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Beyond the fun, special events ala Stroll fan future growth

By John Groh

Stroll on State, presented by Illinois Bank & Trust, is more than a one-day windfall for downtown business owners. Some of them say it's a gift that keeps on giving throughout the year, and they are happy to share strategies they use during Stroll and other special events to grow business and make customers eager to return.

When you think of a customer-rich environment, Stroll on State tops the list. The event continues to grow and the impact on downtown is deepening, according to 2017 numbers. November's Stroll drew 82,500 people downtown, a 10 percent increase over last year. Spending per person was up, too, with 75 percent of attendees saying they spent more than \$25 that day. Beyond that, 95 percent of those surveyed said they would come back downtown after experiencing Stroll on State.

But just having all those potential customers on the sidewalk outside the front door of a business doesn't guarantee anything, according to savvy downtown merchants. People have to walk through the door, and the experience inside has to be positive.

"It's not all about business; it's how you make those people feel," said Sarah Leon, who with husband Tony owns The Parlour at 412 E. State Street. The Parlour is a barber shop offering haircuts, hot lather shaves and men's clothing. The Leons hired a rockabilly band to play in the shop, and people were dancing on the sidewalk and street outside.

"It's about having fun for us, cutting loose and being ourselves," Sarah said. "We did some on-the-spot sales, but it was mostly about seeding business for the future. A lot of people called the week after and said, 'I was in the shop during Stroll on State and want to come in for a cut.'"

Nearby, at Bath & Body Fusion, 324 E. State St., Jen Ralston and her team started making products two months before Stroll to have enough stock to get through the biggest sales day of the year. Jen brought in extra staff to reduce customers' checkout time.

"We try to wow our customers with window displays and make the inside magical," she says.

Down the street at Woodfire Brick Oven Pizzas, 408 E. State St., owner Joe D'Astice, knew the restaurant would be slammed during Stroll. He wanted to serve as many people as possible and do it well. He rearranged the dining room for communal seating, which allowed him to accommodate large parties. Tables fill up quickly during Stroll, and Joe understands that people want to enjoy the event, not wait in a long line to eat.

"Nearly everyone has a cell phone and does texting. We gave them an approximate wait time so they could go enjoy Stroll, and we texted them when the table was ready," he said.

Karen Elyea, owner of Minglewood Boutique, 333 E. State St., counts on special events for more than a one-day sales boost.

“Special events help tremendously because so many new people discover us,” she said. “When they return throughout the year – that’s what keeps me in business.”

For the third year, she featured live mannequins in her front windows wearing fashions from the store’s inventory. She stocked a lot of hats, gloves and scarves and sold them all as the sun set and the temperature dropped on Stroll day. She was happy to hold purchases for later pickup for customers who bought other items.

Going back to what Sarah Leon said, growing business through special events is all about making people feel good about the experience. Downtown business owners get that. They decorate inside and out. They create a fun atmosphere. They add staff and stock ample product. They interact with customers.

They understand that putting their best foot forward during Stroll on State requires jumping in with both feet. When that happens, everybody wins.

The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau produces Stroll on State with the support, services and donations of many community partners, volunteers and sponsors. For a complete recap on the 2017 event, visit www.strollonstate.com.