



The Arkansas DeltaMade Program

by Andrea L. Dono

The Arkansas Delta, once one of the wealthiest regions of the country, experienced a sharp economic decline during the 1960s and 70s. The mechanization of agriculture led to the out-migration of people, capital, and resources from America's breadbasket. The region, which is filled with unique food traditions, a rich musical heritage, two National Scenic Byways, and a colorful history, was left without a significant employment base. Apathy and hopelessness became common in many Delta communities.





he Arkansas Delta Rural Heritage Development (RHDI) Initiative sought to create a culture conducive to entrepreneurialism in a place

where, for more than 30 years, many people had seen no point in making investments. Yet there was enormous potential ready to be tapped among the many home-based businesses, traditional crafters and artisans, small-batch food producers, nature tourism outfitters, and others yet to be discovered along the Delta. A regional branding initiative presented an opportunity to uncover these hidden entrepreneurial assets and foster the creation of new businesses, all built on the distinctive character of the region. “Arkansas DeltaMade” was born.

“The idea was to create a program that brands the unique products made here and markets them to locals and visitors,” says Beth Wiedower, director of the Arkansas Delta RHDI. These products include honey, barbecue sauces, and other items, such as soy-based candles, that are made from local crops. “We know the profile of heritage travelers. They want a unique experience and have money to spend. They’ll buy a \$350 quilt and forgo the \$2 key chain. We launched Arkansas DeltaMade to give the region an identity and create a sense of

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worth here. Even more importantly, we are translating this brand into heritage-based economic development.”

The goal is to preserve the heritage, traditions, stories, businesses, and history before these assets leave the area or collapse into ruin. But Wiedower noted that talking to a local producer of barbecue sauce about revitalization and heritage-based economic development wouldn’t resonate. She instead gave them something to be a part of that was easy to comprehend and had tangible perks. Arkansas DeltaMade was structured as a carrot—an incentive program that provides business workshops and one-on-one trainings, networking and peer mentoring, free advertising and marketing, connections to retail outlets, information on tax credits, and more to participating local producers.

Wiedower collaborated with members of the Arkansas Delta Rural Heritage Development Initiative’s executive committee to research regional branding programs, collect materials, and ultimately establish the program. She tapped graduate students of a Rural Heritage Development Initiative part-

ner—the Clinton School of Public Service in Little Rock—to flesh out the components of the program. They worked out metrics to gauge the program’s success, created a baseline for setting achievement benchmarks, assessed new market opportunities, identified potential members (product producers and retail and restaurant outlets), developed print and online marketing materials and a website, and held sales events.

The fact that there was only one staff person who could devote just a small percentage of her time to managing Arkansas DeltaMade presented challenges concerning the incentives that could be offered and the ways the program could grow. As a result, relying on the 130 Delta partners to share their resources and expertise has been a big part of Arkansas DeltaMade’s success. For example, tourism marketing experts with the regional travel council helped strengthen the brand, and business development organizations provided training and individual counseling services.

“The existing regional partnerships in the Delta helped us from an organizational

standpoint because there were so many groups we could work with,” points out Wiedower. “I couldn’t personally help someone write a business plan or help people apply for small business loans, but our partners could deliver those services free of charge – which has been key.”

identifying retailers and restaurants to serve as sales outlets. Participants, who could join DeltaMade for free, were promised assistance at no charge to help them get recognition for their goods or services and boost their sales. With an eye on quality, the Arkansas DeltaMade website was

“get.” For the Rural Heritage Development Initiative, Arkansas DeltaMade was a “soft sell” that stimulated interest in the larger, more complicated mission of historic preservation, asset-based economic development, and heritage conservation.

Branding and marketing distinctive regional products increased awareness of heritage and culture, while helping to keep regional arts, crafts, and food traditions viable. By connecting Arkansas DeltaMade to local retail outlets in historic downtowns, the program has also helped keep older buildings occupied with thriving businesses and strengthened the local economy. Arkansas DeltaMade is just one part of a larger, holistic approach to strengthening the heritage and economy of Arkansas. But to the hot pepper jelly-maker working in her kitchen and the designers participating in a jewelry co-op in Helena, it’s about people doing what they love in their hometowns while reaching more customers – all without having to move to a larger market.

A range of small business development partners in the region helped Arkansas DeltaMade program participants launch or

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In January 2007, the Arkansas Delta RHDI put out a call for local and unique products and services in order to uncover talented people in the Delta and showcase them through the Arkansas DeltaMade website. Wiedower’s goal was to sign up 25 members who embody the “homegrown” nature of the DeltaMade brand. Partners and steering committee members aided this goal by finding the hidden treasures and

launched (www.arkansasdeltamade.com) with 23 vendors in October 2007.

The branding and marketing emphasis of the Arkansas DeltaMade program quickly attracted interest and membership. Wiedower explains that there is a weak preservation ethic in the Delta region and most people do not know much about revitalization. However, the Arkansas DeltaMade program was a concept that people could



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Beth Wiedower, director of the National Trust’s Arkansas Delta Rural Heritage Development Initiative (left), poses with Cathy Campbell, proprietor of Handworks in Helena, Ark. A strong supporter of Arkansas DeltaMade, Campbell sells many of its products in her store.



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The Delta Cultural Center, housed in a restored 1912 train depot in historic downtown Helena, Ark., interprets the Delta's agricultural, ethnic, and cultural history and promotes tourism in the region.

expand their businesses. These partners included the Southern Good Faith Fund, alt. Consulting, Beacons and Bridges, Arkansas Small Business Development Centers, United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development Offices, the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, and Community Development Offices in Little Rock and

around the region and with steering committee input, Wiedower was able to scout out potential historic downtown shops and eateries where Arkansas DeltaMade products could be sold. She then listed these potential markets in a catalog to help her members make connections. Shops and restaurants that carry Arkansas DeltaMade

is still up to the individual business owner to make the most of the opportunity. For example, the producer of the hot pepper jelly, a real estate agent by day, started making pepper jelly in her kitchen and giving it to friends. Through Arkansas DeltaMade, she learned about price points, product labeling, health department certification, and more. Now she updates her website regularly and has expanded her offerings to include chocolate “gravy” (a sauce usually served over biscuits for breakfast). She has also upgraded her packaging to fancier tins and searches out new merchants. She offers them samples of her products and encourages the shop owners to stock them.

Small-town qualities have also contributed to the success of the Arkansas DeltaMade program. Wiedower, who was born and raised in Arkansas, was able to use friendships and personal and family connections. This was the case in garnering the support of the First Lady of Arkansas. “I ran into her at an event in Little Rock and talked to her about what we were doing,” says Wiedower. “Heritage-based economic development is an unfamiliar term to many people who aren’t in that field. I told her the stories

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Memphis. The Rural Heritage Development Initiative also offered local lenders and entrepreneurs business development workshops that focused on small business financing and micro-lending opportunities.

Increasing exposure to products is another element of growing businesses. Arkansas DeltaMade members not only needed to expand in their own towns, but also to find additional markets. During her travels

items are also listed in an online directory. “Market Events,” such as the ones held at the annual King Biscuit Blues Festival in Helena, are also great sales events that offer access to new markets. Vendors sell products at the event and interact with customers who come from all over the world to attend the internationally known blues festival.

Arkansas DeltaMade is essentially a framework for small business success. But it



of our members and the people preserving our shared culture by creating food products and crafts. It gave her an introduction to the economy of the Delta, the local folks, and a new perspective on opportunities, which all resonated with her.”

Small-town connections also helped in advocacy efforts and getting the support of public officials for policies that would be helpful for small business owners. Wiedower invited legislators to DeltaMade events and sent letters asking them to support policies and incentives that would help program participants.

“We singled out DeltaMade members in their districts and told their stories. We have access to small business statistics for each county, too, so I could go to a representative and tell him that 87 percent of the workforce in his district is employed by small businesses, which means small businesses are a big deal to his constituents and supporting legislation that helps small businesses is a good idea.” She points out that not only do small-town officials depend on the votes of their constituencies, but they probably know the people who would be affected by their policy decisions.

The growing name recognition for Arkansas DeltaMade is just one indicator that the program is working. In three years, the program expanded to 85 participants. Several businesses have websites and more are under way. Plans are in place to hire a dedicated Arkansas DeltaMade staff person to expand the program. While the program hasn’t reversed the exodus of resources, people, and heritage, it has reversed the mindset that there is little to do in the Delta, that there is a lack of resources, that historic structures are disposable, and that heritage tourism isn’t connected to economic development. Wiedower feels it has been making an impact. “It’s been small so far, but some of these towns have 500 people. So if someone doubles her business in a year, that is huge.”

Andrea L. Dono is the program manager for research and training for the National Trust Main Street Center. This case study is reprinted from the booklet, Heritage-Based Rural Development, published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, available at amazon.com.



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New tax incentive programs have enabled business owners to expand and open new stores in Helena, Ark.



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The Arkansas Delta is famous for its musical heritage of gospel, blues, jazz, country, and rock’ n’ roll. The King Biscuit Blues Festival (Arkansas Blues and Heritage Festival), held each year in Helena, is among the musical events and sites promoted by the Arkansas Delta Rural Heritage Initiative.