



First Friday

Downtown Dayton Partnership: Kristen Wicker

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Research

The Downtown Dayton Partnership (DDP) began coordinating downtown Dayton's monthly art hop, First Friday, in March 2008, when the event, launched at a single downtown gallery, was expanded into the Oregon Arts District. The event slowly and steadily grew throughout 2008 and in 2009. However, the DDP began a strategic effort in early 2010 to give the event an extra boost that would more significantly increase attendance, which in turn would better support downtown galleries, restaurants and other establishments.

The DDP researched other downtown art hops and determined those with high attendance had one thing in common: artistic programming that took place in streets and public spaces. Such programming also is highly successful at another DDP-hosted event, Urban Nights, which draws 30,000 people to downtown Dayton in the spring and fall. However, the DDP did not have any funds budgeted to support such programming.

Therefore, an effort to secure grant funding that would allow for artistic programming to be added to the event in 2010 was launched. Various grant opportunities were researched, and consideration was given to the anticipated return on the investment of time and effort required to write and develop a grant application. We determined we were most likely to have success with grant applications to The Montgomery County Arts and Cultural District and the Ohio Arts Council.

Planning

Those grant applications were successful: The Montgomery County Arts and Cultural District awarded the DDP and its project partner, the Oregon District Business Association, a \$5,880 special project grant and the Ohio Arts Council awarded a \$1,105 grant through a highly competitive application process. The funding allowed for the addition of artistic programming to First Friday events held from June through October 2010.

Our strategy was to leverage the artistic programming to expand First Friday into the public spaces in the areas near participating locations, primarily through roaming street performers, and create the extra draw we felt was needed to quickly and significantly increase attendance. From a strategic perspective, we also hoped a positive and enjoyable First Friday experience would translate to a more positive overall perception of downtown Dayton.

We developed the following objectives for the First Friday programming:

- increase attendance at the event by approximately 25 percent
- expand and add more vibrancy to First Friday
- connect First Friday venues by improving the pedestrian experience between locations
- support local artists and arts organizations by contracting only with those from the Dayton area
- expose the community to local artists and arts organizations
- increase traffic and grow business at downtown establishments by at least 10 percent

Our target audience for this project was quite broad. We wanted to attract college students and young professionals, along with a more general audience of those who live in or near downtown and those who live outside downtown but are inclined to visit its establishments. We hoped that broadening the First Friday audience and increasing its size would likewise encourage more people to visit downtown more frequently on other occasions. Our budget for the new artistic programming was \$6,985, the total of both grants awarded.

Execution

To guide the implementation of the grant funding and addition of programming, a First Friday committee was convened. It included a diverse mix of representatives from Dayton's arts community: Sharon Leahy, co-founder of dance and music company Rhythm in Shoes; Duante Beddingfield, local journalist, actor and arts enthusiast; Mary Katherine Burnside, co-director of c(space), a community arts organization and venue; Jane Black, director of the Dayton Visual Arts Center; Christy Jennewein, manager of the Cannery Art and Design Center; and Eva Buttacavoli, director of FilmDayton.

The committee met approximately once a month from January through August. Committee members oversaw the budget; ensured grant requirements were met; developed an application process for interested artists, as well as brochures and electronic communications to spread the word; determined the stipend for artists and arts organizations; and made final selections of those who would participate. The DDP's Oregon Arts District coordinator, Kristen Wicker, organized the committee's work and details of the programming, worked with the artists and arts organizations, and managed publicity for First Friday events.

A total of 132 artists — including both individual artists and those who were part of arts groups — participated in First Friday. All were from the Dayton area. Themes were developed for each month to organize the programming. A great deal of effort was made to provide variety and include multiple arts genres. Participants included:

- theater groups, such as Grimmer Tales, which wrote and performed original adaptations of classic fairy tales; Free Shakespeare, which performed montages from Shakespeare's plays; Zoot Theater Company, a mask and puppet theater group; and Encore Theater Company, a musical theater group
- a variety of dance styles, including Never Quit Dance Crew, a hip-hop dance group; The Tap Factor, a group of adults and children who performed with percussionists; Sandstorm Dance, a Middle Eastern troupe; SMAG Dance Collective, a contemporary African American company; and Bronwen's Belly Dancers
- an eclectic mix of music, such as Patricia Berg, a jazz vocalist who performed with a keyboardist; Ann and Phil Case, who performed traditional Appalachian music; solo jazz saxophonist Tyrone Martin; traditional Celtic music performer Rick Fannin; Afro Image Beat, a group of drummers and multi-instrumentalists; and Duo Dolce, a classical music duo

Other artists included a group of visual artists who set up easels throughout downtown and painted; The Dropbacks, a comedic juggling duo; and Natalie McCollum, a spoken word artist.

Since all grant funding had to be used to support artists, the lack of a promotions budget was the greatest challenge. Kristen Wicker, with support from the First Friday committee, launched an aggressive public relations campaign as a solution. Different story angles were developed and pitched to print, broadcast and electronic media at least two weeks prior to each First Friday. The PR campaign resulted in numerous media stories. Prior to each First Friday held from June through October, at least one story about the event appeared in the media, usually two or three in a variety of media outlets. Other low-cost solutions included the design, copying and distribution of brochures prior to each event (which also were available for download on the DDP's website), and the use of a First Friday Facebook page, on which a highlight was posted every day for a week leading up to the event to build excitement.

Results

In the end, we met all our objectives through the addition of the programming. Anecdotal evidence collected while attending each event and speaking with business and gallery owners, as well as survey data, indicated attendance and foot traffic to businesses increased. Gallery owners estimated crowds had doubled, exceeding the original goal of a 25 percent increase in attendance. The reaction to the new programming from both business and gallery owners and First Friday attendees was very positive, and the artists most certainly enhanced street vibrancy and activity during the events. All participating artists were local, and because artists roamed throughout the First Friday area, the programming did help connect participating venues. Everything was completed within the project budget.

In addition, participating artists and gallery and business owners were invited to complete post-event surveys in October 2010. The surveys included questions designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative data. Eleven artists and arts groups, representing approximately a third of participating artists, completed the survey. Of those:

- Five rated their overall First Friday experience as “excellent” and six as “good.” None rated their experience as “fair” or “poor.”
- Nine of those completing the survey indicated they “definitely” would like to participate again in First Friday, while one group replied they’d be “very likely” to participate again and one responded “perhaps.”

Sixteen business and gallery owners completed the survey. Of those:

- When asked how their business during First Fridays compared to an average Friday night, 13 indicated it was “better.” Three indicated their business was the “same.” None indicated it was “worse.”
- Asked if they noticed an increase in business from the addition of the First Friday programming, 10 said they noticed a “big increase,” five indicated it was a “slight increase,” and one indicated business was the “same.”
- When rating the overall effect of First Friday on their business, 12 respondents indicated it is “excellent” and four indicated it is “good.”

We believe the new programming was highly successful and enjoyed by visitors and business owners alike. It certainly gave the event the desired boost in attendance and overall appeal.