



Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

Clean and Safe

Ambassador programs prioritize differently, but hospitality is everyone's job

A downtown's ambassador program should prioritize safety, cleaning, and hospitality functions, depending on what is key to making downtown a more accommodating place to live, work, and play.

There is, however, some overlap of responsibility to be expected for the people in uniform providing these services, especially when it comes to being helpful to the general public. Hospitality, after all, is everyone's job.

For insight into developing and maintaining a strong ambassador program, *Downtown Idea Exchange* recently spoke with Blair McBride, vice president of Block by Block, a Louisville, KY-based company that specializes in serving improvement districts with clean, safe, and hospitality service teams.

Promote accomplishments steadily

Probably the best thing that downtown can do to develop and maintain a successful ambassador program is to keep funding it sufficiently. That requires steady buy-in from the downtown shareholders who are ultimately funding it, and constantly talking up and reminding them why the ambassador program is worthwhile.

"Downtowns sometimes miss promoting the small and big accomplishments of their ambassador programs," McBride says. "Then when it's time for a BID renewal, the six months before that

is when they're really trying to promote, instead of doing continual promotion."

Implement a methodical process to capture data demonstrating what the ambassadors do on a day-to-day basis, he advises.

Then, rather than overwhelm people with statistics, talk up clean team performance in terms that people can easily visualize, such as likening the weight of trash collected as equivalent to the weight of X Volkswagen Beetles, or how many Olympic-size swimming pools could be filled with the water used in power washing district sidewalks.

When someone takes the time to write an email or letter to downtown about an ambassador who was especially helpful, celebrate it.

Most important and helpful of all is the on-street visibility of the ambassadors, and connecting them back to the downtown organization.

"Safety and cleaning programs are usually most people's connection to what the improvement district does, and to who they are. Tie the downtown organization's website into the [ambassador program] branding scheme," he advises.

As downtown evolves, so should its ambassador program

Obviously, hiring and keeping good people to serve as ambassadors of downtown is critical. "Hire for personality," McBride says, whether

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downtown is hiring people to provide primarily safety, cleaning, or hospitality services.

“The other thing I would add, which we’re preaching to our staff now, is in this economy, make sure you’re keeping your best people.”

Doing that requires allowing people some autonomy in their work, providing competitive pay and benefits, and creating a culture where team members like their work, feel ownership in downtown, are publicly recognized, well treated, and believe in the value of what they’re doing.

Periodically, ambassador programs must be adjusted to meet the changing nature and demands of downtown.

“When we first started out, Louisville was a 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. downtown. I mean, you could roll up the sidewalks at 7 o’clock, because nobody needed them!” he quips. “Now, with the addition of more nightlife and retail, we’ve transformed into a 16-hour downtown.”

Initially, Block by Block hired retired and off-duty police officers as safety ambassadors for its program in downtown Louisville.

As downtown revitalized, developed, and nightlife grew, the BID added a cleaning program, and has since shifted about 60 percent of its resources to cleaning.

Safety ambassadors now cover a larger window of time than when the program began. Landscaping is also a growing work area for the cleaning crew, which McBride expects will become a trend all over North America.

Shift from safe to hospitable

Such change is not unique to Louisville. As downtowns become livelier places after 7 p.m., and attract more weekend visitors, people feel security in numbers. Choosing a good place to eat becomes a more front-of-mind concern than personal safety.

“We’ve always tried to recruit people with high levels of personality. But one of the new things we started looking at was creating more hospitality-only programs, where we have something like a team of Wal-Mart greeters,” McBride says.

Hospitality-focused ambassador programs

enable downtowns to hire people from a wider pool of applicants, including seniors.

“We’ve created programs such as that in Baltimore (MD, pop. 637,500), Waikiki (Honolulu, Hawaii, pop. 371,700), and we’ve just launched one in Santa Monica (CA, est. pop. 88,050),” he says.

“Determine, on a scale of SWAT team on the left, and concierge on the right, what it is you want your program to do. And who is it there to serve? I’ve seen some programs that are only concerned with the homeless and panhandlers. They miss the boat on talking to pedestrians and visitors,” he says.

Cleaning never gets old

The third area that ambassador programs address, cleaning, never really diminishes in importance. Still, even cleaning crews should be approachable and trained to help people navigate downtown.

Block by Block trains both its safety and cleaning services members to also provide basic hospitality services. The company also trains its cleaning crew people to observe and report suspicious behavior, and expects its safety ambassadors to pick up large pieces of litter as they’re making their rounds.

“On the cleaning side, don’t overlook the public’s expectation that somebody with a radio and a uniform has to have some level of ability to communicate and know about downtown,” McBride says.

The long-term challenge for ambassador programs, he says, is to “promote and brand everything you do — and keep your program fresh and relevant. You can’t rest on your laurels. You always have to be looking for the new ‘wow’ effect, something that’s impressive. That could mean adding small things to your repertoire of services.

“It also means promoting what you’re doing. A lot of improvement districts do great things, but they don’t tell anybody. Then people assume the City does it. You’ve got to find the balance of finding the most visible time to do things but also working smart.”

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