

Reimagining Girls' Night Out

Oh man, Girls' Night Out? Like, when people tear through stores looking for giveaways and free drinks? Hasn't that been done (to death)? Hold on a second, though. Downtown Somerville's Girls' Night Out is worth a look exactly *because* the concept is...well, maybe a little moth-eaten. If you can give an event enough of a makeover to change the minds of businesses and guests about what Girls' Night Out is supposed to be, sell out the event more than a week in advance, and give skeptical merchants one of their most profitable nights of the year (at least 65 conversions on average), that's worth talking about. Then, throw in a 91.5% decrease in advertising costs and a 50% increase in tickets sales (500 to 750). Add to that a similar well established (and, uh, free) event is held on the same night in a much larger (and very highly regarded) downtown nearby. Starting to make sense? Don't tell anybody, but some women from that town even spent \$20 each to attend Somerville's event instead!

In Downtown Somerville, Girls' Night Out has become a chance for women to celebrate themselves and their social connections. Businesses aren't swarmed by buzzed bargain-hunters; they create lasting relationships with a manageable number of guests. From pure pampering to fun and exploratory education, guided discovery of experiences and exclusives cater to guests' interests. Combating that common Girls' Night Out motif of discounts and drinks while conjuring an atmosphere of sophisticated chic was an ambitious task, especially for a full-time team of just two. It required innovative, audience-first thinking; inclusive, deep collaboration with businesses; and a good deal of growth to remain largely self-funded.

The secret sauce that ties everything together and makes the Downtown Somerville approach applicable and replicable for any type of event is a strong theme that resonates with both guests' values and business needs. Getting there requires understanding both groups and finding where they overlap. Skipping the theme step allowed typical Girls' Night Out problems to rear their ugly heads the previous year. In 2016, lack of clear theme meant descriptions to businesses had to be vague. They didn't know exactly what type of offer was appropriate and assumed the event was exclusionary (as in just for retailers). They felt pressure to go off-brand with discount products and giveaways, and were frustrated by what seemed like toleration for intoxicated guests. Guests, on the other hand, didn't quite know what to expect, complained about inconsistent offers and gifts, and were annoyed by difficulty checking in and entering contests.

These problems were totally fixable, and despite the difficulties, lots of good had come out of the event. So, instead of scrapping it in 2017, the Downtown Somerville Alliance set a goal: refine the purpose to align with what businesses value, and find the sweet spot that overlaps with what guests love. Unfortunately, nobody knew exactly where that was, so...research. DSA compared Girls' Night Out guest data collected in 2016 against ArcGIS, social media, and website data to segment guests and create 2 personas likely to attend. Then, to handle the perceived exclusion issue, DSA met with focus groups from each downtown business sector (retail, beauty, restaurant, and fitness), shared the personas, and uncovered industry-specific goals. After looking at a marketing and sales funnel, each group decided that last year's focus on customer awareness was not ideal. Businesses would rather move customers from consideration to preference.

Based on these findings, DSA worked with a core group of businesses from each sector to develop a theme. The result, "the Downtown Somerville Glam Squad," represented the guest as a celebrity preparing for the red carpet, and the businesses as members of the entourage that makes sure their needs are met (fashion, accessories, hair, makeup, food, etc.). The



always unexpected

theme made it easy to develop a voice for communication and set event goals and metrics.

Participating businesses were provided with a guide that explained the theme, shared audience data, suggested do's and don'ts, and recommended partnership between segments to give guests the full “glam squad” feeling. Businesses were encouraged to stress experiences and exclusives over discounts and giveaways. The DSA helped businesses develop offers and preregistration systems for special experiences.

Data about the guests allowed for personalized communication and outrageously effective lookalike audiences for Facebook advertisements. The voice allowed DSA to make sure all promotions (press releases, emails, social media, and printed assets) were clear and spot-on. The press caught on, too: coverage included Mycentraljersey.com, Bestofnj.com, Hipnewjersey.com, Urban Agenda, and NJ Monthly. Bestofnj.com was even on hand to cover the event live. UTM codes and vanity URLs tracked just how effective each promotion was at driving people to buy tickets.

The theme was carried through to every part of the event, from ticket sales (“priority tickets” sold in stores came with the opportunity to use a special arrival line) to gifts and prizes. The canvas bag given out the year before was upgraded to a “glam bag” (a summer purse with branded tag and packed with seasonal essentials chosen by expert businesses). The multiple door prizes awarded the previous year weren't quite fabulous enough individually, so several businesses got together and provided a single grand prize: a “Weekend of Wow in Downtown Somerville.” The guest map became a full-color “Insider's Guide” trifold that included all business offers, entertainment, and a description of the “Weekend of Wow”.

The business purpose of the event was to establish lasting relationships with guests, so data had to be collected in a way that didn't disrupt the chic and celebratory guest experience. The DSA tracked which guests took advantage of which offers by providing each guest with a 3-digit “all access number” wristband at arrival. Every time a guest took advantage of a business's offer, they jotted their number on an “all access card”, good for one chance at the “Weekend of Wow.” Businesses held on to the cards until DSA collected them and compiled the info. Guests loved the simplicity of the system. Businesses loved receiving the data about their guests (including name, contact info, and zip); none had been provided back the prior year.

DSA representatives were trained to live and breathe the theme for guest arrival, and velvet ropes were used to form lines. Glam bags were shown off prominently. Free small bites that had previously competed with restaurants were replaced by live pop-up entertainment that made waiting in arrival lines fun and encouraged people to visit the further ends of the district. Guests enjoyed a DJ and a red-carpet photo booth. Professional photographers roamed the streets as “paparazzi” and collected photo and video assets. The event was extended an hour to allow guests to leisurely explore and eat.

After an evening of glamorous fun, all guests were thanked via email. A grand-prize winner was chosen, photographed with contributing business owners, and featured in a press release. The data collected was used for specialized promotions throughout the year. Every goal set was achieved or surpassed, and reviews from merchants were glowing. Even more exciting was that a model to make every DSA event runway-ready was established. Each is now more purposeful, place-specific, and most importantly, meaningful to both businesses and guests.

