Main Street Makeover Marathon: Partnering to Enhance Rural Businesses and Entrepreneurial Learning for Students in Iowa

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Abstract
The Main Street Makeover project has offered outreach assistance to over 20 Iowa businesses while allowing hundreds of students to contribute to strategies that will make Iowa communities more attractive to current and potential residents.

Keywords
rural, entrepreneurship, experience economy, outreach

Disciplines
Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations | Fashion Business | Hospitality Administration and Management | Marketing

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Main Street Makeover Marathon: Partnering to enhance rural businesses and entrepreneurial learning for students in Iowa

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Background
Small businesses account for nearly two-thirds of all establishments (McDaniel, 2001). Nationally, the number of small, independently owned businesses is substantial, accounting for over 90% of all US business activity (Scarborough & Zimmerer, 2009). Diversity of businesses contributes to the socio-economic fabric of a community and is required to create the “critical mass” needed to draw visitors to a destination (Richards, 2001). Small businesses, such as retail and hospitality firms, “provide many of the services needed by the local residents and, perhaps most importantly, they add to the personality and charm that characterize Main Street economies” (Henderson, 2002, p. 49). In addition, small businesses bring community leadership and economic vitality to areas through shopping, entertainment, services, and tourism. The revenue generated from tourism by these lifestyle businesses is significant. However, small businesses face challenges due to escalating competition from well-financed larger firms, regional shopping centers, and the Internet. To compete, small businesses may integrate experiential offerings to provide distinct competitive advantages (Fiore, Oh, Jeong, Niehm, & Hausafus, 2007) while fostering community economic sustainability, more choice, and enhanced life quality for consumers. In an economy increasingly driven by experiences, rather than commoditization products and services (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), this broad scale student project integrated experiential competitive strategies and business makeovers for the purpose of enhancing the success of small rural retail and hospitality firms in Main Street Iowa (MSI) communities.

Purpose of Project/Innovative Teaching Approach
Iowa is continually seeking ways to develop and enhance the economic climate of its communities in the face of population and market change (Iowa Department of Economic Development, 2004; Iowa Department of Economic Development, 2007). Between 1989 and 2001, 70,000 college graduates have left Iowa for the jobs and attractions of large cities such as Minneapolis or Chicago and the State is using resources to reverse this “brain drain” (Burcum, 2003). In a recent article, Governor Culver stated, “One of the biggest challenges we have at the state level is trying to deal with the brain drain”, citing U.S. Census Bureau figures showing that Iowa had the second-highest exit rate for young, single, college-educated residents from 1995 to 2000 (Roos, 2007). Since 2004 this project has also enhanced student recognition of entrepreneurial opportunities within Iowa and fostered a sense of environmental and retail sustainability through the revitalization of existing structures. It has also forged a long-term partnership between our Apparel, Educational Studies, and Hospitality Management Department and Main Street Iowa, which is a part of the Iowa Department of Economic Development. To date, the Main Street Makeover project has offered outreach assistance to over 20 Iowa businesses while allowing hundreds of students to contribute to strategies that will make Iowa communities more attractive to current and potential residents.

Method: Value Added Project Components and Processes
Student teams worked with 3-4 businesses in one designated MSI community to conduct business makeover projects. Main Street Iowa staff and community directors worked closely with faculty to assist
in community and business selection. Businesses were asked to commit time and resources of various types to support project completion according to MSI specified guidelines. Through a multistage analysis and planning process, student teams planned and implemented changes to the business interiors, merchandise presentation, and exterior structure and signage. Project components also addressed experiential marketing and other competitive strategies as deemed appropriate for the participating businesses. The implementation process took place over a four-day period with student teams working on-site, hence the name “Main Street Makeover Marathon” was adopted for this business makeover project. The specific steps and sequence for the project are detailed below:

1. Instructors use a process-based approach to teaching business/community improvement using service-learning experiences. Skills gained have wide transferability to business and community settings. Projects are customized to business and community needs. Each project follows the MSI four-point approach and integrates proven experience economy strategies for adding value. Service-learning experiences increase student awareness of opportunities for employment after graduation.

2. Student participants are sought from a range of interdisciplinary areas and courses in the Department of Apparel Educational Studies and Hospitality Management (e.g. store environment and aesthetics, retail merchandising, entrepreneurship). Teams are developed so that synergies can be obtained for the needed project focus, yielding maximum productivity and desired outcomes for communities, businesses, and students.

3. All projects are conducted in a multi-team format, with student teams contributing focused expertise (design, marketing, merchandising, promotions, etc.) according to a master plan of work. Students collect community level project data and conduct market research during the early part of the academic term. This information is used to complete business sustainability plans. To collect needed information, teams participate in a site visit and conduct a business assessment in the selected community.

4. A Master Plan of Work is developed through collaboration of student teams, MSI staff, and ISU faculty well in advance of the Main Street Makeover Marathon and incorporates needs assessed during the site and follow-up visits. Needs for construction work, painting, or other contract expertise are identified so plans can be developed and advance work completed if necessary before the implementation date.

5. Resources needed to complete projects are identified and leveraged through student innovation, creativity, ideas, and energy. Students create valuable outcomes for businesses and communities using resources in new or unique ways, and by acquiring resources (e.g. funding, borrowed equipment and donated supplies) from Iowa based businesses, organizations supportive of this project focus, and the Main Street Iowa program.

**Implementation of Project and Effectiveness**

Over multiple semesters of class interactions with small business operators and Main Street Iowa (MSI) staff, students have been oriented to the opportunities and challenges of small businesses within rural Iowa communities. Pre and post project assessments have shown an increase in students’ perceptions of knowledge and skills gained regarding competitive strategies for small hospitality or retail firms located in rural communities as well as a significant increase in sense of responsibility to support local businesses. In addition, the experience has significantly enhanced students’ beliefs that the service-learning activity helped them build confidence in operating their own business later in their career by acquiring adequate knowledge and skills to develop competitive small business strategies (Jeong, Oh, Fiore, Niehm, & Hausafus, 2007). Qualitative feedback from business clients, communities, and MSI staff has likewise been positive in terms of value added aspects for businesses and communities.
Qualitative evidence of this project’s impact is shown below in quotes from participating students and a community level Main Street director.

**Students:**
“I really liked getting to work in project teams…I was able to talk the project out with others and that really helped me to learn the subject matter.”
“Hands down, the Main Street consulting project was one of the best overall learning experiences I have had while at ISU….great experience and very realistic.”

**Main Street Director:**
“The students have just breathed so much excitement and new ideas into our business community…..they have brought new ways of looking at things and great opportunities for our local businesses to improve. We could never have come this far without the students’ help on this project. Thank you!

**Conclusions and Future Goals**
This project has focused on the development of business sustainability plans and makeovers with significant input of merchandising and hospitality students. Both of these project dimensions allowed small businesses, many strapped for resources, to realize innovative, memorable experiential consumer offerings. Augmenting business offerings and strategies with experience economy-based value may enhance community appeal by improving the economic viability of its businesses. This, in turn, attracts more businesses and offers interesting attractions to draw both residents and visitors (Glaeser, 2001). All of these outcomes are desirable and vital to community growth and development and provide substantial real world learning experiences for merchandising and hospitality students. We plan to continue this partnership with Main Street Iowa for the foreseeable future and will use the results of this multi-year state project as preliminary data in seeking larger scale external funding. This next step of this project will be to expand integrated teaching, research, and outreach regarding rural development and business and community sustainability.

**References**


