



Coming Back Stronger

How communities are working together to support local business

August 2021

Communities Investing in Their Futures

Over the past year, the Covid-19 crisis completely upended life as we know it. People across the country were told to stay inside and limit their time in public areas. The pandemic was not only hard for people, but it also forced thousands of small businesses to close. Small businesses that had already been struggling due to the transition to big box stores and e-commerce, now had to deal with a significant decrease in revenue. Local restaurants have had a hard time making enough money from take-out orders, and local gyms and other recreational businesses saw their revenue drop to zero overnight. These small businesses do not have the support structure of large corporations and franchises whose business models are more elastic. As a result, many analysts warned that the pandemic would lead to “the worst wave of small-business bankruptcies and closures since the Great Depression.”¹

Communities pitch in to support local businesses

During these unprecedented times, it is more important than ever that people come together to support their communities, especially their local businesses. Now that we are starting to come out of the pandemic and businesses are beginning to reopen, community leaders are finding creative ways to help their local businesses and encourage community members to shop locally. In an effort to keep local dollars local, hundreds of communities are partnering with Yiftee to run their own Community eGift Card Programs.

This paper will highlight many successful communities from cities as large as Boulder, CO, and Salt Lake City, UT, and as small as Frankfort, KY, and Benicia, CA. We will show how leaders have united their community to support local businesses through their Community Card programs. Furthermore, city governments and other sponsors have been instrumental in providing incremental funding to boost these programs, in this time of need. We will explain and quantify how these different sponsors have amplified the effect of “shop local” programs, resulting in significant economic aid for their local small businesses, and establishing new patterns of community engagement.

Community Card programs benefit local businesses

Chambers of Commerce, Main Streets and Downtown Associations are organizing local programs to drive sales to their small businesses, assist in their recovery, and promote them long term. Yiftee provides community organizers a program focused on keeping local dollars local which creates measurable revenue for local businesses. A Community Card Program makes it easy for community members – consumers, local government, employers, professionals, and others – to spend their money at local shops and restaurants instead of large national chains. These local Community Card programs sustainably enable buyers to funnel dollars to their local businesses, instead of leaving the community via ecommerce and national brand gift cards.



A Community Card is a multi-brand gift card that can be used at any participating business in a community. Community Cards give people an easy way to support the local businesses that make their communities unique. Branded for the community, these cards have many uses from personal to corporate. Local companies can give cards to welcome employees back to the office, schools to celebrate their teachers, hospitals to appreciate essential workers, realtors to welcome new homeowners, parents to thank coaches/babysitters/etc. and friends for birthdays and holidays. Not only is the recipient excited to use their Community Card, but the giver feels good for supporting the community. With potentially hundreds of choices for how to spend the card, multi-brand Community Cards are more versatile and valuable to buyers than any single-brand card.

Community Cards make a lasting positive impact

While the COVID-19 crisis made it urgent to help small businesses stay afloat, a shop local program doesn't end there. Even after the effects of the pandemic have passed, Community Cards are a great way to connect and cross-pollinate the community. A survey conducted in

March 2021 showed **51% of card holders used them to shop or dine at new places**. An incredible **92% of card buyers surveyed said they preferred to support their local businesses with a Community Card vs. buying national brand gift cards**. Community Card programs not only spark an influx of revenue in the short-term, but they also provide businesses with a strong, loyal customer base for the future.

It is time to support the local businesses that have been supporting our communities for as long as we can remember. By sharing many examples and case studies, this paper hopes to inspire more employers, professionals, and consumers to cooperate with local Chambers of Commerce, Main Streets and Downtown Associations to implement their own local versions of their Community Card.

City Partnerships Jumpstart Pandemic Recovery

Many cities and counties have been quick to step up and help small businesses in any way they can to accelerate their pandemic recovery. One way communities are successfully getting their Community Card in circulation is by partnering with their respective cities or counties. In these partnerships, the city or county will grant money, such as CARES Act, American Recovery Plan or tourist tax revenue, to the communities to fund marketing costs and incentive programs. By obtaining these grants, community leaders can set up promotion campaigns such as a Buy One Get One Campaign. Some communities have even used the grant to give out free Community Cards to residents in need, or for disaster-recovery efforts. Here are some communities that have successfully gained city partnerships:



South Shore Lake Tahoe, CA – *Go Local Tahoe Card*: In January 2020, the Tahoe Chamber of Commerce pitched the program to the South Lake Tahoe City Council, which invested \$75,000 in the program. This allowed the Chamber of Commerce to start a BOGO campaign where purchasers were given a \$40 bonus card for a \$100 purchase, a \$20 bonus card for a \$50 purchase and a \$10 bonus card for a \$25 purchase. So far, this BOGO campaign has \$140,000 in cards sold with more than 20% of the bonus pool still available. This grant also covered processing fees associated with the program in order to ensure that all money spent goes directly to their local businesses.



Frankfort, KY – *Shop Local Frankfort Gift Card*: The Shop Local Frankfort Gift Card is run by the City of Frankfort, and in February 2021, they set aside \$105,000 to begin their program. To jumpstart their Community Card, they used this \$105,000 to give out free \$25 cards to the first 4,000 people who signed up to receive a card. This initial promotion campaign had an overwhelming response as over 4,000 people signed up on the first day. One community member was especially excited

to use her Community Card saying, “We’re using ours tonight!! Goodwood, Broadway Clay and Hoggy’s!! We can’t wait!”



Benicia, CA – Shop Benicia eGift Card: In November 2020, the City of Benicia gave a \$10,000 grant to encourage local spending during the holiday season. This grant allowed Benicia to set up a BOGO Campaign where purchasers received \$50 free for spending \$100, \$25 free for spending \$50 and \$10 free for spending \$25. Due to the overwhelming popularity of the program, the original grant was exhausted in only a week. In response to this, the City of Benicia resupplied the program with an additional \$7,500 to keep the Buy One Get One Campaign running. Overall, Benicia has sold more than \$100,000 worth of cards in nine months.



Erie County, NY – Shop 716 eGift Card: During the initial launch of the program, the Amherst Chamber of Commerce partnered with Erie County. Through this partnership, the Chamber of Commerce was able to obtain \$500,000 in CARES Act funding and additional grants. This funding helped them begin a very successful BOGO Campaign where purchasers who spent \$50 received \$50 in bonus cards, and purchasers who spent \$25 received \$25 in bonus cards with a limit of one per buyer. With almost 750 participating merchants, community members have plenty of ways to use their Shop 716 eGift Card. Overall, this campaign was a huge success and resulted in over 31,000 cards sold, generating almost \$1,200,000 for the community.



Fenton, MI – Fenton Community eGift Card: The City of Fenton Downtown Development Authority (DDA) partnered with the City of Fenton to run their Community Card. The DDA initially contributed \$100,000 to start a BOGO Campaign, then added \$200,000 more and finally an additional \$75,000, due to the program’s overwhelming success. In this BOGO campaign, a purchaser would receive a matching bonus card, with a value equal to what they spent for a Fenton

Community eGift Card. This BOGO Campaign resulted in over 10,000 cards sold, generating an amazing \$830,000 for the 49 merchants participating in Fenton.



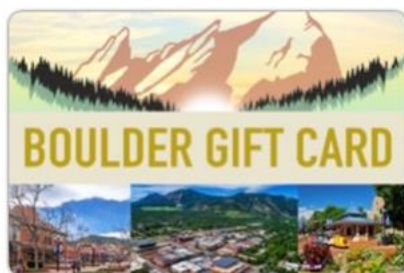
Concord, CA – Shop Concord Gift Card: In November 2020, the City of Concord made a \$10,000 contribution to the program. This contribution allowed the Chamber of Commerce to set up a BOGO Campaign. This initial campaign saw resounding success, selling over 900 eGift Cards for a total value of \$31,020. The campaign was so successful that the City contributed another \$10,000 in May 2021 for another BOGO Campaign. These two campaigns together generated about 1,800 eGift Card purchases, valuing almost \$90,000 for local businesses. Local Concord businesses and community members have loved the Shop Concord Gift Card and the economic boost it has given the community. One merchant praised the program saying, “I had customers downloading the gift cards in my store so they could take advantage of the promotion. It’s a great way for the city to support small businesses in Concord and give customers a nice gift as well!”

Unique Gifting Programs Generate Increased Revenues for Local Businesses

In addition to gaining city partnerships and community sponsors, many communities have created their own unique gifting programs. Due to the flexibility of the Community Card Program, community organizers can tailor their program to fit the needs of their businesses and their community. These unique programs have been very successful driving card sales as well as gaining community awareness about their cards. Whether it be giving out cards to first responders or holding competitions with Community Card prizes, these communities have come up with creative ways to promote and sell their Community Cards.



Franklin County, KY – YES Card: The YES Card is a little different from most Community Cards. It is run by the Franklin County Health Department with the goal of providing structured out-of-school time youth activities. With this program, they hope to reduce the incidence of kids engaging in risky behavior, and instead provide them with a set of approved, healthy activities such as arts, sports and service projects. Families who opt in to the program receive 3 installments of \$400 eGift Cards over a two and a half year period. So far, the YES Card program has been very successful supporting more than 300 youths in Franklin County.



Boulder, CO – Boulder Gift Card: In March 2021, tragedy hit the Boulder community with a mass shooting at a local grocery store. Police officers and other first responders were quick to get to the scene and take care of the situation. To thank the first responders and others who helped out during this time, the City of Boulder sent them free \$100 Boulder Gift Cards, good at any of 180 local retailers. This was the perfect way for the city to show their appreciation and support the community during this tough time.



Birmingham, MI – Birmingham Bucks: In January 2021, the City of Birmingham held a “restaurant week” to encourage community members to eat at their local restaurants. As incentives, the city gave out Birmingham Bucks, redeemable at 280 local businesses. For every \$50 customers spent at a restaurant, they would receive a free \$25 Birmingham Bucks card, and could earn a maximum of \$100 in free Birmingham Bucks. This gifting program was a great way to support local restaurants while promoting and selling their Community Card. In this campaign, the City of Birmingham gave out over 600 total cards generating over \$15,000 for the community.



Dayton, OH – Downtown Dollars eGift Card: Merchants have loved the Downtown Dollars eGift Card, with over \$131,000 in sales since its inception in early December 2020. One shop owner even reached out about getting a new Activation Card saying, “I want to make sure we can still accept the cards because it's been great for our business.” Dayton community members have enjoyed using their Downtown Dollars eGift Cards in local shops, and they are excited for future community-building events like these:

“Downtown Adventure” Scavenger Hunt: In July 2021, the Downtown Dayton Partnership put on a “Downtown Adventure” scavenger hunt event to encourage community members to explore their downtown businesses. They invested approximately \$1,200 to incentivize people to participate in the event by giving out free \$10 Downtown Dollars to participating teams. Overall, this campaign was a success, having over \$500 redeemed on the day of the event alone.

“Welcome Back” Campaign: Dayton has also just started their “Welcome Back” campaign in July 2021. In this campaign, they are targeting companies who are welcoming their employees back to the office. For every \$25 the company purchases, they will receive a complimentary \$25 to give to their employees.



Riverdale Park, MD – *Riverdale Main Streets Alliance Card* and *Riverdale Farmers' Market Card*: Ryan Chelton, Director of Development Services for the Town of Riverdale Park, MD was enjoying the success of the Alliance Card when he had another idea. Could they do a card that worked just at their Farmer's Market, and use it to replace the \$25/week certificates they were mailing to more than 200 families in need each week in their town? The program was implemented in a few weeks, and the Farmers were activated as merchants participating in the program. The Town will benefit from returned funds if cards are unused and on demand tracking and reporting on card issuance and spending.

Recruiting Sponsors Dramatically Improves Community Card Program Results

Many organizers recruit community sponsors to gain the funding necessary to market their Community Card Program and set up special promotion campaigns such as a BOGO promotion. Some community organizers have long standing relationships with potential sponsors. Others have pitched sponsorships to city councils or board members. In some cases, word about the program spreads, and sponsors reach out on their own in order to benefit from the local branding and marketing available to them. Sponsors are normally recognized on the Community Card website, on the card itself, in local press and social media and sometimes in physical signage in the participating merchant locations. Here are some examples from communities who have successfully recruited sponsors to help with their programs:



Salt Lake City, UT – SLC Downtown Dollars: The SLC Downtown Dollars program began in October 2020, and they were able to get a \$75,000 grant from the city to offer a BOGO campaign for the holiday season. Because of the initial success of the program, many local corporations grew interested and purchased cards for their employee holiday gifts. These corporations began to reach out about bulk purchases and other ways they could help the program, such as employee rewards, anniversary gifts and spot bonuses. Some of them work regularly with Downtown SLC, and others heard about it through media coverage of the program. These corporate purchases were helpful in distributing their Community Cards and raising community awareness about the program. Due to the increased awareness of the program, their promotion campaign became so popular that they scaled back the higher incentive levels to avoid running out of bonus funds too quickly.



Whatcom, WA – *Think Local First eGift Card*: When Whatcom began their Community Card Program, they asked a local organization called Sustainable Connections to attend a Yiftee demo webinar in hopes of partnering with them.

Sustainable Connections had already been promoting local businesses and encouraging community members to spend their money locally. After attending the webinar, Sustainable Connections was excited to partner with Whatcom County to run their Community Card Program. This partnership led to many more opportunities for the program. Through their previous relationships, Sustainable Connections was able to recruit over 250 merchants to participate in the program as well as important sponsors such as the City of Bellingham. These sponsorships, along with grants from the Federal CARES Act allowed Whatcom to offer bonus cards and other special gifting programs. One merchant loved what the incentive campaign did for her business saying, “The incentive program was a big motivation for people to purchase the Think Local First Gift Cards...I am very thankful for the program.” Overall, Whatcom’s incentive BOGO campaign was very successful. The bonus program investment is projected to return up to 8X the CARES Act funding within the year.

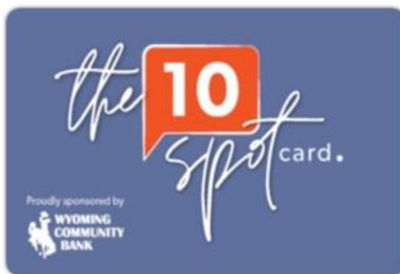


Harney County, OR – *Shop Harney eGift Card*: Harney County is a small county in rural Oregon. There are only two cities in the county, Hines and Burns, and the total population is just over 7,000. When the Shop Harney eGift Card launched in November 2020, they got both the City of Hines and the City of Burns to

sponsor their card which allowed them to offer a large holiday incentive campaign. Shop Harney recruited these sponsors by talking with them face-to-face and giving a presentation to the city councils. After learning more about the program, both Cities were more than happy to provide funding to support the program. Once awareness about their Community Card started to spread, community organizations began to reach out about sponsoring the program. These sponsors were essential in spreading awareness about the program and in offering BOGO sales, special drawings and other incentives.



Chattanooga, TN – Chattanooga Express Card: When the River City Company launched their card, the Chattanooga Express Card Program was offered as a sponsorship opportunity through their larger downtown recovery plan. They turned to the Electric Power Board of Chattanooga (EPB) and the Benwood foundation to sponsor the program. The River City Company has had long standing relationships with both organizations, and they were happy to support their community by sponsoring the program. These sponsorships were very helpful in launching the Chattanooga Express Card, providing funds needed to support their overall downtown recovery plan. Due to the financial support from these sponsors, the River City Company was able to offer a BOGO where purchasers who buy a \$100 card receive a free \$50 bonus card, purchasers who buy a \$75 card receive a free \$25 bonus card and purchasers who buy a \$50 card receive a free \$10 bonus card. This campaign resulted over 300 cards sold valuing \$40,000 for the community. The Chattanooga Express Card launched in May 2021 and has sold \$42,000 in just three months.



County 10, WY – The 10 Spot Card: County 10 is a bit different from most of the community organizers. They are a for-profit business that provides free online news to their community. However, their mission is to “Connect the Community,” so they were excited to start their own Community Card Program with the 10 Spot Card. First, they reached out to the Wyoming Community Bank in hopes of gaining their sponsorship. The Bank loves supporting the local community in any way they can, so they jumped at the opportunity. Next, they reached out to the LOR Foundation whose mission is to enhance the prosperity of small communities. The LOR Foundation was more than happy to give County 10 a grant to get the program started. This grant was very helpful as it covered some of the printing, time and advertisement costs to run the program. With this grant and the support of the Wyoming Community Bank, County 10 launched and is building awareness in the region.

Communities Must Help Their Local Businesses Recover from the Pandemic

Coming out of the pandemic, communities are making a big difference in the rate of recovery experienced by local businesses through Community Card programs. The shop local movement is essential to avoid small business closings and revitalize Main Street. Community organizers have been instrumental in orchestrating Community Card Programs to make sure local dollars are spent locally. Employers, corporations, city governments, individuals and other community sponsors have also played an essential role in preserving local businesses by providing the funds necessary to launch, market and manage highly visible programs.

Pandemic-induced lockdowns caused a change in consumer behavior, and “online purchases of gift cards more than doubled in 2020.”² Furthermore, the gift card industry is expected to steadily grow even after the pandemic subsides. Experts forecast that, “The gift card market in the country will increase from US\$ 155 billion in 2020 to reach US\$ 239 billion by 2025.”³ While most of these cards are currently for large ecommerce sites or national brands, redirecting the funding for those cards towards local Community Cards will help Chambers of Commerce, Main Streets and Downtown Associations create positive change for the community’s valuable local businesses.

This paper describes many dedicated community organizers who have created effective campaigns that resulted in millions of dollars being injected into the US’s local economies. Communities such as Fenton, MI, gained city partnerships that allowed them to offer free bonus cards in a Buy One Get One campaign. Unique gifting programs such as the “Downtown Adventure” scavenger hunt in Dayton, OH, serve as a great way to connect community members with their local businesses while promoting and selling Community Cards at the same time. Other communities like County 10, WY, were able to recruit community sponsors such as the Wyoming Community Bank to help them cover fees and marketing costs for their Community Card.

In order to help small businesses recover from the pandemic, community members – residents, employers, professionals, schools, hospitals, and local government – need to work together. Yiftee has seen city offices, community sponsors and community members all coming together to support local businesses through their Community Card Programs. These programs not only have a positive impact on the survival of small businesses through COVID-19, but they also have the lasting impact of connecting people with their communities.

Getting Started

As a Community Organizer:

- Find out if your community has any community gift card programs that are already set up but underutilized
- Reach out to local small businesses to better understand their individual needs and concerns at the moment
- Work to not only simply encourage people to shop local, but create active and fun incentives that will benefit everyone

As a Sponsor (Employers, Professionals, Hospitals, Concerned Citizen Groups, etc.):

- Reach out to your local business organizations like Chambers of Commerce and Downtown Associations to see how you can contribute to any existing shop local campaigns
- Encourage your employers to support local-offer perks for doing so
- Suggest implementing a local Community Card program as a way to give back to your community. It is much easier to set up a card when there are sponsors lined up to buy them. The programs are paid for by small eDelivery fees on gift senders, which means they are free to organizers and local merchants.

As an Individual:

- You vote with your dollar, and every dollar counts!
- Go out to eat at local restaurants rather than chains and franchises
- Encourage your social circle to look local first
- Support your favorite small businesses with your voice. Leave positive reviews and recommend them to friends.

About Yiftee, Keep Local Dollars Local

Yiftee (Yiftee.com) serves more than 300 communities and 10,000 local businesses with simple, secure, point-of-sale system-independent eGift Cards that keep millions of local dollars local. The company works with Chambers of Commerce, Downtowns, Main Streets, Business Improvement Districts, city governments and other local organizations to create “Community Cards,” branded for the community and redeemable at 10s to 100s of local businesses. Organizations and individuals purchase them online and send them via email, text or print to friends, family and co-workers to support their local businesses.

There is no cost to the organizers or merchants for the program and it can be set up in just a few days. Yiftee also provides custom-branded cards for individual merchants, franchises, and chains.

More info at <https://yiftee.com/>, email: sales@yiftee.com, Twitter: @Yiftee, Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/yiftee/>.

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