

A NEW TAKE ON

POP-UPS



Colin Edgell, owner of Whitecap Outdoor Consignments, was one of the two winners in Cambridge's Holiday Pop-Up Project.

Store Giveaway Contest Takes Aim at Downtown Vacancies By Jim Duffy, Cambridge Main Street

Most folks associate short-term pop-up stores with shopping malls, not historic downtowns, but the Main Street program in Cambridge, a city of 10,000 on Maryland's Eastern Shore, set out to see whether a variation on the pop-up concept might generate holiday excitement and perhaps help reduce vacancies.

Conceived by Cambridge Main Street Board President Phil Feldman, the Holiday Pop Up Project (H-PUP) sounds a bit like a reality TV show, and it is — only without the cameras. Feldman proposed running a contest in which would-be entrepreneurs could apply for the chance to test out retail business concepts rent-free during the 2010 holiday season in November and December.

I admit that I had doubts about the project at first. The timeframe to put such a contest together seemed short. Would a property owner really play along? What if we didn't get any good applications — or worse yet, no applications at all?

Feldman focused on the upside. Every phone call that came in would be from a prospect we could work with going forward, whether the caller decided to enter the contest or not. That could help our Main Street program boost its progress on a top priority — reducing vacancy rates that were still too high at 25 percent.

Plus, Feldman felt that adding two new stores could generate excitement and foot traffic during the critical holiday season. And if the contest garnered media attention, H-PUP might help brand downtown Cambridge in its region as a place that goes the extra mile to help entrepreneurs. In late September, Feldman and I met with property owner Bill Harrington. We invited Harrington not only because his vacant storefronts occupied a key location in the downtown, but also to pursue another of our organization's priorities — building stronger partnerships with select property owners whom we felt might be skeptical of the Main Street approach and with whom we had not successfully partnered before.

Harrington peppered us with questions and concerns — would he have a voice in choosing winners? What types of businesses were we hoping to land? What would be his expenses? In the end, despite lingering doubts about whether the program would attract businesses built to last and capable of paying market rents, Harrington agreed to give the program a shot, as long as the winners agreed to cover utility costs and licensing fees.

The next day, press releases announcing H-PUP went out to regional media. The first call I fielded was from a television reporter asking if she could come to Cambridge the next morning. Over the next few weeks, the H-PUP program was featured on TV newscasts on six different occasions.

Overall, the contest drew 15 expressions of interest and six formal applications. The two winners were announced in late October. One was Whitecap Outdoor Consignments. Owned by Colin Edgell, the shop offers consignment merchandise in the outdoors and sports category — hunting gear, team sports equipment, boating supplies and accessories, clothing, and other products.

In a retail environment where dollar stores and high-quality consignment shops have done reasonably well, all things considered,



Harrington, Feldman, and I found this concept really appealing.

Most recently, Edgell had been working as a chef. But he also had extensive professional experience working at boatyards and marine suppliers. It turned out this was a concept he'd been mulling over for years and our contest gave him an unexpected opportunity to test it out in the real world. He staffs the store himself, with a little help from his dog, Teak.

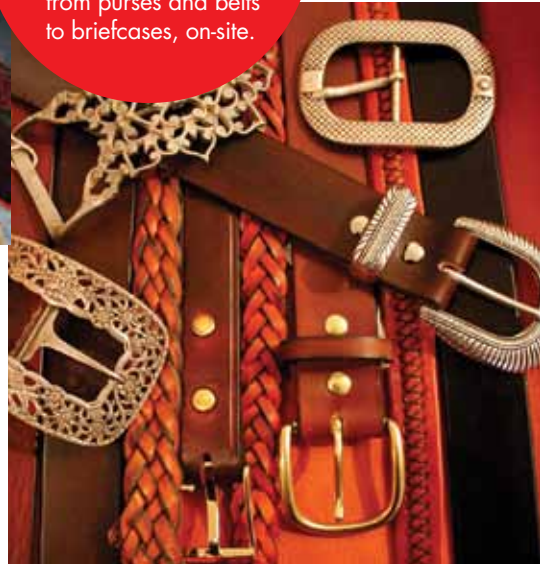
"One of the great reasons for living on the Eastern Shore is all the amazing boating, kayaking, and hunting opportunities available here," Edgell says. "But there aren't any stores that are really focused on providing affordable options in this area. I thought this concept would have strong appeal to local residents and visitors alike, especially in this economy, and everything that's happened so far has me continuing to believe that."

The other winner, Malina Custom Leather, offers retail sales in the atmosphere of an artisan's workshop. The focus is on high-quality leather products — everything from purses to portfolio covers and belts to briefcases. The business's tagline is "Every Stitch By Hand," and the inventory is created on site by Dennis Napolitan, a craftsman who used to be a partner in the chain of D'Naz Leather shops that formerly operated in New York City. The store also features works by a local photographer, Lisa Krentel.

More recently, Napolitan had been working in the antiques field. He co-owned a downtown shop that was gutted by a 2008 fire. Since then, he had been supplying leather goods to local art galleries on a limited basis, but he hadn't really considered opening his own retail workshop until the contest surfaced. On the day the shop opened, Napolitan sold a \$600 handbag.

"I have to confess that when this opportunity came along, I thought it was likely to be a two-month project and that's it," says Napolitan. "But now I'm in my third month and I'm really excited about moving forward."

Dennis Napolitan, owner of Malina Custom Leather, handcrafts high-quality leather goods, ranging from purses and belts to briefcases, on-site.



At press time in mid-January, both business owners were still engaged in lease negotiations with Harrington, but they are eager to move forward and become permanent operations.

Edgell reports that his biggest challenge at Whitecap has been finding enough consignment inventory to keep his shop looking full and vibrant at all times, especially after a busy weekend. He is negotiating with a major marine-supply and boat-accessories wholesaler to provide a line of new products to augment his used merchandise.

Through the Christmas season, Napolitan's bulletin board was strewn with yellow tickets representing custom orders for everything from simple belts to ornate holsters. He hopes someday to supply his merchandise to select stores in nearby cities, in addition to running his Cambridge shop.

H-PUP has exceeded my expectations, and Cambridge Main Street will look for opportunities to repeat the contest in the future. The next time around, however, we will be looking to launch the contest at least a month earlier and to work harder to make it simple and seamless for winners to get stores up and running.

We'll also look at offering a longer test period than two months. Giving away at least three months and possibly more might generate even more interest and additional applications. But overall, we're very pleased with how things went the first time around.

Jim Duffy is the manager of the Cambridge Main Street program.