Beating the Winter Blahs with a Non-Event Instagram Event

by Ruth Brindle, Executive Co-Director, Main Street Wilmington

What do you do when it's too cold for an outdoor party but when you still want people to engage with your historic downtown? You host a non-event event! Main Street Wilmington recently held its second annual #luvwilmingtonoh Instagram contest where participants were encouraged to share a photograph of something they loved about Wilmington's historic downtown—a building, a shop, a restaurant, a local figure, a beautiful view, or anything that highlighted something unique about the community. Participants were asked to post their photo on a public Instagram account using the #luvwilmingtonoh tag and mentioning @mainstreetwilmi. Professional photographers were encouraged to post photographs, but their entries were not eligible for prizes.

Main Street Wilmington is a community-based non-profit committed to promoting historic preservation and economic development with the goal of maintaining a cultural downtown district that attracts entrepreneurs and retains businesses, serving as a vital hub for housing, shopping, dining, and entertainment. While the goals of the contest were to bring people downtown during a relatively quiet time of the year and to promote downtown shopping, participation, and engagement, the contest also raised awareness of our local history and the beautiful architecture of our historic downtown. The two winning photographs were interior shots of iconic historic buildings in the downtown – Wilmington Friends Meetinghouse (celebrating its 150th anniversary this spring) and the Murphy Theatre (celebrating its 100th anniversary this summer).

The contest was a success on many levels, not the least of which was increasing our community engagement and outreach through social media. Dozens of unique photos were shared, commented on, and reposted, which lead to a 148% increase in impressions on the @mainstreetwilmi Instagram account. Several of the photos were submitted by students from the local high school, who were encouraged to participate in the contest as an assignment in their photography class—a great opportunity to talk to a new and much younger audience about the organization. The contest also allowed us to highlight the local businesses that generously contributed to the Valentine's Day-themed prizes—the florist who donated half a dozen red roses in a beautiful arrangement, the restaurant who donated a gift certificate for dinner for two, the coffee shop who donated a gift card, the wine merchant who donated a bottle of wine, and the specialty retailer who put together a gift basket with scented candles and home decorations.

Of course, no event or program comes together perfectly. We received push-back on the contest rules, particularly the photograph date and professional photographer restrictions. Originally, only photos taken during the span of the contest (February 1-8, 2018) were eligible for consideration. After receiving feedback from several individuals who wanted to share photographs taken in the downtown during other seasons – particularly some of Main Street's signature events like our spring Wine Walk and Holidazzle Illuminated Parade—we agreed to open the date restriction to any photograph taken since January 1, 2017.

The restriction on professional photographers was intended to encourage all Wilmington residents and fans to participate but was seen as an unfair restriction by the professional photographers in the community, who were also looking for

Winning photograph: interior of the Murphy Theatre by Veronica Campbell (@vlee_82).

Winning photograph: interior of the Wilmington Friends Meetinghouse by Becky Bowman (@rebeccaakbowman).

exposure for their work and their businesses. In response to their legitimate concern, we have planned a photography exhibit of professional work for the fall.

The other challenge was reposting—or sharing—the submitted photographs directly from @mainstreetwilmi in a timely way that didn't flood our followers' feeds, given Instagram's lack of scheduling ability. While a work-around was created using Google calendar for this year, we are investigating third-party scheduling apps for the future.

Was it worth the time and effort? We say—absolutely yes! Anytime our local residents can be encouraged or incentivized to look at their community with new eyes and a measure of pride—everybody wins.