

Downtown Promotion Reporter

The tools you need to bring more people and more business downtown



Supporting Merchants

Unique partnership raises visibility, creates cost savings

Several restaurant owners in Manchester, NH (est. pop. 110,448), have banded together to produce events, cross-promote each other, and explore the savings of purchasing as a group. NH EATS is the brainchild of Carol Lawrence, owner of the Red Arrow Diner franchise.

“She has always felt that collaboration was key in order for downtown to be very vibrant and offer lots of options,” says Ami D’Amelio, founder and owner of marketing company Just Flow. Lawrence, D’Amelio, and one other restaurant owner first discussed the concept of working together to capture more customers via cross-marketing, and then rolled it out to other potential NH EATS members. The effort was dubbed NH EATS rather than Manchester EATS with an eye toward taking the initiative statewide eventually.

NH EATS also hopes to become a central clearinghouse for hospitality information. While Manchester has an active downtown organization and chamber of commerce, neither focus exclusively on hospitality, D’Amelio explains.

Bringing restaurant owners to the table

The enticement of group purchasing helped attract some members, as did the extra marketing reach of cross-promotion. “When you go talk to people in the restaurant industry, they have a very thin profit margin,” says D’Amelio. By convincing restaurant owners that, rather than taking more out of already tight budgets,

NH EATS could reduce existing line items, the group gained member interest. For the group approach to work, every member gets an equal vote and all decisions about new members, events, marketing investments, and other issues must have unanimous approval to move forward.

Then came the hard work of getting the new partners to give up the names of their point-of-sale

Have a contingency plan on Day One

Despite strong initial membership and several very successful downtown events, the restaurant group NH EATS had to take a hiatus over summer 2015 because one founding member closed its doors and dropped out of the group — and nothing had been put into place for this eventuality. It is key to know potential members well, have unanimous support for the addition of new members, and have a plan in place for when membership levels drop, says Ami D’Amelio, who handles marketing for the group.

“I think it was very helpful that we vetted the partners fully,” she says. “We had everyone sit around the table and made sure we were all on the same page philosophically, but I wish we had sat down at the beginning and been more final about how voting would happen, and what would happen if someone felt they needed to leave the group.”

The loss has been, “very disorienting, because we didn’t have anything in place,” says D’Amelio. “With more forethought, it would not have knocked us off our momentum. We’re in a holding pattern at the moment. We need to regroup. We want to add more members, but felt we needed to look internally at how we want to move forward with this, and how to make sure the people who do join are going to be staying.”

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vendors, liquor distributors, sources for seafood, and more. “We had to see who everyone was using and what their experience was, so that as we were growing we could negotiate for less cost,” D’Amelio says. To demonstrate the point, D’Amelio offered the group a special rate, not only for NH EATS marketing, but for the marketing efforts (newsletters, website updates, in-house promotions, etc.) of each member.

The group decided to focus on branding itself and launching events first, and will seek out additional group purchasing opportunities in the future. “We did not have the opportunity to push that [purchasing] piece as much as we had hoped,” she says. “It’s hard to tackle everything at once, and we wanted to get our name recognition, and get events going.”

Still, the information sharing has paid off. “There were several partners who did end up changing to new vendors because they were able to have those conversations with other trusted business owners and to get some real insight,” says D’Amelio. In addition, ideas and experiences were exchanged and promotional events were launched.

One of the larger NH EATS events was Downtown Employee Week, which coincided with the Fourth of July. Summers are quiet, D’Amelio says. This was a way to support downtown dining during a slow period. The group partnered with Intown Manchester and the chamber to market the event to larger corporations. “So if you worked downtown, you could bring your business card, parking card, or other proof, and get 50 percent off your lunch at participating restaurants. We had a huge turnout!”

Last fall, NH EATS hosted the Makin’ Bacon Tour, during which participants could enjoy \$2 tastes of bacon-based dishes at all eight of the founding part-

ners’ restaurants and four other locations. The dishes were often paired with complementary beer tastings provided by a regional brewery. Guests purchasing a showcased beer received a free pint glass. And guests who had their event cards stamped at all 12 of the participating locations were entered to win \$25, “just for eating bacon!”

This March, the group hosted Around Town with NH EATS: A Wine & Cheese Affair. Restaurants and several wine distributors gathered at a downtown theater to offer tastings of cheese-based dishes and the beverages that pair well with them. “We did have a small charge per head, but once you were in, you could have as much as you wanted,” says D’Amelio. “And we donated all the proceeds to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Manchester. All of our partners felt that they wanted to give back to the community. They were not there to make a profit. But a goal was to promote themselves, and to promote NH EATS.”

NH EATS is promoted via Facebook and blog posts, as well as on-site cross-promotion by member restaurants and partners such as Intown Manchester and the chamber. “Our members are definitely seeing more traffic, and more people are asking us about the partnership because this is something that hasn’t been done before,” says D’Amelio. Many customers comment on it being their first visit, which is a strong indicator that new patrons are noticing the group’s efforts. “And the properties that handed out coupons during NH EATS events have been able to point to a lot of activity related to that,” she says. “We’ve gained a lot of local notoriety of name, and the types of partners we have has set an expectation [of quality].”

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