

The Corporation of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake

Information Report to Council

SUBJECT: ShopNOTL Update and Next Steps
DATE: 2023-02-21
REPORT #: CAO-23-012
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DEPARTMENT: CAO/Administration

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

ShopNOTL.ca, a Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL) Economic Development initiative, was developed to support the local business community. This website, separate from the Town's website, provides a comprehensive online Business Directory and acts as a one-stop-shop for residents and visitors to shop locally. ShopNOTL connects NOTL businesses and customers by showcasing the superb and diverse business community and providing a simple, direct link to local business websites and other pertinent contact information. This site also fosters the partnership between the Town and the business community, helping to re-stimulate the local economy post-COVID-19 by supporting and promoting all things local.

On February 4, 2022, the ShopNOTL site was launched. Within the first 30 days of the launch, 248 out of approximately 320 NOTL companies registered on ShopNOTL (78%). The total number of site visits within the same time frame totalled 2,300 visitors. The two-week campaign was intended to reach NOTL and Regional residents; however, as identified in the ShopNOTL google analytics report, the campaign reached a worldwide audience, including site visitors from the United States, India, the United Kingdom, China, Mexico and Ireland.

On July 11, 2022, the Town launched a second campaign. This campaign was intended to encourage residents and visitors to use ShopNOTL to learn about new businesses. The 3-week promotional campaign included social media, Bell Media, and GO Train advertising and relocating some ShopNOTL pole banners to new strategic locations.

Executive Summary

- While ShopNOTL was initially created as a "shop local" initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic, the initiative has evolved into an inclusive NOTL Business Directory.
 - Feedback from the business community has informed the upcoming evolution. Based on this feedback, the following updates will be made to the site:
 - A Name Change will be made
 - A Business-to-Business (B2B) Component will be added
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- The name of ShopNOTL will be changed to **ExperienceNOTL**. Staff are creating the new logo/branding and will begin the new marketing campaign for ExperienceNOTL in April 2023.
- In April 2023, the new Business-to-Business Component will also be added. This forum provides a private, easy-to-use online space for local businesses to foster communication on various business requests and topics of interest. The addition will help foster continued economic growth for NOTL businesses, the Town and the Region of Niagara by improving and creating local business connections and local business transactions.
- Moving forward, the NOTL Chamber of Commerce will assist in marketing the ExperienceNOTL site. Staff will work with the NOTL Chamber of Commerce to merge databases and add the Chamber logo to all members' listings. The Town will continue to maintain the database.
- Staff will track comparative data and monitor outcomes to ensure ExperienceNOTL remains an effective platform for local businesses.

Project Update and Discussion

This report aims to provide Town Council with an update concerning the future direction of ShopNOTL. These updates include:

1. A Site Name Change
2. A Business-to-Business (B2B) Component
3. Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber of Commerce / Tourism NOTL Partnership

1. Site Name Change

During the Tourism Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) P, the Project Facilitator gathered the following feedback related to ShopNOTL during company visits:

- "It will be nice to have an inclusive business directory for NOTL."
- "It's a good idea, and we are interested in seeing where it goes."
- "The name is misleading as it projects the site to be only for shopping."
- "The "shop local" program was started to encourage local shopping during COVID-19, which makes it less relevant now."

While ShopNOTL was originally a "shop local" initiative during the COVID pandemic, the vision has now transformed into an inclusive NOTL Business Directory.

Based on feedback from the business community, The Town is making a name change from ShopNOTL to ExperienceNOTL. Businesses have identified the restrictions associated with the word "Shop" and noted that the site provides many other experiences rather than just "shopping." Staff feels the word "Experience" better reflects the site's intent.

In the comfort of their home, office, or walking down the street, residents and visitors can search by category and discover all that NOTL has to offer. Promotional cards with a QR code displaying ExperienceNOTL will also be strategically placed in participating businesses so individuals can instantly, with the scan of a mobile device, have access to this inclusive business directory.

2. Business-to-Business (B2B) Component

As identified in a January 21, 2022, Information Report to Council, the original vision for Phase Two of the ShopNOTL initiative was to expand the platform to provide the local business

community with a Business to Business (B2B) forum, as suggested by the business community. This forum provides a private, easy-to-use online space for local businesses to foster communication on various business requests and topics of interest.

The B2B forum includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- An online repository for the Town to share brand guidelines, photography, videos, new activities or programs
- Search capabilities
- Promotional opportunities
- A space to collaborate on projects
- Opportunities to pursue/solicit potential vendors and sponsors and seek feedback/advice
- A space to provide updates or website links encouraging fellow business owners to look through services offered
- Personalization of content and experiences
- Opportunities to submit stories, photos, and videos to encourage the local business community

This new feature will foster continued economic growth for NOTL businesses, the Town and the Region of Niagara by improving and creating local business connections and local business transactions. Registration is required to enter the B2B portal and is restricted to businesses already listed on the ShopNOTL website. Town Staff will be responsible for approving registrations and content uploads.

3. Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber / Tourism NOTL Partnership

The NOTL Chamber of Commerce has expressed its support of ExperienceNOTL and agreed to assist in marketing the site. Moving forward, the Town and the NOTL Chamber of Commerce will market one inclusive NOTL business directory with Chamber members identified with the Chamber logo on their listing. The Town will continue to maintain the database with ongoing support from the NOTL Chamber of Commerce.

Project Schedule

- **March 2023:** Finalize the new logo/branding for the new site name
- **April 2023:** Launch Phase 2 - B2B Section and New Site Name
(Audience: Current ShopNOTL Businesses, Community Members)

Email Blast:

- Announce name change & why
- Announce new B2B platform (as noted above)
- Announce partnership with NOTL Chamber of Commerce
- Share marketing plans for 2023 (Spring/Summer Marketing Campaigns)
- Pitch businesses on promoting ExperienceNOTL by displaying brochures in business locations
- Pitch campaign to track how many customers are coming from ExperienceNOTL

Social Media:

- Three weeks, 1X per week

- Facebook, Instagram, Twitter

Media Release:

- Announce the new site name
- Announce a comprehensive Business Directory
- Announce promotion – mention ExperienceNOTL to merchants and receive a free gift (TBD)

** Staff will monitor registrations to determine future marketing campaigns.*

- **June 2023: Summer Marketing Campaign**
(Audience: Residents and Visitors)

Marketing Tactics:

- Social Media
- Town Website
- Radio & Newsprint
- Promotional Items

Budget

The cost associated with this next phase of the project is \$3,000. This amount includes adding the B2B Forum onto the platform, rebranding the logo to reflect the new name (ExperienceNOTL), and promotional giveaways. The total amount is being funded through the Niagara Region's contribution of \$15,000 towards the Town's Business Retention and Expansion Project (BR&E). The remaining contribution is allocated to cover the remaining costs associated with the BR&E Project.

Engagement

Engagement with the business community is ongoing through the BR&E company visits, including asking the following questions related to ShopNOTL:

1. Is your business registered on ShopNOTL?
2. Has your business benefited to date from ShopNOTL?
3. Is there anything you would like to suggest to make ShopNOTL work better for your business?

In summary, 90% of companies visited through the BR&E program are registered with ShopNOTL, with the remaining 10% signing up immediately after the visit. Based on feedback from most of the businesses, it has been challenging to determine if revenues have increased due to ShopNOTL. Moving forward, Staff will design a tracking system and measure results annually. Requesting a name change for ShopNOTL was a common theme during the discussions.

On January 10, 2023, Town Staff met with STAY NOTL's (formerly the NOTL Bed & Breakfast Association) Board of Directors and presented ShopNOTL and the proposed future direction. The intent was to garner support for the Town to market the platform as a service to their members whose guests are looking for places to eat, things to do, where to shop, and other general services they require. Additional follow-up is pending.

NEXT STEPS / CONCLUSION

Town Staff will change the name from ShopNOTL to **ExperienceNOTL**, create the new logo/branding and begin the marketing campaign in April 2023. Staff will work with the NOTL Chamber of Commerce to merge databases and add the Chamber logo to all members' listings.

Staff will continue tracking comparative data and monitoring outcomes to ensure ExperienceNOTL remains an effective platform for local businesses.

Staff will also continue to provide status updates to Council on the ExperienceNOTL initiative.