

Entry category (2,304 total word count)

The FrankGroup Award for Excellence in Community Engagement

Name of organisation submitting entry

Porirua City Council

Name of project

ChoctoberFest – empowering Porirua businesses

Project summary

When a city is home to 'New Zealand's Most Trusted of All Brands', the internationally recognised Whittaker's chocolate, it makes good sense to make the most of these bragging rights. Porirua City did this by creating an annual festival to support and empower local businesses, leveraging the public's existing love for Whittaker's.

Post covid, and navigating a challenging financial climate, the hospitality sector in Porirua was struggling. Locals would travel to Wellington or Kapiti for a good coffee or snack as the perception was that Porirua didn't have much to offer. We wanted to ensure the food and beverage sector was able to thrive – it employs many locals, and is a mechanism to build positive perceptions of Porirua as a food and beverage destination.

Leveraging one of New Zealand's most recognised brands, Whittaker's Chocolate, the Council created ChoctoberFest Porirua – a local festival celebrating all things chocolate. The goal was to help small businesses build on the success of an existing favourite, and establish Porirua as the home of chocolate.

ChoctoberFest runs each October. Local eateries compete in two categories (drinks and baked goods, all using Whittaker's chocolate), and customers rate entries via an online platform using unique codes.

The month-long festival attracts locals and visitors, aligning with the city's economic development goals to empower local businesses and position Porirua as a desirable destination.

Three years on, ChoctoberFest has been a huge success. In 2024, 20 businesses took part, netting \$131,000 for the local economy on sales of ChoctoberFest items alone. All businesses involved reported a significant increase in sales, and other businesses in the city also felt the boost of increased visitor numbers.



Whittaker's
SINCE 1896

porirucity

Strategic context

The level of need and the evidence base that demonstrated the need:

Porirua City's 2021 Destination Management Plan outlined the huge opportunity presented to the city by Whittaker's chocolate drawing in visitors to experience the world's chocolate capital. Whittaker's massive brand recognition, coupled with the sense of pride within the Porirua community, meant that we knew we would be onto a winner with ChoctoberFest.

We needed Whittaker's on board, so worked closely with them on how we planned to make this a successful initiative for the city, while respecting their brand and reputation.

The Porirua business community needed help. Hospitality businesses were hit hard by Covid, and the financial climate that has followed. Visitor numbers were down.

We knew there was a desire within the Porirua community to support local businesses through the success of our Love Local campaign that began during Covid. We wanted something that could build on that. We wanted to give something local to Porirua residents that would bring joy, build community spirit and pride in their city.

We also knew that Porirua residents are proud to have Whittaker's as part of the city, and are often asking for ways to celebrate that.



The anticipated outcomes and the linkage between the project and the outcomes (i.e. how was the project able to generate the expected outcomes:

Our desired outcome was a thriving business community – to increase revenue in the food and beverage sector from residents and out of town visitors, raise the profile of the cafes, bars and restaurants in Porirua, increase pride in our city's hospitality offering, and create a community of chocolate lovers talking about Porirua in a positive way.

These outcomes were met. In the most recent ChoctoberFest in 2024 we had 20 businesses take part, selling more than 13,000 baked treats and drinks over the month of October, with sales of these items alone pumping \$131,000 into Porirua's economy, as well as additional spends at the participating businesses, and others around the city.

In addition, ChoctoberFest got people talking. ChoctoberFest Facebook page now has 3,400 followers, has had over half a million views and reached 200,000 people. The Facebook Fan Club Group has had over a thousand people join with 300 posts made, and healthy chat and debate.

In 2024 we had 7130 Google Searches relating to ChoctoberFest.

Cafes told us they had some of their biggest sales weekends ever, during ChoctoberFest and reported lots of new customers, both local and from other parts of the region.



Laura Kiteley Top contributor

Omg exciting!!! 🥳🥳 every single one I tried deserves it in their own way. Thanks to all the businesses for putting this on for us and Thanks ChoctoberFest people for organising! Always love this event! Good Luck everyone 💎💎

18w Love Reply

3



Gorgeouss Goose Cakes

So cool to be a part of 💎

17w Love Reply Hide



The relationship to council's strategic direction:

One of Council's strategic priorities is to create thriving communities. This festival helps us achieve that for our business community, and for residents, positioning Porirua as a great place to live, work and raise a family.

Partnering with businesses in this way stimulates the economy, creates employment and provides positive experiences in Porirua.

The risks for the project and how they were mitigated:

Risk – businesses not seeing value in the proposition and don't participate. We visited businesses personally to talk to them about the benefits of being involved, and to work through any issues. We promised and delivered marketing support and business profiling.

Risk – Whittaker's not wanting to be associated with the initiative. Whittaker's is an international brand that is the most trusted in New Zealand. They could have their production facility located anywhere in New Zealand, but they continue to support Porirua by remaining here. ChoctoberFest gave Whittaker's a low-cost, low-effort initiative they could support that let them provide benefits back to the community they are part of. Following the success of the first year, Whittaker's embraced and contributed more in the subsequent years. The Whittaker's team has become more involved in the campaign, including running their own activations.

James Ardern, CEO Whittaker's, in an email in November 2022:

"We are all very impressed with the local buzz ChoctoberFest has created. So we would like to have discussions before Christmas (beginning of our budgeting for next year) regarding possibilities on how Whittaker's can participate/support to a greater level next year. We believe the ChoctoberFest has the momentum to grow each year which will be awesome for us all."

Risk – customers wouldn't show up. We ensured the businesses had good offerings at good prices, we marketed hard, and created an online community to generate hype and discussion.

Project Management

The key issues from the project plan – scope, timeframes, resources, and governance

A project plan was developed by the Communications and Marketing, and Economic Development teams and managed using a dedicated Trello Board to track campaign timelines and requirements, and all collateral that had to be designed and produced.

The idea first came about in August 2022, with the first ChoctoberFest in October that year. It has since become an annual event and we've built on the campaign with work beginning in June each year.

The concept came from our own teams, including the name (which we have safeguarded through copyright), and the majority of work is done inhouse including business liaison, comms and marketing, media and social media, web build, creative direction, content creation and photography. Due to the initial timeline and work required in 2022, an external design company developed the identifier and design assets.

What quality assurance systems were utilised

In partnership with Whittaker's we review all business entries to ensure a high standard and that Whittaker's products are showcased effectively and are in line with their brand values.

We used a step-by-step QA process for marketing to ensure we reached our target audiences with content that was aligned with our brand voice, original, engaging and persuasive, using keywords to optimise searches, and to ensure it was legally compliant and free from errors to protect our reputation and credibility. We regularly monitored impressions, clicks and engagement and reviewed the campaign performance while looking for customer feedback so we could identify where improvements could be made.

Relationship Management

Effective communication with hospitality businesses was critical to share our vision, get them excited from the outset, and to maximise opportunities throughout the project. This was done with face-to-face visits, regular emails and follow up phone calls. Multiple visits were critical to reach the busy business owners and managers, as well as checking in throughout the month to see what assistance they needed.

Enabling businesses had access to Whittaker's ingredients was also important. Council was able to facilitate the purchase and delivery of raw materials at a discounted rate which made it easier for businesses.

We also worked with other businesses to let them know about the campaign and ways they could leverage the extra visitors to Porirua during October, wider than just the ChoctoberFest businesses.

Effective communication was also critical with the Whittaker's team to ensure a successful collaboration.



The different communication tools used

We used a wide variety of tools – face-to-face, email, council social media (multiple platforms and pages), billboards and posters, website, newspaper and magazine ads, radio ads, radio social media and promos, activations, school newsletters (as the festival coincided with school holidays), promotions through elected member channels.

The different audiences the project engaged with

Audiences included internal council staff and elected members, Whittaker's, the participating businesses, wider business community, Porirua residents, potential visitors (driving distance, Wellington to Manawatu), community contacts.

Project Success

ChoctoberFest has become a highlight on the city's annual events calendar and anticipation is high in the lead up, among residents and visitors alike.

The results in 2024 show the success of ChoctoberFest. A total of 20 cafes, eateries and bars sold more than 13,000 baked treats and drinks, with those items alone pumping \$131,000 into Porirua's economy – as well as additional spends at the participating businesses, and others around the city.

Every venue that took part in ChoctoberFest 2024 who also took part in it last year, said there was a significant increase in business sales and foot traffic through the doors this year compared to last year. Having ChoctoberFest fall in the first two weeks of school holidays played a huge part in the success.

While \$131,000 was spent specifically on ChoctoberFest items, participating businesses reported instances of large groups coming in to try their drink or bake, then deciding to also order breakfast, lunch or dinner.

Local businesses that weren't part of ChoctoberFest also reported a very busy month, with a surge in customers from the increased numbers visiting Porirua for the festival.

Customers could choose to rate the ChoctoberFest products on offer and in all, 4,266 ratings were made. While 2,229 of the 4,266 votes cast were from Porirua, 717 were from Wellington, 163 from the Hutt Valley and 88 from Kāpiti, showing the promotion attracted people from around the region. Other visitors were from further afield, including Auckland, Christchurch, Waikato and Taranaki, and a handful from the USA, UK and Australia.

In 2024, approximately 500kg of Whittaker's chocolate was used in the creations sold during the month.

From a public perception front, the social media campaign was a success, engaging communities and exposing businesses. Numbers for these channels are highlighted earlier in this entry.

Success was measured through the boost to local businesses, meeting the desired outcome of the campaign, as well as positive publicity for the city as a whole.

Potential barriers were traversed, including working closely with Whittaker's to ensure appropriate use of their brand. The company welcomed being involved, due to their commitment to Porirua.

In addition to voting on entries, more than 3,000 people entered a competition to win a Whittaker's factory tour. Whittaker's CEO James Arden said they were rapt to be part of the month-long chocolate celebration.



The affordability barrier was addressed by helping businesses set a variety of price points, to avoid deterring visitors through high prices.

Lessons learnt from the project include starting early, not to underestimate the work involved and to allow plenty of time for businesses to plan. Other keys to success were to: plan well, communicate frequently, have big ideas, share your passion and others will believe, and even in challenging times people love a treat.

The festival is now BAU, to be delivered annually. The next challenges will be looking at how we can grow and add on to the festival, while still delivering it with a small council team.

A real key to success, and one that can be transferred to other councils, is to jump on what makes you unique. Whether it's wine in Marlborough, wild foods in Hokitika, or chocolate in Porirua, having something you can leverage that differs from other regions makes your festival, event or campaign stand out.

In Porirua we are lucky to have Whittaker's chocolate which people throughout New Zealand know and love. We would encourage councils to consider what is in your area that is special and that people love and will visit you to experience.

We'll leave final words on the success of ChoctoberFest to some of the small business community we set out to support and empower.

Matt – Urban Bake House

"ChoctoberFest has been a fantastic and beneficial event for Urban Bake House to be part of.

During the ChoctoberFest Bake Off period we noticed a boost in overall sales revenue, an increase in customer count and a heap of new customers through the door.

Staff engagement was also riding high, the Bakery was abuzz!

We couldn't be happier with the way it all went."

Georgia – Peppermill

"ChoctoberFest was a huge hit for us this year!

It was incredible seeing new faces in our cafe, some who had travelled into Porirua, just to try our offerings! We even had a lovely lady choose to spend her 80th birthday here, so she could have a JellyTastic Shake."

Yanah – Pepe's Cafe

"ChoctoberFest was an absolute blast. We were thrilled to be part of Porirua's ChoctoberFest, where we had the chance to share the unique island flavours of Samoa with our community.

It's all about creating connections through food.

We had so many new faces come in who hadn't heard of us which was really great for business."

