



PHOTO BY AARON BREWER

Run this town: Maximizing the community impact of a running event

By Dylan Edgell

Special events can be a powerful tool to build community while attracting outsiders to experience what you have to offer. From 5Ks to marathons, running events have been growing in popularity, and runners are willing to spend serious money to participate in a race that they see value in. The 2018 annual report from RunSignUp, a popular resource for race directors, showed a 23.1-percent increase in the number of registrations from 2017 to 2018. According to Arkansas Runner, there were 97 races registered in Arkansas in 2019.

Chances are there is a running event in your community, and a few key strategies can maximize its impact. I recently ran the Summit 2 Summit half-marathon in Hot Springs, part of the city's annual Spa Running Festival. I wanted to learn more about how it has impacted Hot Springs and how communities might replicate their success.

The Spa Running Festival has been active for 38 years and was originally started by a group of business leaders looking to address the issue of low tourism in the fall by organizing a health fest and 10K race. The event has since evolved to include a 5K, expanded into

downtown and recently added the Summit 2 Summit half-marathon.

In the most recent Spa Running Festival, every race sold out including the 5K, 10K and half-marathon. This event attracted over 2,000 participants from 26 states (and one person from France) to spend a weekend experiencing Hot Springs. Many runners reported that they spent a few days in the area staying at a hotel, dining at local restaurants and shopping at local businesses.

"The Spa City Running Festival, in many ways, highlights what makes Hot Springs such a special place to visit," said Hot Springs Mayor Pat McCabe. "Hot Springs is the most popular tourist location in the state and is well known nationally and beyond because it, too, has offerings for all ages and interests."

Running events don't have to be large to have a positive community impact. Hot Springs' success can be replicated on a smaller scale, said Spa Running Festival Race Director Cindy Baswell.

"A 5K can be just as successful if you promote it properly." She offered some tips to ensure that the next running event in your community has an impact far beyond race day:

Build community support

To ensure that an event is successful and sustainable, races need the support of the entire community. This includes support from local government to close down busy intersections for race day, the support of local businesses to sponsor the race and to have activities for the runners after they finish, and the support of the broader community to find volunteers to help promote and work the event. Sponsorships are particularly important for the long-term sustainability of the event.

Show off your community

Lean into the unique aspects of your community and show off your community assets. This is an opportunity to give a captive audience a tour of your town, and it is important to make the most of it by highlighting the best parts of your community. Additionally, RaceSignUp recommends creating a distinctive brand for your race to communicate to runners that your community is unique and worth returning to. The Spa Running Festival was able to draw on the unique history of Hot Springs' bathhouses, the beauty of Hot Springs National Park and the downtown area to create a memorable experience that was unique to Hot Springs.

Keep the runner in mind

The most important piece of advice is to keep the runner in mind. According to Baswell, "It's all about the bling." Runners love the swag that comes with registration at many races, like unique shirts and signature race medals. RunSignUp also recommends broadening your base of potential participants by offering multiple race distances at different price points so that individuals can find a race that is right for them.

Running events are a unique opportunity for a community to show off their town in a healthy and positive way. These events have the potential to create a positive culture of health and well-being in your community, bring in new visitors and have an impact that lives beyond race day. Keeping these strategies in mind will help ensure that the next race in your community is more than just a good workout.

To learn more about upcoming running events in Arkansas or to promote your local event, go to arkansasrunner.com.



Dylan Edgell is the assistant director for the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) and an avid runner. Learn more about CCED at www.uca.edu/cced.

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