Downtown Hartwell: A Shop Local Initiative Research Study

Leonard Leadership Scholars Program
Terry College of Business
University of Georgia
Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary........................................................................................................ 1

II. Data Collection............................................................................................................. 5

III. Results............................................................................................................................ 11

IV. Recommendations......................................................................................................... 17
I. Executive Summary
**Issue Identification**

Hart County is located in Northeast Georgia with a population of approximately 23,000. The county is a blend of residential areas which include 222 miles of shoreline on Lake Hartwell, the town of Hartwell with historic homes and downtown shopping area, and rural districts. The result should be a booming local economy, but money is flowing elsewhere. Hartwell’s historic downtown is part of the Main Street Program, offering various shopping attractions, music and arts, and various festivals throughout the year, but the area is not realizing its full potential. Therefore, Hartwell seeks to determine various approaches to better utilize and present the downtown area in order to both attract and keep money in the local economy.

**Project Objectives & Expected Outcomes**

- Assess the current situation and current issues affecting Hartwell’s downtown economy.

- Design and conduct a survey of various groups that have an impact on the Hartwell local economy to serve as a SWOT analysis for the downtown area. More specifically, the demographic groups of the survey include store owners, downtown shoppers, local residents, visitors, and any other groups we deem relevant as we progress. This will help to identify what currently is working and what is not and to gauge attitudes towards shopping local. The end goal therefore is to gather as much relevant information to best assess the issue identified above.

- Analyze data gathered from research and surveys. Process the information to present to Hartwell. Based on the data, provide potential recommendations and ideas to serve the needs of downtown Hartwell and attract visitors and locals to shop downtown.

- Provide Hartwell with a report summarizing the findings.
Consulting Steps/Outcome

1. Initial meeting with Hartwell clients (September 24, 2010):

Introductions were given to establish an initial relationship for the future project. Hartwell gave an explanation of the problem, stated as the need for a way to both identify the cause of and provide a solution to the outflow of money from the downtown Hartwell area. The problem and possible solutions were left open-ended, leaving significant background legwork to be done first.

2. Preliminary Research (October):

In order to better understand the project, our group conducted preliminary background research on several topics:
   - Hart County and the Tri-County Area
   - Comparable Towns/Counties
   - Comparable Methods of Shop Local Campaigns
   - Marketing Research and Survey Design

At the conclusion of this background research, our team was able to determine the deliverables for this project in a Document of Understanding (DOU), agreed upon between our team and Hartwell. Furthermore, we were able to determine our target audiences for the project in terms of survey demographics.

3. Second meeting with Hartwell clients (November 17, 2010):

Our team sought approval to move forward with our selected target audiences and survey plan. The topics included:
   - Local shop owners
     - Chamber of Commerce listserv
     - In-person interviews
   - Random downtown shoppers
   - High school students
   - Local residents
     - Survey in local newspaper/online

These topics will be discussed further on a case-by-case basis in Section Three: Results.
4. Surveying (March 2011):
Our surveying was carried out through both in-person interviews and online surveys. During our visits we conducted 78 in-person surveys of non-downtown shoppers, 16 in-person surveys of downtown shoppers, and 7 in-depth interviews of downtown shop owners. Through our online surveying, we received feedback from 99 local residents, 0 high school students, and 0 business owners. We collected a total of 200 surveys from all survey channels.

5. Analyzing Results and Making Recommendations (March/April):
Based on the survey and interview feedback compiled, our team was able to recognize patterns and consistent responses in our results. From here, we assessed possible solutions/recommendations and developed a 4-pronged approach that best addresses the issues identified above. These 4 topics discussed include marketing efforts, online presence, festivals, and downtown business recommendations which will be discussed in Section Four: Recommendations.
II. Data Collection
Downtown Shop Owners:

Description: The downtown shop owners’ survey is intended to gauge the mindset of the local shop owners in Hartwell and specifically hear their views on the current economic environment of downtown.

A copy of this survey is included below.

Dear Local Shop Owners,

We are a third party consulting group from the University of Georgia working on a project to improve commerce in downtown Hartwell. Below is a link to a survey that will hopefully provide beneficial information for our cause. Your honest opinion is invaluable and your participation in this survey would be much appreciated. The results of this survey will remain anonymous.

Thanks in advance for your time and support.

~ UGA Hartwell Team

1. What industry are you in?
2. Who do you see as your target market (specify age, lifestyle, etc. if possible)?
3. What tactics/marketing do you use to attract people to your store?
4. How successful has your marketing been (specify in relation to local and visiting shoppers)?
5. What are the current strengths of your business?
6. What areas would you like to improve in your business?
7. Would the following be helpful to your business?
   - marketing classes
   - small business seminars
   - festivals
   - generic downtown advertising
   - improving your stores website
   - improving the downtown Hartwell website
   - discount program/coupons (similar to groupon)
   - other: ______________________
8. What other stores could help improve commerce in downtown Hartwell?
9. What are your opinions on branding Hartwell (logo, moto, mascot, etc.)?
10. What are your ideas for the Hartwell brand?
Walmart Shoppers:

Description: The Walmart shoppers’ survey is not targeted at any particular demographic per say, but instead is aimed at determining what factors are drawing buyers away from downtown Hartwell. Noting that Walmart and downtown Hartwell attract different audiences (with some overlap), this survey was aimed at identifying specific factors that are missing from the downtown structure.

A copy of this survey is included below.

1. Are you a resident of Hart County?  
   *If not...what county are you from?

2. What age range do you fall into?  
   19 and under  
   20-44  
   45-64  
   65+

3. Do you shop downtown?  
   Yes or No

4. How often do you shop downtown?  
   More than once per week  
   Once every 2 weeks  
   Once per month  
   Once every 3 months  
   Once every 6 months  
   Less than once a year

5. What drew you here versus downtown today?
High School Students:

Description: While the majority of our surveys capture individuals in all age groups, the high school students’ survey is specifically targeted toward the younger demographic’s point of view.

The original survey was sent out online via Survey Monkey and is included below:

1. Please indicate your gender:
   Male
   Female

2. How long have you lived in Hart County?

3. How often do you shop in downtown Hartwell?
   More than once per week
   Once every 2 weeks
   Once per month
   Once every 3 months
   Once every 6 months
   Less than once a year

4. What do you like about downtown Hartwell? (Check as many boxes as apply.)
   Attractive place to shop
   Selection
   Friendly merchants
   Variety of businesses
   A Specific Business I Like
   Other (Please Specify)

5. What would help increase how often you shop downtown?

6. What could be improved about shopping in downtown Hartwell? (Check as many boxes as apply.)
   Selection
   Variety of Businesses
   Accessibility
   More age-specific offerings/products
   Specific type of business (let us know what type by commenting in the box below)

7. What shops do you like to go to downtown? Why?

8. Do you ever shop outside of Hartwell? If so where and why?

9. If you were the mayor, what events or festivals would you add or change downtown?
**In Person Downtown Shoppers:**

*Description:* The random downtown shoppers’ survey is designed for both residents and non-residents of Hart County as a broad spectrum approach. Through this survey we intend to talk directly with the shoppers to identify what brings them to shop downtown and what would bring them there more often.

*A copy of this survey is included below.*

***Male or Female: We check this off.***

1. Are you a resident of Hart County?
   *If not...what county are you from?*

2. What age range do you fall into?
   - 19 and under
   - 20-44
   - 45-64
   - 65+

3. How often do you shop downtown?
   - More than once per week
   - Once every 2 weeks
   - Once per month
   - Once every 3 months
   - Once every 6 months
   - Less than once a year

4. What drew you downtown today?

5. What would bring you downtown to shop more often?

6. What other types of shops would you like to see downtown?

**Follow-up Questions:**
- Are your customers typically locals or visitors?
- How do festivals and events affect your business?
Newspaper/Online Local Hart County Residents:

Description: The newspaper/online local Hart County residents’ survey is intended to gain feedback specifically from Hart County residents. In addition to the results of this survey, we will also be able to identify which method (print or online) is the most successful in reaching out to locals.

A copy of this survey is included below.

1. Please indicate your age:
   19 and under
   20-44
   45-64
   65+

2. Please indicate your gender:
   Male
   Female

3. How often do you shop in downtown Hartwell?
   More than once per week
   Once every 2 weeks
   Once per month
   Once every 3 months
   Once every 6 months
   Less than once a year

4. If you shop downtown less than once per month to less than once a year, what would help increase how often you shop downtown?

5. What do you like about downtown Hartwell? (Check as many boxes as apply.)
   - Attractive place to shop
   - Selection
   - Friendly merchants
   - Variety of businesses
   - A Specific Business I Like

6. What could be improved about shopping in downtown Hartwell? (Check as many boxes as apply.)
   - Selection
   - Variety of Businesses
   - Accessibility
   - More age-specific offerings/products
   - Specific type of business (let us know what type by commenting in the “other” box below)

7. What goods and services draw you to shop elsewhere (some place other than downtown Hartwell)?
Shop Owners

Six downtown shop owners were surveyed with each interview based on open-ended questions. Most interviews were free-flowing and relied on each respondent’s previous answers versus a scripted conversation. This produced very detailed and in-depth results unique to each interviewee. As an independent third-party, we believe most shop owners delivered honest and transparent comments. Based on these answers, three common themes that emerged were cooperation with other stores, product offerings downtown, and events – all areas that are expanded on in Section Four: Recommendations.

Walmart Shoppers

From the 78 responses gathered, the majority of shoppers currently reside in Hart County with only 15 respondents from surrounding counties. This was beneficial in that it provided us with both locals’ and visitors’ perspectives. Next, we were able to gather valuable insight into the respondents’ motives to shop at Walmart versus downtown Hartwell, as well as how often they visit Hartwell to shop. This information can be seen graphically in the pie charts below.
*“Other” includes: parking, wheel chair access, carts, etc.

Further, based on the Walmart shoppers’ feedback, we identified key factors deterring traffic away from downtown and to a super store like Walmart. These factors include specific items, lower prices, variety, groceries, location, and “other.” First, the factors of lower prices and groceries are difficult to compete with based on the Walmart’s size and logistical advantages. Instead, we recommend focusing on increasing variety in product offerings downtown in combination with seasonal promotions.

**High School Students:**

We attempted to survey the members of four student organizations: Key Club, FBLA, Anchor Club and DCT at Hart County High School. We received no response from Principal Gibbs nor the teachers that advise the student groups. We believe that their feedback would be insightful and provide an interesting perspective from this specific demographic. The survey was sent out online via Survey Monkey and has been included in Section Two: Data Collection.
Downtown Shoppers/Locals (In-person):

We surveyed 17 downtown shoppers coming in and out of different businesses and downtown establishments. Our team focused our survey on what factors lured them downtown on that particular occasion as well as their opinions on how to improve the downtown area. Based on their responses, we isolated the common themes as to what attracted them downtown. Their feedback included an emphasis on more green space and a kid-friendly atmosphere. Many elaborated on the need for increased variety among stores and restaurants. All responses tie into Section Four: Recommendations.

Local Hart County Residents (Newspaper and Online Survey):

Of the newspaper surveys and listserv emails, we received 102 responses. Of the 102 surveys, 99 respondents completed the online survey. While unrelated to the content of the results, only 3 hardcopy surveys were completed and returned. This demonstrates residents’ receptiveness to online channels and a current presence on the web.

This survey proved to be one of great importance. Not only did this survey yield the highest number of responses, but our team also received very consistent feedback in terms of the open-ended questions and many of the multiple choice options. Thus, this survey provides concrete direction for real improvement to the downtown area. Some of the data is displayed below:
Downtown Hartwell: Research Study

Shopping Frequency

- More than once a week: 22
- Once every 2 weeks: 19
- Once per month: 14
- Once every 3 months: 10
- Once every 6 months: 13
- Less than once a year: 22

Prefer Hartwell Due To:

- Attractive place to shop: 53
- Selection: 63
- Friendly merchants: 44
- Variety of businesses: 18
- A specific business I like: 12
- Other: 18

*“Other” category common responses include convenience, hardware store, and pharmacy
Improvements for Hartwell:

The two free response questions also provided great insight into the state of downtown Hartwell. As for ideas to increase downtown shopping, common responses included more variety, more restaurants, cheaper prices and longer store hours. As for reasons why people shop elsewhere, common responses included cheaper prices, restaurants, and more variety.

Through the various questions, several important themes developed. First, there is an overwhelming desire for restaurants downtown and within the greater downtown area. This alone seems to be a major complaint of a majority of the residents. Furthermore, many supporting ideas go along with an increase in dining locations, such as benches, greater green space, a park, etc. as a means to keep people downtown once already there. Second, a greater variety of stores are desired by the majority of residents. Many suggestions were given, including but not limited to, coffee shops, general stores, more up-to-date stores (notably clothing retailers), and a migration away from the higher-end vendors. Lastly, price surfaced as a major complaint from respondents. Many residents commented that they prefer to shop online, travel to Anderson, or drive to Seneca based on the savings they receive at these locations. Furthermore, many residents commented that convenience was the only reason they still shop downtown. Due to higher prices, many residents described a desire for more savings and discount opportunities. Based on these responses, a need exists for either less expensive shops (i.e. less high-end stores) or an overall decrease in downtown prices.
III. Recommendations
1. Marketing Efforts

Through our various surveying channels, a common theme emerged of a lack of effective marketing efforts. Specifically, our team noted that many stores rely heavily on their lake resident customer base in the summer time and then the local population during the remainder of the year. Therefore, we recommend increased marketing efforts across the board, targeting the lake community, other visitors, and Hart County residents.

“Welcome Back” Campaign

The “lake folk,” as they are often referred to, are perhaps the most essential contributors to downtown Hartwell. As implied by their name, the “lake folk” are seasonal residents and therefore should be targeted during the summer months of high visitation. Specifically, we recommend a “Welcome Back” campaign that would launch on the first big weekend of the season (most likely Memorial Day). The campaign would consist of multiple marketing tactics to reach the target audience. Some examples include, door hangers, flyers in the mail, e-cards, listserv blasts, magnets, and flyers around the community. The information included in this media could range from upcoming festival and event dates, new restaurant and store announcements, special sales and promotions (coupons), and any other relevant information. The “Welcome Back” marketing campaign is an effective and efficient integrated plan to establish and continue a two-way relationship with your strongest and largest consumer groups. It is a nice gesture that incorporates the valuable human touch in welcoming them back to town, while also promoting the businesses in downtown Hartwell.

Billboard off I-85

Our survey supports the utilization of a billboard to capitalize on the I-85 traffic that could increase the visitors to downtown Hartwell. With the amount of people who drive on I-85, the cost of the billboard per viewer would be very minimal. To work out a cooperative relationship with the county for this signage, the billboard could showcase half Hartwell and half county dining and shopping options. Broadcasting the “historic downtown” has the potential to attract people looking to explore a hospitable, Southern town.
Hartwell Branding

For Hartwell residents, we found that many have lived in Hartwell their entire lives. These people love their town but need to be reinvigorated on the downtown as a whole. Based on this, we suggest creating a motto, logo, and mascot in order to pull together the personality of Hartwell in one quick marketing package.

For the motto, logo, and mascot, our team recommends a contest done through social media. The contest would utilize Facebook, Twitter, and the Hartwell website (discussed below) to draw local residents online to begin a two-way conversation. Residents would submit ideas to the Hartwell Facebook page and then vote on their favorite idea. The Hartwell website and Twitter would alert residents of the contest and funnel them to the Facebook page. After a month of PR, the top ten would be announced, and a new round of voting would start. A winner would be crowned after two weeks of voting – possibly at one of the large events held downtown. This would allow the local community to create and take pride in deciding the Hartwell logo, motto, and mascot.

2. Online Presence

After analyzing all our surveys and interview results, we found a potential improvement to increase the shopping in downtown Hartwell by utilizing the Internet. In a small town like Hartwell, it’s difficult for a small store to have high brand awareness with limited resources. As a result, we recommend working towards a greater online presence by fostering more cooperation among the stores, improving your website, and utilizing Facebook and Twitter more aggressively.

Cooperation Among Stores

One of the most common answers we received from both shop owners and local downtown shoppers was the lack of cooperation among the shops. From the shop owners’ standpoint, they expressed that they have very little business-like interaction with the stores around them. Going along with that, the local downtown shoppers said they would like to see the stores come together with joint special offers or promotions. We stress the importance of the businesses in a small downtown area such as Hartwell banding together to get their name
and promotions out to increase the effectiveness. The most important information to hit would be weekly sales. We recommend an enhancement of your website (discussed below) to allow a single touch point to get all the promotions and sales. This cooperative effort will make it easier for shoppers learn more about the different offerings which could increase the downtown shopping. At the same time, this will be helpful in assisting the businesses in getting their name and brand out to the public.

**Website**

After analyzing the significant amount of responses from the online link of the Local Residents’ survey, we realized a great opportunity to utilize the Internet in increasing brand awareness of Hartwell. Going along with the cooperation among the downtown businesses above, we suggest improving the Hartwell website. The most significant improvement would be a page dedicated to getting the special events, offers, or promotions out to the local community. This could be accomplished through the DDA website or a weekly email to the local residents. Because most of the shop owners expressed a desire to build a cooperative relationship, buy-in to this recommendation should be easily implemented. To fuel this site, each participating shop owner could email their weekly message to someone in the DDA office. From each update, the only requirement is to organize and post the information.

**Social Networking Sites**

To piggy back on the weekly email, we believe utilizing social media will have a great effect on updating consumers. This is a very simple and inexpensive channel to broadcast important information to the local residents of Hart County. For our local resident survey discussed in the section above, we noticed a substantially larger percentage of people utilizing the online version to complete the survey. As a result, Hartwell should begin taking advantage of social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. Similar to the “Welcome Back” campaign, this will add a personal touch and feel to different promotions. Instead, you could have a relevant, two-way conversation (through Twitter or Facebook) with the reader.
3. Festivals/Events

After speaking with various shop owners, random shoppers, and local residents, we discovered a common theme in a unanimous interest in more festivals and events in the downtown area. Not only do the festivals and events stimulate downtown with visitors and lead to an increase in shopping and dining, but also build up the community as a whole. Therefore we recommend continuing the successful events already in place as well as the addition of newer ones.

Maintain Current Festivals

From Cars and Guitars, Under the Stars Memorial Day event, to The Pre 4\textsuperscript{th} Extravaganza, and all of the smaller events in between, Hartwell is already home to some spectacular events. These events are rooted in the community and have proven successful over the last couple years. We strongly encourage Hartwell to not only continue, but also expand on these events, as they are extremely beneficial to bringing in business to downtown Hartwell.

New Non-Holiday Festivals

Beyond these events, most respondents cited a desire for year-round events, especially some that don’t just fall on or cater to major holidays. Some ideas for events include a Taste of Hartwell and Bubba-Fest. A Taste of Hartwell would be a lake event to capitalize on water sports and the lake community. Each restaurant would bring a variety of food offered at their downtown location, and each person would pay a predetermined amount to sample each booth. The other event, Bubba-Fest, would involve different “Bubba” events like a Bubba-Que cook off and the Redneck Olympics. Different sports in the Redneck Olympic games would include a three-legged/sack race, best Bubba gear contest, and a mechanical bull riding competition. Along with these events, Bubba-Fest would showcase the “hit-and-miss” piston engines. This event celebrates the farming tradition of Hartwell in a quirky, family-friendly environment.
4. Downtown Business Recommendations

This component of our recommendation is by far the hardest to implement. However, the data can be extremely useful in terms of highlighting what businesses/products are currently missing from downtown. In all of our survey and interview efforts we included a question about what stores and additions the respondent would like to see downtown that would get them to shop their more often. This question led to a large number of ideas and suggestions.

*Park*

While downtown Hartwell currently has patches of green space and some nice sitting areas, a particular addition that would be worth looking into would be a park. Through our preliminary research on other small towns and their downtown area, we found that parks build up and beautify the neighborhood, and more so attract visitors to the area. A specific example would be the Paul Anderson Memorial Park in Toccoa. Based on these findings, our team suggests that the DDA looks into the construction of a park or at least additional green space with shady places to sit. We feel that this addition would lure people downtown to enjoy the historic atmosphere, creating a carryover effect of increased downtown traffic which inevitably would lead to increased dining and shopping.

*Variety*

During our research participants consistently noted the lack of variety in downtown Hartwell in both shops and restaurants. Shop-wise, the area is filled with gift/antique shops which are wonderful, but not necessarily visited on a regular basis. Further, Hartwell has seen three major restaurants in the downtown area recently close. An increase in food variety is tied hand-in-hand to getting more traffic to pass through the downtown area.

*Restaurants*

When it comes to restaurants, there was a wide variety of desires including a deli, steakhouse, a sports bar that serves both as a dining establishment and nightlife hotspot, & a frozen yogurt/smoothie place.
Contact Information

Leonard Leadership Scholars Program
Terry College of Business
University of Georgia

Jessica Craven
jessicas.craven@gmail.com
(678) 231-5916

Sam Gruber
samjgruber@gmail.com
(770) 906-0273

Chris Dammeyer
cdammeyer@gmail.com
(678) 910-0382

Mike Moore
mmoore1988@gmail.com
(404) 323-0629

SurveyMonkey Login Information

Survey: Hartwell Shop Local Survey
Login: imcconnell
Password: hartwell

Survey: Local Shop Owners and High School Students Surveys
Login: HartCounty
Password: llsp