MULTI-USE SIDEWALK: THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL ROLE OF STREET FOOD VENDORS AND KIOSKS IN THE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Street food vendors and kiosks provide many social, economic and cultural benefits in hospitality zones. As drivers of foot traffic, vendors and kiosks increase the appeal and vitality of downtown districts’ sidewalks and public spaces. Mobile vending also provides an opportunity for entrepreneurial start-up and brand extension of existing retail businesses. This industry represents a significant economic impact and revenue generator for cities. In large metropolitan areas, vendors and kiosks can generate up to 1.7 billion dollars in yearly sales revenue. When well regulated and managed, vendors and kiosks can be a valuable asset and an integral component of the social experience of a city.

Definition of a Street Vendor vs. Kiosk

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<th>Street Vendor:</th>
<th>Kiosk:</th>
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<td>A mobile non-store retailer whose operations usually occur by cart or truck. A street vendor’s stock may include perishable goods, nonperishable merchandise, or both.</td>
<td>A permanent small structure with one or more open sides, or a standalone device with a computer screen. A kiosk vend merchandise, services or information. Kiosks may by automated or human-operated.</td>
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Characteristics of Both Street Vendors & Kiosks

- Prices for vending carts, trucks and kiosk structures vary on location and ownership options, but are much cheaper than their retail counterparts.
- The cost of a street vendor’s food cart runs the gamut from $500 to $40,000 depending on the needs of the vendor.
- Carts and kiosks can have the capacity for running water, stoves, refrigerators and fully equipped espresso machines.
- The relative low overhead, limited financial risk, and initial investment make kiosks and vendors an ideal start-up or retail expansion.

Social Benefits of Vendors and Kiosks in the Community

Street vendors and kiosks are familiar fixtures throughout many downtown areas. They serve as hubs for people to socialize, build community and explore new products and cultures. The presence of street vendors and kiosks have imbued a new vitality in hospitality zones by attracting crowds of people to walk in and around various areas of a city in a quest to find the perfect taco, cupcake or the best BBQ. These mobile businesses also serve to revitalize many slow, less traveled places in downtown areas by making pedestrian areas more vibrant and aesthetically interesting.

The identity of public spaces is formed in part by the presence of street vendors and kiosks. They serve as banners illustrating the different cultures that are integral components of a city, what languages are spoken, and what people like to do, eat, and buy. They form the first impression of a place for many visitors, and this first impression is an honest view of how people socialize, what is popular, and what makes the place they are visiting unique and special.

There is also more of an opportunity for building community relations with street vendors because of the one-on-one model.
“These street-food vendors do their version of marketing via Twitter; their sales (and customer support); And all of those tasks are conducted in the same voice. No transferring to another department. No repeating of information to another employee. No redundant data entry. No conflicting messages. Simple and straightforward, these single-person operations” (Jacobs).

Unexpected services, such as public safety, are also a staple of street vending. In March 2010 a New York City T-shirt vendor alerted the police to a suspicious vehicle in Times Square. The vehicle was later revealed to contain a failed bomb attempt. Due to their stationary position in the same location everyday, street vendors become intimately familiar with the area where they vend and the regular passersby. The possible partnership with law-enforcement highlights the collaborative opportunities for the future of policy making, and the possibility of more vibrant and synergetic downtown areas.

In addition to enhancing the safety and appeal of pedestrian pathways, kiosks and vendors also benefit first-time entrepreneurs, existing businesses and the economic viability of hospitality zones in a plethora of ways.

Economic Value
In larger metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and New York City, the combined yearly sales revenue of street vendors reached 1.7 billion dollars (Lindberg). Revenue from seasonal or temporary kiosks in the United States reached up to10 billion dollars in 1999, and the numbers are growing with the help of technological advancements (Ginsburg). During peak seasons (September-January), a single kiosk may yield $110,000 (Levin).

Street vendors can generate $250,000 a year or more in revenue depending on location, which is about average for a well-located food cart (Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs). Kiosks can gross up to $120,000 for seasonal products and $400,000 for year round offerings (Ginsburg).

Avenue for Entrepreneurship
Kiosks are an innovative way to rejuvenate or start-up sales for many entrepreneurs. One of the fastest growing segments of retail, street vendors and kiosks are characterized by low overhead costs, immediately available consumer bases, and a unique opportunity for first-time entrepreneurs. In many cases, street vending is the first step in the process of owning and operating a storefront for entrepreneurs who lack necessary resources such as time, manpower, or capital. The low cost of renting or maintaining food trucks, carts and trailers’ in comparison to permanent store-front retail make them a viable option for many start-ups. Small mobile businesses also benefit from a quick return on investments (Ginsburg).

The New Frontier of Business and Brand Extension
Small mobile businesses can serve as innovative outlets for existing shops and restaurants to attract clients to their permanent venues by enticing them to experience a selection of their full range of products or food options. Many existing businesses have turned to kiosks to market to and generate more customers by expanding their stores in another area of a downtown center and increase foot traffic to their storefront locations.

Kiosks also have the inherent quality of being a hotspot for retail because they are aesthetically interesting and naturally catch pedestrians’ attention. Their locations in heavily trafficked areas are perfect for impulse purchases, market testing new products, or an ideal place to sell a region’s artisan, handmade or culturally significant goods (Ginsburg). Many businesses like ProActive and Avon use kiosks to expand business and company recognition.

The New Image of Street Vendors and Kiosks: Gourmet, High Quality and Culturally Diverse
Food vendors, whether they are selling out of a cart or truck, are a classic go-to staple for a meal or snack for a broad range of communities. Typically, the offerings of a street food vendor are standard lunch fair: hot dogs, chips, sodas, burgers, and depending on the place, even taqueria style lunches or gyros and falafels. In metropolitan areas such as New York, the cultural diversity of the vendors can be seen through the wide array of food options such as Mexican, Indian, Brazilian, German, English, Egyptian and many other varieties too numerous to list (Prewitt).

Street food is usually cheap, easy to make and eat, mobile and usually caters to workers and even tourists in the lunch rush. Because of these characteristics, street food is sometimes perceived as lower quality than that which is prepared
in storefront restaurants. Yet this perception of street food and street food vendors is changing in part because of the new trends towards improving the integrity of street foods and higher standards of food quality.

Street food vendors have become proprietors of gourmet pop-up restaurants where culinary adventures in different cultures, styles and hybridizations of food can lead to meaningful social experiences. Vendors in several U.S. cities are combining high-quality ingredients and ethnic inspiration to offer haute cuisine curbside (Ruiz). Each Saturday, thousands of people gather at San Francisco’s farmers’ market to buy local ingredients, but they’re equally drawn by the gourmet street food. For example, Primavera, a Mexican-food vendor, serves tamales with non-genetically modified corn, among other dishes. RoliRoti offers ethically raised chicken rotisserie.

Legitimization of the Industry: The Vendy Awards

The Vendy Awards list the best street food nationwide and attest to the fact that the quality of ingredients, technical skill and ambience of street vendors has begun to rival traditional restaurants in profit and popularity. Consumers play a large and active role in the street food scene by seeking out street food in hospitality zones similar to the way they actively seek out new restaurants. Many of the innovative qualities of street vendors—whether it is innovative marketing or the product itself—speak to a variety of tastes—people across demographics flock to street food vendors for meals that are a delicious and feasible middle ground between cheap fast food and expensive sit down dinners.

According to Jason Perlow, founder of the online culinary forum eGullet, a few upscale vendors have elevated street food with finer, local, sustainable ingredients, and these models have appealed to chefs hesitant to sink millions of dollars into a high-concept restaurant with considerable overhead (Ruiz).

Examples of Innovative and Gourmet Street Food and Vendy Award Winners

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Description</th>
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<td>Minneapolis, Minnesota: Chef Shack</td>
<td>Stationed at the Mill City Farmers’ Market, Chef Shack serves bison burgers topped with homemade condiments. The truck-based restaurant uses local and seasonal ingredients in dishes like pulled-pork sandwiches, beef tongue tacos, and pulled pork nachos with corn salsa.</td>
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<td>New York, New York: Dessert Truck</td>
<td>Located near the New York University campus, Dessert Truck’s chef/proprietor Jerome Chang is a French Culinary Institute alum and former pastry sous-chef at Le Cirque.</td>
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<td>Mafa, Texas: The Food Shark Truck</td>
<td>The Food Shark truck specializes in Mediterranean fare with a Texas twist. Items include homemade hummus and falafel paired with crisp romaine lettuce. The signature dish is the Marfalafel, a falafel sandwich wrapped in a flour tortilla.</td>
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<td>Washington, D.C.: The Little Yellow Truck</td>
<td>Operating on the corner of 14th and L Streets NW by Andy and Young Kim, and dubbed ‘the little yellow cart’ by locals, the cart has no official name. The co-chefs serve chicken and beef teriyaki along with bulgogi, a barbecue dish that features marinated beef and vegetables.</td>
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<td>Anchorage, Alaska: Tia’s Gourmet Sausage</td>
<td>A street cart-based diner adjacent to the Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau, Tia’s offers Alaska Reindeer Sausage sandwiches.</td>
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<td>New York City, NY: The Dosa Man</td>
<td>Originally from Sri Lanka, Thirus Kumar makes dosas, stuffed potato crepes made vegan-style with rice and lentils. He goes through almost 60lbs of potatoes every day, and his menu items...</td>
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sell from $1 to $4 (Prewitt). His product’s appeal to healthy, vegetarian and vegan lifestyles.

A Cult Following: Marketing Power of Mobile Businesses

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have contributed greatly to street vendors’ customer base and revenue, as well as increasing foot traffic and advertising for downtown areas, shopping districts and other popular hubs. Sites such as findlafoodtrucks.com for the Los Angeles street food scene, or foodcartspotland.com for street vendors in Portland exist in cities throughout the US and Canada. The use of Twitter and Facebook have made many mobile businesses on the cutting edge of their industry and given the trend a cult following which is growing in numbers across broad demographics.

There are numerous online communities devoted to the street food trend. Many people follow their favorite vendors on Twitter and Facebook or word of mouth, but there are also countless internet communities on forums and specialized websites which follow, review and discuss vendors, identify locations and cuisine. Yelp.com, a consumer review site has a devoted street food section for cities such as Toronto, Los Angeles, Austin and San Francisco. Foodtrucktalk.com is a community that discusses the positive and negative aspects of being a food vendor or a street food consumer in almost all 50 states from Wisconsin to Arizona. The site reviews and highlights different cuisines, locations, vendors, problems or exemplary service every week.

Conclusion

Street vendors and kiosks are a practical option for first time entrepreneurs and businesses seeking to expand their operations and clientele. They offer a city a multitude of ways to showcase the culture, art and social opportunities which complement traditional businesses. Most importantly, street food vendors serve as centers for creating communities through food and socializing, and with suitable policy, this industry can be a viable option for any hospitality zone. For information on how cities can manage street vendor activity, see overview titled, “Policies and Legislation to Regulate Street Food Vendors and Kiosks in Hospitality Zones.”
Works Cited


