

Winter Downtown Activation Strategies

By Max Musicant, Founder and President of The Musicant Group

Abstract

Winter is coming.

For decades these are words that downtowns, retailers, and main streets loved to hear. But increasingly – and ever more so during the COVID pandemic – winter does not guarantee the financial windfall or the opportunities for social life and civic tradition that were the bedrocks of communities and downtowns in the past. This article investigates placemaking and activation strategies to foster commercial and social activity in downtowns and main streets with northern climates during the winter months during the holidays and beyond.

The Situation

The winter holiday season has traditionally been a time of commercial bounty and social connection for downtowns. Our collective memories are filled with images of snow falling on bustling main streets, families with presents under their arms, cocoa and chestnuts in hand, and smiles all around. The reality is that holiday centric retailers and attractions in many downtowns (and elsewhere) have been eroded due to suburban and more recently online competition – and often a general decrease of investment in the civic commons overall. At the same time, successful downtowns have been able to supplement reductions in GAFO and apparel retail with experiential offerings such as restaurants, entertainment venues, and “pamper” focused businesses, often complimented by new residential units and offices.

Regardless of the success of a downtown during the holiday season, the months of January, February and March are often collectively ignored. This, despite the doldrums of winter being precisely the time where retail commerce, social life, and often people’s mental health are at a low point. It is here where programming and activation can have a particularly strong effect for downtowns and their patrons. Whether a downtown remains a center of holiday shopping, is a mixed-use service center, or is struggling economically and socially – wintertime activations can serve as a key strategy to enhance commercial and social life.

The “Why” of Winter

Getting clear on the underlying purpose for any winter activation – or frankly any initiative – is an *essential* question to answer. Too often communities launch events and activations that certainly have positive impacts, but eventually (or quickly) putter out because the core purpose and benefits to identified audiences has not been identified. Similarly, many downtowns have traditions that have gone on for years (or decades!) that were designed with an initial purpose that no longer is relevant. One specific example of this was the Holidazzle Parade, which graced

Nicollet Mall in Downtown Minneapolis since the early 90s. Originally designed to draw traffic to downtown retailers and department stores, the parade's impact was severely reduced when most anchor stores closed. Despite the boost to revenue the parade provided to newly opened restaurants, the loss of major retail stakeholders and the initial "why" of the event eventually caused the event to be cancelled¹. Upon examination of what downtown then needed, it was replaced by a month-long winter market, which brought back something downtown now lacked: holiday retail².

For downtowns with holiday focused retailers, one of the main "whys" continues to be drawing social activity that drives consumer purchases. For downtowns with more of a focus on service, office work, residential living, and/or entertainment, the "why" may be more upstream – of creating experiences that support the overall attractiveness of the housing, office, and hospitality uses. Either way, supporting the peaks and the valleys of existing activity should be considered, by focusing on the post-holiday experience to bolster the low months of commerce and social life.

Whatever the context, there is no more important question when designing an initiative – winter or otherwise – than, "why are we doing this?"

Winter Context

The two dominant characteristics of winter environment is that it is far colder and darker than the rest of the year. No surprises here. But too often these are viewed as exclusively negative phenomenon that must be merely tolerated rather than seen as opportunities. Digging deeper, they provide insights into frameworks that can shape successful activations.

Leveraging contrasts: The dark and cold make any source of light and warmth that much more attractive. Just as shade and coolness serve as draws in the summertime. The creation and use of these contrasts provide a common thread through the activation strategies that follow.

Less competition: While the competition for peoples' wallets is fierce, a community's social calendar is often bare, with far fewer festivals, concerts, and activities than the jam-packed summer. This is especially true following the holiday season. For young families, in particular, they have an almost insatiable demand for high quality, free or low-cost activities for their children that also provide enrichment for adults. While there is increased inertia to leave the house when it is cold, any activation will have far more visibility than similar efforts the rest of the year.



A weekend wintertime activation at a transit facility in Downtown Robbinsdale, MN. Photo: The Musicant Group

A desire for meaning and tradition: With the continued decline of participation in religious institutions, especially in northern climates, there remains an innate desire to mark the season and the passing of time. While holiday shopping has filled much of the void for many, growing numbers hunger for something more purposeful to pair with the consumer ritual. Creating new and amplifying existing traditions serves not only to strengthen the social fabric of the community, it can also draw visitors to support surrounding commercial uses. An excellent example of a new secular tradition is the Luminary Loppet, which combines cross country skiing, ice sculptures, theater arts, and fire every January on a frozen lake in Minneapolis, MN.



View of Luminary Loppet on Lake of the Isles. The lighted elements are ice structures with candles within them. Minneapolis, MN³

Bored people are cold people: And cold people go home. Keeping people engaged is essential to winter programming. People don't mind being out in cold temps as long as they are participating in an experience. Participation being key – while observing something provides benefit, the more people can be part of the event, the stronger their memories of it will be and the less they'll think about the wind chill.

Further, winter activations need to have a particularly high density of activities relative to the summer time as visitors have less tolerance to walk between features. Further, special attention should be paid to the waiting and warm-up experience, with the provision of fires, heating lamps, indoor warm-up spaces, well maintained family friendly bathrooms, and areas with protection from the wind.

Proximity of activations to commercial centers: One of the most common mistakes communities make is to locate their winter activities in areas that are too far from their downtowns to provide any synergistic benefits. In wintertime, even one or two blocks can sometimes be too much of a barrier to generate meaningful foot traffic. When, planning an activation, if one of your goals (or "whys") is to support your downtown retailers, follow the

real estate adage: location, location, location. It's better to shoe-horn the activity into a space in the heart of your downtown than to stage the event in a pleasant but remote park.

Don't forget about maintenance! The presence of icy, uneven, and slush-filled pedestrian – and increasingly bike – pathways can be a major obstacle for visitors of all kinds, but especially seniors and families with strollers. Maintaining safe, dry, and well-lit pathways throughout downtown and to and from major access points in a timely manner is a critical component to any winter activation.

Activation Strategies

With the preceding context and framework in mind, we'll now explore a number of specific winter activation strategies for downtowns. As with any recommendations, the successful application of these concepts is dependent on the unique context of individual places, goals, stakeholders, etc. Start with discerning your community's "why" and then dive-in to the strategizing on making it happen.

A final recommendation is the power of combining various strategies. Having one of any of the below concepts is good, but the more you can layer them together, the more of an experiential critical mass you can develop.

Fire

Fire provides warmth when it's cold, light when it's dark. It can be an event centerpiece or provide a cozy and comfortable waiting experience. Effective at any scale from candle to bonfire. Pairs well with smore making, singalongs, storytelling, and sparklers. If communities face hesitancy from their Fire Departments around permitting and safety, try asking if they'll oversee the fires as part of their community outreach effort. Globally, Scotland, in particular has embraced the concept of fire for cold weather celebrations⁴.



Advice Elves offering guidance for a dime at Lindale Gardens Winter Festival, Richfield, MN - photo by The Musicant Group

Other iterations of fire concepts include:

⁵*Bread hearths and pizza ovens:* delicious all year round, fixed or mobile baking operations offer a low cost, highly participatory food offering.

Mobile Saunas: Sweat culture is growing in popularity as more Americans rediscover what countless northern cultures have known for years – it feels great to get really hot in the winter. While startup costs and permitting for brick and mortar saunas can be prohibitive, in Minnesota, a rash of mobile operations have been started. Of note is the crowd funded 612 Sauna Society, a cooperatively owned mobile operation that frequents breweries, public spaces, and festivals around the Twin Cities.



Bread oven within Duferin Grove Park, Toronto Canada – photo by New York Times



Little Box Sauna at the Piazza on the Mall in Downtown Minneapolis, MN - Photo by The Musicant Group



612 Sauna Society at Surly Brewing in Minneapolis, MN - Photo by Forbes

6

Ice

The opposing element of fire in winter is ice. Often manifested as skating rinks. The rinks can serve as hubs of activity if well located, with equipment rental and concessions. More exciting is the rise of ice-based games that provide activities, spectator opportunities, and smaller footprints with less cost. Most prominent is the newly minted Olympic sport of curling, produced using natural or synthetic ice. It provides the winter equivalent of bocce or petanque, an easy to learn but hard to master social game. For more space constrained areas crokicurl provides an adaptation of the game. With indoor curling growing in popularity, outdoor offerings provide the perfect low-cost introduction into the sport.



Olympic medal-winning curler John Shuster giving a curling lesson at a pop up curling court in Downtown Minneapolis - photo by Musicant Group



Croki curl court in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan - photo by The Star Phoenix

Wellness

Staying healthy and active is increasingly on the forefront of peoples' minds. So often in the

wintertime, people only imagine fitness activities taking place in more natural settings, such as cross country or downhill skiing or snow shoeing. That need not be the case and urban dwellers are eager for options to be active outdoors in their own neighborhoods. Creative offerings include: snoga (snow yoga), winter 5 and 10k's, winter biking, urban cross-country skiing, winter dance parties, and sledding. As the Danish say, there is no bad weather, just bad clothing.



Santa Run 5k in Duluth, MN - photo by Duluth Tribute

Notable examples include the man-made sledding hill at Titledown in Green Bay, WI⁷ and the annual 5k as part of the St. Paul Winter Carnival.⁸



Start of the Securian Financial Winter Run as part of the St. Paul Winter Carnival - photo by the Winter Carnival

Indoor Spaces

Indoor public and common area spaces provide a critical element for winter activations – a place for people to warm up. Visitors can enjoy staying outside, but if just one member of a group gets too cold, it can end the trip for everyone. Non retail indoor spaces like libraries, municipal buildings, transit centers, enclosed tent structures, mobile warming houses, schools, or even ice fishing huts, can be used to provide places for warm ups. At a base level they can provide seating, bathrooms, and warmth. Heightened experiences could include entertainment, markets, craft activities, workshops, talks, and more.

Public Art and Entertainment

Often an epicenter of warm weather activations, public art and entertainment are taking on new forms to energize the cold weather public realm. Art focused programming innovations include: commissioned art shanties, snow sculptures, snow mazes, and kite festivals. While some of these examples are produced in more natural settings, parking lots and urban plazas would make perfect settings for these installations.



Art shanties from 2019 Festival in Minneapolis, MN - photo by PRX

Kite from the Winter Kite Festival, Minneapolis, MN - photo by Minneapolis Parks and Rec Board

For live entertainment, long-form stand and watch concerts and movies do not work as well in the coldest months, but several nimble alternatives exist to animate commercial districts with less public realm space to work with. These include: roaming musicians like accordion players, choirs and carolers, fire performers, and holiday characters. In addition to keeping visitors warm, special care should be given to the performers as well.

Lighting

The quality and impact of lighting becomes ever-present when faced with 5pm sunsets. While string lights in boulevard trees remains an effective staple, a number of creative additions can add to other activation or become destinations themselves. Europe in particular has been leading the way on light shows projected onto centrally located landmark buildings. Called video mapping or light-painting, the customized light shows have become huge draws in many cities.



Budapest Basilica Christmas Market Video Mapping / Light Painting on the Facade - photo by budapestchristmas.com



Winter light show with 250,000 LEDs set to music designed by University of Minnesota students – photo by University of MN

Commerce and Retail

The experience of shopping continues to rise in importance as online alternatives wear away at any remaining competitive advantage bricks and mortar retailers had on price and convenience. During the holidays – and otherwise – it becomes ever more important to provide a memorable experience for visitors within a store or district, which in turn prompts a purchase to memorialize the visit.

Effective strategies to produce experiences that attract and retain customers include pop up shops and markets, in-store demonstrations and classes, competitions and games, high quality outdoor merchandising, and product sampling⁹.

Spatial constraints during COVID complicate matters, placing much more emphasis on the use of outdoor areas. Parking spaces and sidewalk space should be used for showroaming, walk up windows, and warm waiting areas for people picking up orders.

Food

The final frontier – food often provides the biggest draw to initiate a visit, especially outside of one's routine. Harking back on the framework of contrasts, warm food holds particular sway, especially items that can be made and sold outside and are fragrant. In addition to selling food, winter also provides opportunities for participation in the cooking, including s'mores and roasting chestnuts.



Caroling event with s'more making and chestnut roasting in Downtown Minneapolis - photos by The Musicant Group

COVID again provides challenges here, but also opportunities for American cities to catch up to their European counterparts. The patio season across the Atlantic has long stretched into December and beyond, even for Nordic cities. The provision of heat lamps, wind blockers, blankets, and seat warmers can create a wonderful experience – and may even make the warm food taste better. As restaurants continue to need additional outdoor seating areas into the winter, downtowns should extend the conversion of on-street parking spaces for these purposes.

The Final Ingredient: Attitude!

The success and failure of downtowns often comes down to culture: do communities have the pride to want a strong downtown and know that they already have what it takes to create it? It gets to the core of an opportunity or constraint mindset. The former supports growth, the latter creates an environment of “no”. A community’s attitude and the story they tell about winter sets the stage: is it a magical time of year where the dark and cold provide a palette for imagination, community and delight? Or is it something to be suffered through? What you see in your mind’s eye is what you get.

Canada has been a leader here. Edmonton has launched their Winter City Strategy and activation campaign.¹⁰ Stateside, the Twin Cities has recently coordinated a number preexisting but separate events in January under the Great Northern Festival umbrella, which in turn became a key part of their Super Bowl hosting programming¹¹.

For downtowns to thrive during the winter months it is *essential* for communities to embrace the realities of the season and open themselves up for the possibility they create. From there they can unleash their creativity and communicate that sense of wonder and magic to the outside world. This will start the virtuous cycle where one day you’ll start to hear “is it winter yet?”



Edmonton's Winter City guide 2019/2020

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ <https://www.startribune.com/downtown-minneapolis-holidazzle-shrinking-going-dark/227051831/>
- ² <https://www.holidazzle.com/>
- ³ Loppet Foundation, www.loppet.org
- ⁴ <https://www.visitscotland.com/blog/events/fire-festivals/>
- ⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/travel/in-toronto-a-locavores-life-made-easy.html>
- ⁶ Little Box Sauna, photo courtesy of The Musicant Group
- ⁷ <https://www.titletown.com/events/recreation/tubing>
- ⁸ <https://www.wintercarnival.com/events/securian-winter-run/>
- ⁹ https://cdn.nrf.com/sites/default/files/2019-01/Consumer%20View%20Winter%202018-2019_0.pdf
- ¹⁰ <https://www.wintercityedmonton.ca/> and https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/initiatives_innovation/wintercity-strategy.aspx
- ¹¹ <https://thegreatnorthernfestival.com/>