrancy. A campaign can reintroduce the charms of the traditional downtown. Or, for a new generation of residents, it can frame a first meeting.

In either case, it's important that the district make a solid impression.

Unique promotional efforts within a community might include advertising-based image campaigns, retail marketing strategies, and special events. And for all of them, five best practices culled from Virginia Main Street programs can boost the prospects of success.

A campaign can reintroduce the charms of the traditional downtown.

### 1. Plan thoroughly

A strategic and comprehensive plan for the Main Street program should guide the efforts of the promotions committee, which then does its own long and near-term planning.

In Abingdon, the Virginia Main Street program, designated in 2007, is undergoing its own process of identifying appropriate and meaningful promotions for the historic Southwest Virginia community.

#### The first step: studying the calendar

"With so many complementary and engaged community organizations active in Abingdon, we really need to find a niche," said Advance Abingdon Executive Director Elisabeth Iskra. "That means researching the community calendar to find an open date—an opportunity."

While a long-term plan lays out general mile markers used to assess progress, more near-term planning is all about the details. Any campaign will require its own timeline and task sheet, and it needs a leader: someone who will direct and track the work of the committee. Someone must be the project lead, and each committee or event chair will have his or her own style and techniques for ensuring progress toward the group's goal.

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### Tip: Engage partners in planning

An ambitious yet achievable plan comes together where an organization's goals meet its available resources.

Yet while resources in the current economic climate are likely to be diminished, that doesn't necessarily mean that the goals need be set aside. Whether your organization is updating its strategic plan or developing the annual work plan, consider inviting collaborating partners to participate in the planning process.

Working together, the organizations might identify additional shared goals and the collective resources to achieve them. By their very nature, Virginia's Main Street efforts provide communities with frequent and natural openings for these collaborative conversations.

For more tools, tips, and resources on strategic planning, download the Winter 2008 Virginia Capacity newsletter at:  
[www.dhcd.virginia.gov/occb](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/occb).



### Main Street: Open for business?

It's often said that a shop open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. caters to the unemployed. Many store owners are open precisely during the hours that their most likely customers are working.

In communities across the commonwealth, limited hours of operation on Main Street give consumers a reason not to shop downtown – and offer the edge of convenience to other retailers.

"If Main Street businesses are going to be competitive in today's market," says Staunton Downtown Development Association (SDDA) Executive Director Julie Markowitz,

## 2. Market creatively

Nothing renews enthusiasm or participation like a new marketing effort – especially for members of the board for Main Street organizations across the country. After all, it's fun to communicate a message in a groundbreaking way or capture a new audience.

Tap into this creative energy to spark new ideas, but remember, the commercial district has an overall personality that the organization has invested money, time and energy in establishing. Effective marketing will reinforce this desired brand image while sparking new energy; it will build new relationships while strengthening current ones.

Staunton did just that with the recent development of an extended store hours campaign.

The effort strategically addressed the misperception of the commercial district as a nine-to-five community. The goal: provide convenient shopping times and support merchants already keeping their doors open late, garnering the spirit of an evening or afternoon out on the town.

Building on a well-received community identity established in partnership with Staunton Downtown Development Association, the new effort appeared natural and well-coordinated. The tagline, "Staunton, As U like it" was extended with "When You Want It."

The campaign employed additional funding from the Staunton Department of Economic Development to purchase advertising, banners, Mylar star balloons, and door stickers featuring the tagline and store hours. Television spots and press releases highlighted the merchants open on Friday and Saturday evenings as well

"they cannot ignore national retail trends. We must offer the same convenient shopping hours."

Through her work promoting SDDA to civic clubs and community organizations, Markowitz heard complaints not about the quality, variety, or service of businesses in Downtown Staunton, only the ongoing chorus of frustration from potential customers who could only window shop.

"The community wanted to support those businesses," she says, "and it shows in the overwhelmingly positive comments we received from the extended hours campaign. We think that our numbers will show that our response to consumer demand was a good move."

as on Sunday afternoons. And to top off the energy during the extended hours, street performers added music and a festive atmosphere.

### 3. Effectively staff the effort

Effectively managed promotions will tap valuable and unique skill sets of volunteers, preparing them to represent the effort and the organization while offering each volunteer a rewarding experience.

Working to reach the large youth market provided by Harrisonburg's James Madison University, Downtown Harrisonburg Renaissance worked with a volunteer who understands the best practices and opportunities associated with social media and online communities. Setting up a special Facebook presence to inform

#### The Volunteer Workforce

For more information on working with volunteers, download the Spring 2007 Main Street Monitor, "Recruit, Train, and Recognize: Three Steps to Develop an Effective Volunteer Workforce," at: [www.dhcd.virginia.gov/mainstreet](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/mainstreet).

Harrisonburgers of news, entertainment, and events, the volunteer's efforts increased event attendance and played an important role in several specially targeted campaigns.

Of course, the skills of volunteers aren't just behind the scenes. For event-based campaigns, volunteers with friendly smiles and calm, welcoming demeanors can make guests feel welcome - exactly what the campaign is trying to do for the downtown. But in order to best represent the effort, volunteers should know about the Main Street community and the opportunities it offers. Training prior to the event and the availability of a centrally located person as a resource point during the event will bolster confidence in front-line hosts.

### 4) Communicate generously – it takes time

All campaigns rely on effective communication to engage and inform merchants, residents, and other stakeholders. Start by widely communicating the campaign's vision during the planning phase, follow up when it's over with a report on campaign success, and in between, talk up the effort in every possible way.



Everyone associated with a campaign should be considered an element of the communication plan.

With the avalanche of advertisements, product placements, and solicitations individuals are exposed to each day, word of mouth remains

a relied-upon source of reliable information. Tap into the networks of board members, committee members and volunteers by equipping them with information they need to be effective buzz agents.

Keep everyone informed on the progress of a campaign and the events associated with it.

Luray Downtown Initiative uses a central and public online calendar to keep citizens aware of important event dates, planning dates, and committee meetings. Additionally, the group has used its Web site to archive their "Faces of Main Street" campaign in which they partnered with The Page News & Courier to highlight the merchants of the commercial district, greatly extending the reach of the effort.

### 5. Evaluate and celebrate

Measure the success of promotional campaigns. While this is listed last, it must really be considered in the planning phase.

What do you want the campaign to do and how will you tell if it has done it?

Build measurement into the campaign and then share the results with volunteers, sponsors, merchants and other stakeholders. Allow for progress updates along the way to help maintain energy around the campaign.

Be a willing collaborator with the press throughout the campaign and share your evaluation data. Return phone calls promptly, and if a national story has relevance to your local campaign, make the local connection by issuing a tailored news release.

When the campaign is over, incorporate the analyzed evaluation data in a coordinated and celebratory debrief session. Give everyone involved a chance to feel good about the work they have done - and together identify ways that lessons learned can be put to work in the next project or ongoing operations.

### Tips for constructing a news release

(Adapted from Virginia Tourism Corporation's *Helpful Hints for Passionate PR*)

- Have your contact information in plain site at the top or bottom of the page
- No more than two pages – preferably one
- Use a headline to announce the news in title case, under 80 characters
- Use a strong lead sentence (less than 25 words), simply stating the news you have to announce and make your points in the first paragraph.
- Make sure to address the basics—what, when, who, where, why
- Keep sentences short, with three to four sentences per paragraph
- Never use promotional language—“the best new...,” “unbelievable,” etc...
- Write succinctly and well
- Avoid use of first person outside of direct quotations
- Include a quote from a major player
- Customize the release for your intended recipient
- “For more information, visit [Web site] or call [phone number with area code]”
- END with # # #
- Proofread carefully!

### Five questions to guide campaign evaluation

#### What are the goals of the campaign?

Before you plan your campaign, know what your goal is. Is it more customers in stores? More dollars spent on Main Street? Greater awareness of the services and merchandise available in the downtown district? The goal will shape the plan and how you measure success.

#### How will the outcomes be measured?

Now that you know what the goals are, how will they be measured?

Put a system for measurement in place and invest in it. The investment might be time spent training merchants to capture data. For surveys, it might mean providing incentives to those downtown guests who complete them. Volunteer preparation will come into play for both gathering data and processing it.

#### Where's the performance baseline?

To measure progress—a positive change in a condition—the commercial district has to know where it currently stands. Without a baseline, even a measured outcome can be discounted as hearsay, so go the extra step and gather comparable data.

#### How will the marketing tools be evaluated?

If a marketing campaign uses multiple avenues to get the word out, the different media should be assessed for their effectiveness. Compare their benefit-to-cost ratios to know where marketing dollars are best spent. Put a system in place to gather information. Surveys can play a part, as can price discrimination techniques such as coupons.

#### How will subjective comments be gathered?

Not every story can be told with numbers. Supplementing data with anecdotal accounts boosts the power of data to communicate with stakeholders.

Interview participants, shoppers and merchants to gather their reaction to the campaign. Don't forget to document them and annotate with photographs and video.



### Tips for a celebratory and meaningful debrief

- Set aside a dedicated time and place.
- Give a little time between the campaign and the debrief. Let the process and outcome soak in, giving everyone their own reflection time before pulling it together.
- Invite stakeholders, volunteers, and others who helped.
- Laugh together at memorable moments.
- Share photographs or video—post them on the Web site if appropriate.
- Review the data tracking campaign success.
- Reflect upon (and record!) strengths and weaknesses of the effort.
- Give everyone a chance to comment.
- Consider additional ways to express gratitude to merchants, volunteers and sponsors.
- Identify next steps and follow through on them.
- Thank everyone.

### Seven Additional resources

Allen, Sylvia. "A Planning Guide for Special Events: What do you do and When do you do it?" Main Street News, October 1999.

Falk, Edgar. 1,001 Ideas to Create Retail Excitement. Prentice Hall, 1994.

Reinhard, Richard. "Buffalo Place Inc.: Building a Successful Promotion Program" Main Street News, May 1992.

Stuart, Sheri. "Strengthening the Commercial District: 10 Tips for Terrific Retail Promotions" Main Street News, December 2002.

VanBelleghem, Luke. "How Special Events Benefit Local Businesses" Main Street News, June 1, 2007.

