

Re-Thinking Downtown

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Communities across North America are looking for ways to make their communities prosperous again. Most are focused on economic drivers that are meant to bring jobs, investment, and wealth to a community. That is certainly a noble pursuit. The challenge is that so many communities are using strategies from a generation ago in addressing their downtown core, and that is why they are failing.

When we think about our community's downtown, we often think about shopping and retail space. That mindset is so pervasive that when our downtowns suffer a downturn, and businesses close, we work to retain and attract similar businesses to fill the gaps and store-front vacancies. Yet that approach fails to consider how the world is changing, as well as what our downtowns were really, and always, about.

When I was a kid on the farm, I recall my Grandpa getting ready to head into town to get parts and supplies. He would ask everyone if they needed anything from town, since he was going. I would always ask if I could come along. I didn't need anything from town; I simply wanted to go to town because that was where I would see my friends. In fact, it's not that long ago that the entire family would go into town together on a regular basis. Sure, they had to get supplies, but the opportunity to go to town was more about the chance to socialize and visit.

Our downtowns have always been about socializing. Business, trade, and commerce activities were what brought us downtown, but the underlying desire was to socialize and engage with each other. Our downtowns are the social core of our communities. We seem to have lost sight of that important point. Our strategies to rebuild our downtowns focus overly on business attraction, and retention of commodity-based businesses. Yet that fails to take into account how the world has changed.

We lament that our downtowns are struggling, and often attribute that to the rise of online shopping and our inability to compete with the likes of Amazon, but is that really the issue? Before online shopping, we complained that people went to bigger towns just down the road to shop. In both cases people were driven by better prices and broader selection. The false assumption is that those are the only factors that drive competition. Ethics, values, quality, atmosphere, and service are enormous factors that drive consumer decision making and choices.

Amazon didn't buy Whole Foods because it has the best prices and broadest selection. Whole Foods has very expensive, nuanced goods which cater to those looking for healthy, organic and socially conscious food choices. Doesn't seem to be a match of business models, but perhaps that is the lesson. Even Amazon realizes there are other ways to compete besides variety and price. Our downtown businesses don't need to compete on price, and they really can't anyway. That does not mean there is nothing else they can do to draw community dollars into their community business.

The other element we need to consider is the types of businesses we draw downtown. Perhaps we need to stop assuming that all businesses need to be commodity-based. You can buy a lot of commodity goods online, but there are so many things you simply can't buy online. You can't see a chiropractor online. You can't do yoga online. You can't have lunch or a coffee with friends online. Businesses based on service, recreation, and socialization still do very well and can be used to draw people to your community's core, and with a thriving core you develop a thriving community.

Finally, we need to remember that downtowns that thrive are not alive only 9 to 5. They are centers of activity after hours too. To be such, however, you must have residences in the core. Not long ago, people used to live in the suite above their shop. Of course, we don't do that anymore, but we need to remember the value of having people living downtown brought to our communities. Our downtowns need to be places where people actively live, not just do business. That means much more mixed-use development and rezoning in a lot of our communities. It may feel like it's creating chaos, but it's really creating life in your core.

Re-building our communities often means starting with the downtown core. However, it is not just re-designing that is required to make our communities stronger, but often a re-thinking about what works, and what is possible. Changing your thinking can be a challenge, but it is important if you are going to find new opportunities.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.