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Recipe for Success for Fashion Small Businesses in College town: Fresh Urbanism with a Heaping Side of Country Hospitality

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A college town is defined as an area where a college or university shapes the culture and characteristics of the community (Gumprecht, 2004). This distinctive climate possesses certain characteristics that separate it from other urban areas and local communities. College towns are more likely to have stores that cater to the offbeat interests and tastes through the stores, music, arts and other culture (Gumprecht, 2004). They are often home to a plethora of small businesses that try to attract the demographic of young students, including a multitude of small fashion businesses in particular, which face a unique set of advantages and challenges to operate.

While there has been growing research concerning the distinctive characteristics of a college town in itself, there is limited research on small businesses, more specifically, fashion retailers, that exist in this unique setting. With 67 fashion-related businesses operating in a particular large college town, what does it take for a small fashion business to be successful in this unique college town environment? An analysis of the challenges and benefits small businesses face while operating in a college town was necessary to understand the recipe for success. The purpose of this study was to gain insight on how these small fashion businesses were staying lucrative in this college town through a series of qualitative interviews with five local fashion-related businesses.

To approach this research question, in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted. This qualitative method is recommended for uncovering valuable insights, experiences, and perspectives that are difficult to obtain from quantitative research techniques (Creswell, 2012). A total of five local fashion-related small businesses, each with a unique mission and product offering, were selected for interviews. The stores included a men's clothing store, a woman's boutique, a unisex boutique, a fabric store, and a fair trade non-profit store. Interviews were conducted two separate times, with storeowners and managers, from October 2015 to January 2016. Each interview was conducted in-person, at the respective store. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed to identify emerging themes.

Three key themes emerged from this study: (a) consumers want the store to reflect an urban setting that they are lacking from a small town; (b) small businesses need to still reflect country hospitality; and (c) opportunities exist to make up for low sales seasons (summer and winter) by reaching a different customer base. For these small businesses, the recipe for success in a college

town was a combination of these ingredients. Store owners strive to position their stores as destinations with products that Columbia was previously missing. One owner noted that she wanted to bring a “bigger city, more urban feel” to customers through her store. People in a college town are looking for brands and styles that reflect the larger, urban areas surrounding them. One storeowner said that “bringing a unique perspective to a small town is always needed.” At the same time, these stores expressed the importance of providing customer service that is reflective of country hospitality. A store manager said “I like knowing all of my customers by name,” because the familiarity fosters loyalty and spreads business. If a small business fails to provide outstanding service and experience to the customer even one time, “they’re not going to come back.” These stores believed that their loyal customers were coming back to their stores because of this hospitality. Furthermore, these businesses needed to extend this hospitality to not only their customers, but also to other nearby local businesses. For example, these small fashion businesses were sending customers to each other and collaborating together in local events. They also make sure to carry different brands from stores with the same product categories. Thus, these businesses naturally created a mutually beneficial system to build their customer bases. Lastly, several managers identified that local residents “don’t want to deal with students,” and avoid shopping downtown. Summer may serve as a viable opportunity to cater to college town natives, because a majority of the students are away for the season.

This research presents a series of important implications and contributions. Small businesses must take initiative to provide a unique, urban inspired merchandise mix with outstanding customer service in order to be successful. Given the flexibility of small businesses to react to new trends faster than big-box retailers and provide more individualized attention, this is their biggest competitive advantage from the big-box retailers. Being located in a college town still necessitates knowledge of the latest trends (ie. on Pinterest), as well as the most effective channels to reach younger consumers. This study offers opportunities for further research. Studies focusing on these small college town businesses’ use of other venues such as website and social media platforms and examining their analytics could reveal key findings regarding the platforms and content that best reaches consumers in a college town.

Reference

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