

# **Higher Ground Coffee House: One Part Successful Business and One Part Community House**

**Nicole Bell**

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Initially there was “no special sauce...the artists, musicians & visitors make it what it is.”

Scott Landman

Towards the end of Middle Street, near artists' lofts and a small gallery, the *Higher Ground Coffee House* offers the community a comfortable place to meet, to relax, and to connect to others. On first glance, the coffee house appears to be an unassuming place with just a few tables and chairs along the cobblestone street in warm weather, and a few select couches and armchairs and tables of various sizes inside for any weather. There is a counter where a variety of hot and cold beverages and snacks are sold and music plays quietly in the background. However, the strength of the coffee house lies in the subtleties of its design and the careful attendance of its creator.



The proprietor, Scott Landman, and his wife Mariclaire Hession, have spent over a year ensuring that *Higher Ground Coffee House* is a welcoming place where patrons feel they can sit to enjoy some peace and quiet, meet with friends or business associates, or check out the latest local artists in the rotating art exhibit and regular music performances. They pay close attention to detail, listen to the desires of their customers whether spoken or unspoken, and remain versatile. All of this leads to a space that immediately welcomes regulars and first-time visitors alike, inviting them to make themselves at home.

On the surface the coffee house appears to be like many others. *Higher Ground Coffee House* is anything but a simple café, however. Instead it is a carefully tended recipe for a community house and its chef, while knowing the recipe is a success, constantly seeks ways of improving it even further.

What are the main ingredients in their recipe for success? *Innovation, location, publicity, attention to detail, leadership, problem solving, partnerships, and replication.*

## INNOVATION



Scott modestly says that their success in creating a community house was accidental. While wandering Lowell one day in search of a quiet place to sit and have a cup of coffee after being laid off from a high tech job, he realized that none of the places in Lowell offered what he was looking for: a quiet place where he could comfortably sit on his own or meet up with friends, where he could hear some poetry or local musicians, and where he could enjoy himself without alcohol and smoke. He needed income and wanted to work in a place he truly enjoyed. Thus began the planning for and establishment of the *Higher Ground Coffee House*: the recipe was begun!

In speaking with Scott, it is apparent that his success is not as accidental as he claims, but rather is the result of careful planning, great attention to detail, and his ability to listen well and remain versatile from the moment of conception to the final product. Following is a list of the most important ingredients contributing to his success. Each ingredient is described not only in terms of planning and managing a coffee house, but more importantly in terms of creating a successful community house where a sense of community and linkages among community members are strong. While the target population and type of final product may differ, the key ingredients should remain constant in any venture intended to create a business where the community feels a sense of belonging and empowerment from the success of the business.

### MAIN INGREDIENT #1: LOCATION



Scott knew that location was very important if his business was to be a success and decided that it needed to be located “in the core” of Lowell. He found a number of possible spaces to rent just outside of the center, but was dissatisfied because he really wanted a location within walking distance of the artists’ lofts and main tourist area. Both groups he felt would benefit from the type of space he was creating. A space that he believed was perfect fell through, but he continued searching, letting everyone he spoke to know exactly what his requirements were. Scott spoke to people at City Hall, other business owners in the area he desired, as well as friends in Lowell. Eventually his networking was a success as the owner of the space he had initially sought called him to say that a space was open for lease next door. The building is close to his target groups and other destinations of his target

groups, such as restaurants and galleries. In addition the space offers a wide open area in an historic building that he was able to modify to his needs.

## MAIN INGREDIENT #2: PUBLICITY



The long search for space served a second purpose, though not an originally intended one- publicity. Scott had spoken to so many people in his search for the perfect space that he had also begun to publicize his idea and create interest and even a buzz throughout Lowell. He continued to talk to everyone he met about his coffee house, passionately explaining the key features and his hopes and dreams for it, keeping interest alive and inviting people to come visit when he opened. Once they came, he said they spread the word to friends and business associates.

Reluctant to rely upon one method of publicity, Scott also publicized in local newspapers and said that there were several articles that were very positive, which increased the number of first-time visitors. He also hung a bright banner for visibility above the entrance to the coffee house once it opened.

All together, the publicity was a great success and instead of the slow increase in customers that Scott expected, the number of customers grew quickly and continues to increase as people tell friends and associates about the *Higher Ground Coffee House*.

## SEASONING: ATTENTION TO DETAIL



Of course, if publicity was great but the product offered by *Higher Ground Coffee House* was less than expected, the number of customers at the community house would not continue to increase as it has. After spending time at *Higher Ground* and speaking with Scott, it is apparent that he attends to each detail as if it is of the utmost importance. The effect is that customers feel their needs and desires are anticipated and that they are in a place of comfort and familiarity rather than a business. There are two ways in which this attention to detail is especially important.

## Research

Before establishing a coffee house, Scott spent many hours in coffee houses across the country and attributes part of his success to his attempts to establish a place that has all the strengths of the cafés he visited without their weaknesses. To that end, the colors throughout *Higher Ground Coffee House* are warm, inviting, and comforting; the furniture is versatile so that individuals are comfortable by themselves, but groups can also be accommodated.

Of special import to Scott is that the overall space is divided naturally by the arrangement of the furniture to be separate spaces. He pointed out that the corner stage is raised so that performers feel they are the focus of the attention, but when it is not in use patrons at small tables do not feel they are on display. Speakers are arranged near the stage and in the main area of the coffee house, but not in the alcove off to one side or in the back, so that those who wish for a quieter atmosphere are able to find spots suitable to them, and lights are also dimmer in some areas than others. While most of the furniture consists of small tables that can be separated or pushed together, there are also a few arm chairs, and one large table Scott refers to as the “community table” where numerous people can gather around either informally to socialize or more formally to work together on a project. Scott said that versatility is very important in order to serve the large portion of the community that he links together at *Higher Ground* and that his time in various coffee houses taught him some of the best ways to accomplish that in his business.



In addition, Scott attends to daily details, such as ensuring that the newspapers that are out for customers are always the most current issues, and that music is appropriate for the time of day without jarring a morning patron awake or soothing an evening patron into sleep.

During our interview, Scott’s eyes constantly flicked across the room, checking on customers, pausing to assess the comfort of one before he excused himself to ask if a business man working on his laptop needed more light or if the students in the alcove needed anything, wiping a table with crumbs and neatening a newspaper before



coming back to sit with me. He greeted many regulars by name, and greeted everyone with a smile regardless of whether they were a customer, were delivering an order, or wandered in looking lost. When asked about his constant

appearance of contentment, Scott answered that regardless of his mood, he always puts the needs of his patrons first and believes that is the best way to run a successful business or community house.

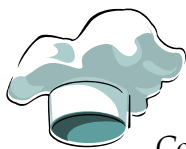
### **Sustainability**

While many of the details mentioned above will help ensure the success of *Higher Ground Coffee House*, Scott said that he also pays attention to the comments and questions of customers, both first-time and regular, to determine if changes are needed to optimize the community that he attracts and the sense of community he attempts to create. An example is that several people asked if he serves lunch. Instead of simply stating that he does not, Scott asked what they were specifically interested in and began to offer some small lunch items with the intention of broadening the selection over time to include a variety of soups, sandwiches, and salads. He said that he already increased the selection of baked goods and snacks to accommodate interests and to involve the community that frequents *Higher Ground*; he feels this is their community house and they should feel empowered to initiate change and make *Higher Ground* feel like their own.

An important aspect of empowering the community at *Higher Ground* is trust. Scott said that he trusts his customers and, at their suggestion, began leaving cups within easy reach so they can get their own coffee when he is at the outside tables or engaged with another patron. He said that many regulars get their own coffee and simply leave their money on the counter for him. After a year of business, he feels that the trust he and the community have in each other is a very important ingredient in the success of *Higher Ground Coffee House* as a community house.



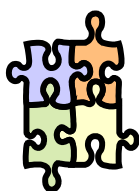
### **SOUS CHEFS: NEW LEADERSHIP**



Trust is also important with the employees Scott has hired. He said that while he and Mariclaire were both resistant to the idea of being “bosses,” they knew they could not be at *Higher Ground Coffee House* all of the time. They do both work there nearly every day, but they knew they also needed to hire staff that they could trust to run

*Higher Ground* like it is their own. Scott said that he feels that he treats “retail as theater” and that when he leaves at the end of the day and an employee takes over, that he is also passing along the show. For this to be a success he needs to trust them to run the Coffee House as if they were the customers and to ensure everything is the quality and way they would want it. He said he has been very lucky with the staff he has hired and that they are all cheerful people who treat all customers well. In fact, several employees spend free time at *Higher Ground* relaxing with friends and enjoying the recipe they are helping to perfect.

### WHEN THE RECIPE GOES WRONG: PROBLEM SOLVING



While Scott’s innovation, choice of location, publicity, attention to detail, research, trust, and leadership style all facilitated a smooth beginning for *Higher Ground Coffee House* with a clear path for the future, there were rough patches along the way. He said the first challenge, after the long search for an appropriate location, was to learn the financial and construction sides of their project, because neither he nor his wife had ever encountered them before and without them their aspirations would remain unfinished and unsuccessful. However, far from letting difficulties stop them, Scott and Mariclaire faced the challenges with persistence, learned all they could about them, and overcame them to continue on to success.

### GARNISH: PARTNERSHIP



Due to the type of license Scott obtained for *Higher Ground*, he could not pay performers or charge artists to hang their works, so he developed a plan based upon ideas from other coffee houses he had frequented that created a partnership between him and his wife and the artists and musicians. He arranged for artists to hang their works for free in exchange for giving him and Mariclaire one piece of the artist’s choice at the end of the rotation. This allows the artists to have exposure and a means of selling their creations without high initial costs, while Scott and Mariclaire have been able to add to their personal art collection. He said that since they first opened he has not had to recruit artists and has had a steady rotation with displayed works successfully selling for as much as \$2,000.

Scott said that he has a similar arrangement with musicians who, while they know they can not be paid, know that the space set aside for them on the stage is

prominent for the venue and that they will be performing for a welcoming crowd in a nice place and will gain exposure. He said that he has many CDs of the musicians who have performed there and from others who hope to perform there in the future, and that he plays them, which gives the aspiring musicians additional exposure. Scott said interest has been steady and several performances have attracted fifty to sixty people.

### SHARING THE RECIPE: REPLICATION

Can the principles and success of *Higher Ground Coffee House* be replicated to other coffee houses and further to other establishments that seek to both eke out an income and create linkages and a sense of community in their locale? I believe the answer is yes.

Currently, Scott and Mariclaire are working to open a second coffee house on the campus of University of Massachusetts, Lowell. They are seeking to use the principles from their first venture in the initial establishment of the coffee house, but will assess the interests and desires of the college students and staff as they tweak the recipe for its new locale. They know this is a different community than the one they currently serve in “the core” of Lowell, but feel the same attention to detail, problem solving, partnership, and leadership will have the same effect and produce a community house that reflects the overall personality of the campus community.



Scott also said that he thinks the same principles can be used in many businesses to empower the customers, create linkages, and create a sense of community. The important thing is to place yourself in the customers’ shoes before beginning the project by researching, while establishing the project by listening to the opinion of those in the community, and every day of the project through attention to detail and trust. Add a bit of versatility and the willingness to partner with others and the result tastes just right!

### RECIPE BOOK: RELATED INFORMATION

More information on the Higher Ground Coffee House is available at <http://www.lowellcoffeehouse.com/index.htm> or by calling 978-453-4007.

Higher Ground is currently open Monday - Friday 7 AM to 11 PM Saturday 8 AM to 12 PM Sunday 8 AM to 10 PM at 194 Middle Street, Lowell, MA 01852.

More information regarding community building is available from the following two books:

Dalton, J.H., Elias, M.J., & Wandersman, A. (2001). *Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomas Learning.

Mattessich, P. & Monsey B. (1997). *Community building: What makes it work*. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H Wilder Foundation.

## **Downtown's Newest Brew**

By RITA SAVARD

LOWELL Beatnicks wearing black turtlenecks and reciting poetry may be one image the phrase "coffee house" conjures. But for Lowell couple Mariclaire Hession and Scott Landman, a place where memories are made in a "homey" atmosphere is what comes to mind.

Through the doorway of the historic brick building at 194 Middle St., jazz rhythms subtly float on air and soft lighting washes a warm glow over sage, terra cotta and mustard-colored walls. Every now and then, the cappuccino maker begins to whirl and churn over the humming of customers' conversations as they sprawl out on cushy red armchairs, clutching coffee cups.

"Warm and inviting," said Hession, describing the mood she wants to project at the Higher Ground coffee house, which opened after Thanksgiving. "I want people to feel they can make a second home here." In an area large enough to seat 49 people, and that Hession says has a "Parisian bistro feel without being too stuffy," different sections of the room take on new shapes from open spaces to cozy nooks.

"The original design was to have a number of spaces inside one large space," Landman says, "all accessible to each other."

In the most central spot, an antique church pew stands beside a large social table, surrounded by smaller cafe-style tables. Hession imagines that when people walk in the door, the first place their eyes will travel to is the smallest yellow space at the farthest end of the room.

"It's our little living room," she says.

The couple plan to use the stage at the front of the room in a number of ways, including acoustic performances on weekends. And every two months, new artwork will be showcased on the walls from local artists.

Then there's the coffee, of course.

Whether the java junkie's concern is full flavor or a quick jolt, Higher Ground serves up fresh brews daily from lighter roasts to espresso, a variety of tea and baked goods.

Besides having "the best" coffee, what the couple want most is to create a sense of community, where people can come to read, relax and play games alone or among friends.

"After a certain time of day, there's no place to go downtown that isn't a restaurant or a bar," Hession says. "It's a huge need to fill and people will respond to that."

Hession and Landman know starting a new business in hard economic times is reason for concern, but both believe the coffee house's "uniqueness" will make it a city staple.

"I think people will just feel that it fits," Hession says. "I know some of my best memories are hanging out with friends over a cup of coffee."

Higher Ground is open Monday through Thursday, 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.; and Saturday and Sunday, 8 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Retrieved November 13, 2003 from

<http://www.lowellcentercity.org/articles/highground1.html>

## **"Spring Thaw" in Lowell, MA**

Written on March 13, 2003 03:03 PM

If you happen to be in Lowell, MA on March 14 at 7pm, make sure you stop by Higher Ground Coffee House to check out the work of my friend and displaced Cowlander in an exhibition called "Spring Thaw".

*With a goal of creating community within its four walls, Higher Ground has merged coffee house with artist venue to create a truly unique gathering place right in downtown Lowell. Over the past months the coffee house has sponsored a series of exhibits all centered around showcasing the works of emerging artists from the local area -- ranging from stage performances to art exhibits.*

*Annalisa Oswald is a writer and painter working across mediums -- from online design and writing, to abstract acrylics and oils. Her current works focus on visual conversations where titles and images interact to paint a story or emotion.*

Retrieved November 13, 2003 from

<http://www.naladahc.com/mt/archives/journal/001145.html>