

Role for business leaders in a cleaner downtown

Chester Smolski

The recent sales promotion by the Providence Intown Merchants Association proved quite successful. Five-cent bus rides and bargain sales generated considerable business, especially on Saturday, normally a quiet day for retail sales in the downtown. This well illustrates what is possible when salesmanship and cooperation among downtown merchants are used to full advantage.

Past efforts by the Intown group have been only moderately successful because the necessary ingredients, leadership and cooperation, were missing. Even today Intown is not the strong leader for downtown revitalization that it can and should be. If the individual retailer hopes to maintain and improve his business, then greater organized efforts must be made to attract people into the downtown and to make it a pleasing shopping experience.

For this to happen there must also be better cooperation between the business community and the city. An auto-restricted zone, newly paved streets, widened park-like walkways, and brick sidewalks are some of the city improvements currently underway. The opening of the Biltmore Plaza, increased private interest on Washington Street, and the hope of a convention-jewelry complex at La Salle Square reflect some of the private sector investment in the future of the downtown. But there still remains an important ingredient for further city improvement — a clean downtown. And this is where the Intown group can provide the leadership and the cooperation.

One of the major sources of business that Providence has still not fully realized is the convention trade, even though a Convention Bureau has been established with city, state, and private funding. The miniscule budget of this organization has generated more than \$2 million of business in the first two years of operation. One of the recent successful conventions drew 14,000 Charismatics who came to Providence one weekend, spent over \$1 million in the area, and returned more than \$60,000 to the state in taxes. The downtown businessmen knew when these conventioners were in town and their sales reflected it. A logical result of that meeting would be to have more of them, i.e., sell Providence as a good convention city.

One method would be to increase the \$80,000 budget of the Convention Bureau so that an increased staff could generate more business. The business community should increase its \$40,000 contribution, as should the city and state increase their funding.

Given the greater efforts to bring tourists to the city through an expanded budget and staff for convention selling, the other important ingredient for business is to "sell" the city. We do not do well in this respect, and yet the potential which exists in a walking city, in an architecturally and historically significant setting, and with increasing entertainment opportunities is good. We have much to offer but we still lose conventions and, as a result, business for the downtown.

A recent case illustrates this. It would have involved only 150 persons (Providence's market is best able to handle relatively small groups) staying for four days in the city. It would have meant more than 100 hotel rooms booked for the oc-

casion and 150 people eating, drinking, and buying goods in Providence, an amount estimated to be \$60 per day for each person. Although only a modest amount, the approximately \$36,000 added to the local economy would have been of some help to local businesses. But we lost this prospective client from Washington because their representatives on seeing the city claimed "that it was a dirty city and gave a poor image."

One can debate whether the downtown is dirty or not, but when others see it that way and then decide not to spend their dollars here because of this perception, then we are the poorer for it, both in a literal and figurative sense.

Another example of the poor impression of the downtown came during the jewelry manufacturers meetings recently held in Providence. Unfortunately, many jewelry representatives from all over the nation saw the La Salle Square area after a rock concert. The shock, dismay, and disgust was all too evident to both local representatives and those who were visiting. Is this the city which is trying to build a tourist trade on the one hand and then presents this filthy picture of itself on the other?

The short-lived program of the Providence police to arrest vandals and litterers after a rock concert is obviously not working. Why cannot a surcharge be assessed against promoters of such events to be used to clean the area immediately after the concert?

As for the dirty downtown, there are two possible solutions: have the city clean it, a service businessmen can rightly ex-

pect for their tax dollars, yet one which is poorly done by the city.

A second possible solution lies with you, the business community. This is your city, your business, your interests which are not being served, and when we lose conventions because of a poor visual impression, it is you who will lose business. You can do one of two things: insist that the city fulfill its obligations to you the taxpayer or, if that does not work, then do it yourselves.

In many other older cities of this nation, strapped by financial crises, declining tax bases, and unable to provide the level of necessary services, the private sector is providing the leadership to help restore vitality to city centers. A small but positive step that downtown merchants could make is to start a cleanup of the downtown.

There already exists an Intown organization whose role is to generate activity in the downtown. Is it not possible that this group spearhead such a cleanup movement? Why not donate some new rubbish bins? Why not clean and wash the sidewalks in front of your shops? Why not organize to remove the litter? Why not educate a public to be aware of the problem? And why not provide the leadership that you already have to make a clean downtown?

Such efforts will help your business; will help restore confidence in the downtown; will make the city center more inviting to visitors; and it could be the start of a campaign to restore a sorely missed pride in Rhode Island's capital city.

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