

Our Outer Sunset Businesses

Understanding Challenges
and Surfacing Opportunities

Marie Mika and Outer Sunset Neighbors



Context

Background

The Outer Sunset Neighbors organization wants to better know our small business owners so we, and the city, can help them thrive.



Study Goals

We wanted to learn about

- how our local businesses came to be
- the owners' challenges, surprises, and successes
- what might be unique about being a small business owner in the Outer Sunset
- opportunities to better support them

Participants and Methods

We spoke to 14 small business owners who opened their business within the past five(ish) years in their shops and restaurants.

The majority of businesses are food/beverage-focused; others are retail (records and books), and service-oriented (floral design, office supplies/shipping services).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual business owners that lasted from fifteen minutes to over an hour.

A one-hour focus group was conducted with most of the participants to dive deeper into emergent themes.

Executive Summary

Our Outer Sunset business owners live in the neighborhood, close to their businesses, and have skin in the game. Their love for and dedication to the community are priceless resources for our city leaders and neighborhood organizers in the effort to foster vibrant small businesses and accelerate the ascent of our thriving neighborhood.

Our participants named several circumstances and challenges that they face, some specific to being located in the Outer Sunset. The most prevalent themes related to bureaucratic red tape and being perpetually surprised by additional criteria to meet, with little assistance to meet them. Others included challenges from SFMTA/MUNI, and generally a lack of any recognition or support from City Hall.

Almost all of our business owners stated that they had tremendous support from their “community” - meaning a diffuse base of people who support and patronize their businesses. However, many had experienced challenges, especially when opening their businesses, from proximate “neighbors”. An opportunity exists to help smooth and facilitate positive relationships with business neighbors.

A minority of participants stated that they had received substantive assistance or support from an existing local business association. An opportunity exists to amplify the efficacy of these organizations.

Main Findings



The Outer Sunset is a vibe

More California than San Francisco, the Outer Sunset has a unique vibe all its own. The briny ocean air, hazy sunsets, surfers, and quiet residential streets distinguish us from other well-known San Francisco neighborhoods with distinct characters.

Our business owners want the city to help crisply define our neighborhood identity and leverage it as an asset to strengthen our sense of shared community and to draw other San Franciscans — and ideally tourists — to our neighborhood as well.



The Outer Sunset is in transition

There are new families in the neighborhood who have money to spend on new and different kinds of businesses.

There are also long-time residents and legacy shops.

Our new business owners want to successfully navigate the sometimes challenging line of pleasing the longer-term residents, yet meeting the wants and needs of the new wave.

"You know, it's a changing neighborhood. It's always been a changing neighborhood. And right now it's kind of interesting to try to balance what's been here for 75 years versus what's coming in new, the newer families that are coming into the neighborhood and how the demographics and diversity are changing a bit — trying to manage all that, and keep everything happening.

Change is hard, and there are paradigm shifts in the neighborhood.

We're trying to adapt to everyone who wants to keep the neighborhood like it was, which we want. But also add new things that can help." – Doug, Underdogs Too



The Outer Sunset is rising

Both [local](#) and [national](#) newspapers have described the Outer Sunset as “thriving.”

With a grid layout, public transportation, and bordered by world-class parks we have the potential for a new urbanist’s dream, a “15-minute city.”

Our business owners want to seize the moment and the momentum of our ascendant neighborhood. [Per SFGate:](#)

“Until the 20th century, the Outer Sunset, previously known as Outside Lands, was mostly sand dunes, largely untouched except by San Francisco’s fog and early homesteaders and squatters. Today it’s home to pastel bungalows, expansive windswept parks, artisan finds, delicious food and a surfer vibe that’s uniquely San Francisco.”

CALIFORNIA TODAY

While Downtown Flounders, This San Francisco Neighborhood Is Thriving

The Outer Sunset’s success reflects how some cities have evolved during the pandemic.

 Give this article  



By **Claire Fahy**
Reporting from San Francisco

June 9, 2023



Young families have gravitated to the Outer Sunset neighborhood as remote work has negated the need for long commutes. Michael Macor/San Francisco Chronicle, via Associated Press

The succulent-adorned parklet outside of Hook Fish was filled on a recent Friday afternoon with customers enjoying a late lunch of \$17 burritos with carrot hot sauce. Shoppers perused the racks at

Our Outer Sunset merchants live here and are invested in our community

Almost all of our business owners live in the Outer Sunset, often in very close proximity to their businesses.

In their own words, they love the Outer Sunset and wouldn't want to live or own a business anywhere else in the city.

Most of them opened their business with the explicit aim of fostering a sense of community, connecting local residents and organizations, and giving back to the neighborhood.

While the Outer Sunset may have an enviable designed and natural environment, our business owners are the heart and soul of the neighborhood, making and facilitating the human connections residents new and old are here for.



Laura and Colin of Damn Fine Pizza want their restaurant to be a vital community hub

Showing love for the Outer Sunset

"At the time, I was living here. Now I'm south (Montara) and I love the Outer Sunset. I love the people here. It doesn't have the formality of the Mission, for example, and it's very neighborhood-based which I really like. So it hit all those boxes. And at least for me, I didn't want to start a business like this anywhere that I didn't really like being. And I love being here." **Ben, Tunnel Records**

"I wouldn't really live anywhere else in the city other than here. So that's part of my passion. I've lived here since I moved here about 20 years ago, so I've been in the Outer Sunset for a long time. Yeah, I wouldn't do it anywhere else." **Eddie, Avenues**

"Michael and Lauren - their family is here in the Sunset, they live right on Lawton. If you go to our Lawton Street location they live two houses over. So I think they just really wanted to bring a strong community where they are already are." **Brittany, Manager, Andytown**

Fostering and giving back to the community

Poppy lives close by and only wanted to buy a business in the neighborhood where they live. It was an existing business that they were lucky to find and that worked out. "It's all about being part of the community, like Cheers" (where everybody knows your name). **Poppy, Offix Edge**

"We do a farmer's market out at Lawton (pop-up farmers market at the store during the summer). So we work with local farmers in the area. And we give them a space to advertise and also to just do business. Other than that we do small things. In the works right now, for this location, we're going to be coordinating with the San Francisco Fire Department. We're just trying to build awareness for mental health, for our first responders. Working with them here so that they can give out information about resources and raise awareness that even our first responders need mental health care. In the past we've done a lot of pop-ups, even with small businesses that used to be alumni here; we've definitely helped them. I just feel like Andytown is really good at being a platform for other small startups." **Brittany, Manager, Andytown**

"I felt like we were in these bad political times and I just felt like, you know, the most important thing right now is this community and we need more options out here, places for people to come together. I used to be involved in coffee shops. And I really missed seeing people every day, and that's a place where your community does come together and you get to see people consistently.

And so I just felt like we needed more places that would provide that. And in a comfortable setting as well. So I felt like, okay, we have the ability to do this, and I feel this way, then **I'm looking around like, who's going to do this? And I'm like, okay, it's us.** You know, if not me, then who, right?

So we felt like that was like a good sign. I felt like that was a little internal push just to really to get out there and just to do more the next day, right? Be able to do a little more and having a place that's open to the public lets you do that.

Laura, Damn Fine, on opening the business to serve a community need



At Sealevel, Jeana has designed her artist workshop and community gathering space to feel comfortable and welcoming to all.



Specific challenges and opportunities



Ben, Tunnel Records

The Outer Sunset presents many unique circumstances and challenges

When asked, “Are there any unique circumstances that small business owners face in the Outer Sunset relative to the other neighborhoods in San Francisco?” the responses ranged from bureaucratic hurdles and red tape to the vicissitudes of our unique weather patterns. The main themes were ever-changing rules and regulations, curveballs or challenges from SFMTA/MUNI, and a lack of any help or affirmation from the city.

“The inability to be flexible with zoning is problematic.”

“(The city is) always giving us different bureaucratic hurdles to clear. Like handicap requirements, which of course you do, but it just takes money out of your pocket. There's a new requirement for entrances. And we have to do the survey and then potentially retrofit our entrance, and at some point it's just money out of your pocket that could be spent on other things.”

“For the city of San Francisco, it seems, for many years, the Sunset, we just kind of did our own thing for our own neighborhood. But for whatever reason, they're paying attention to us (now) – and not in the good way. The good way would be providing some resources to us but now they're trying to crack down on every little regulation and they're treating us almost like how you would treat the Financial District or the Marina or North Beach – and that relates to transit and parking and fees and regulations.”

What went right when opening new businesses?

Mainly “support” from the neighborhood, or community

When asked what went well when opening their businesses, most of our participants named support from their community — whether from surrounding merchants or an enthusiastic customer base. This was mainly attributed to pre-existing connections and proactive networking. Few if any other factors were mentioned regarding “what went well.”

“The neighborhood did support us. When we opened our doors, we didn't even announce it. We just opened our door one day and it was packed. Too packed, LOL. So, that was good... And at that time, hiring the staff was easy, most of our staff is local. To have staffing that was people who live in the neighborhood was the goal. So those are pretty good things.” [Doug, Underdogs Too](#)

“We had great support initially, you know. We spent a fair amount of money on inventory and infrastructure and immediately had a pretty consistent business on our hands. I had lived in the Sunset for a long time. And so I knew a lot of people, which helped to have kind of a built-in clientele. Other surrounding merchants were a big help. Andytown and Riptide were really supportive.” [Ben, Tunnel Records](#)

“I think the networking for kind of creating a cool scene... like all of our parties went pretty well. We connected with AwayCo and they connected us with Stuff Magazine and that got us a lot of press with the surf community. We got published pretty early on in one of these coffee magazines, which was cool. And when they showcased the Outer Sunset we were also part of it.” [Eddie, Avenues](#)



Like many participants, Kathryn (of Black Bird Bookstore) stated that lack of cohesion, identity, or a central hub is a major challenge facing Outer Sunset businesses:

"I think one thing that's unique is that we don't have one hub that is the Outer Sunset, right? We are scattered businesses on these commercial corridors and it's not even every single corridor.

And so we're all kind of spread apart. When people come out here they can't - it's not walkable, right? Unless you endeavor to walk the Great Highway and make it an exercise day.

So we're all kind of lumped together - but how do we market ourselves to tourists with this challenge?

In the past, Three Fish Studios made a beautiful map of the Outer Sunset with all the businesses for tourists so that they can drive around to, or make sure that they hit, all the spots.

I think that that's our greatest challenge right now."

Community is supportive; neighbors can be challenging

While many business owners spoke of considerable community support for their businesses, “neighbors” — those who live in close proximity to the business — can be another matter entirely. Several spoke of direct opposition from neighbors — particularly when opening their businesses, or trying to establish outside seating. This often caused lengthy and costly delays.

“When we first opened up this location the biggest issue was having the neighborhood have our back on the backyard. I think a lot of neighbors weren't too happy about the backyard situation because they thought it was going to be rowdy, but there is a bar next door so I didn't really understand what the issue was with that.” **Brittany, Andytown**

“I think, just in general, we are a different kind of San Francisco over here, a different neighborhood. We want to have the ability to reach the neighbors and to speak with them. We would like a forum to reach the neighborhood — not on Yelp, Nextdoor, etc. I want to fix the problems, not read a bunch of things (i.e., Nextdoor). I want the neighborhood to be comfortable to just call me directly. Also, when we do things like parklets I don't think the first time they (the neighbors/residents) should hear about what we're doing is from an MTA posting. Currently, there's not a good way for us to do that — besides direct mailing, which is very expensive. So, just to have forums that can reach out when you're trying to form a new business or have a new initiative would be such a great thing.” **Doug, Underdogs Too**



Several of our business owners stated that they were still feeling the impact of the pandemic, such as Mike of Beach'n and Judahlicious:

"The pandemic is "over". But it's still not. It changed a lot of things and it changed the way a lot of people like go out.

It may be due to a number of factors. That there has been somewhat of an exodus from the city since the pandemic hit. A lot of people moved out. And schools, like SF State - we used to rely on a lot of students.

And the pandemic also changed how a lot of people work. A lot of people are working from home, so a lot of people who would normally come into the city and would normally come here are just working at home now.

We just have to keep going and hope it gets back to the way it was."

There is considerable opportunity to amplify the efficacy of our existing business organizations

When asked, "Did you work with any Outer Sunset organizations while you were opening your business, or since it has opened?" there was some awareness of existing organizations, mostly on the Taraval corridor (Albert Chow/POPS, Angie Petitt/Sunset Mercantile), and some mention of active help from these groups. There was very little awareness among those along Irving and Judah.

There is considerable opportunity to amplify the efficacy of Outer Sunset business organizations – and our small business owners are eager for the recognition and assistance.

"No. I receive the POPS meeting agenda and minutes but it is mostly focused on Taraval. In the beginning I was keen to create a Noriega St business association but the pandemic stopped those efforts." **Poppy, Offix Edge**

"We really haven't. We've been receptive to all the merchants associations and stuff, but the street fairs and all that want money out of pocket to do stuff, you know, to have a booth. And we don't really need a booth. We have a storefront. Because there's not really reason for me to spend money, you know. We don't have a problem getting our name out in the Outer Sunset.
Ben, Tunnel Records

"Not super directly, like POPS....we might have done something there, may have done some beach cleanups here and there... We were going to do a block party with SurfRider, and San Franpsycho... but it got shut down for some reason. (Anyone else?) I mean... Outer Sunset Merchants Association, he came by a few times... Yeah, not much." **Eddie, Avenues**

"Definitely. So definitely POPS. We were a member of POPS even before we opened. And before we opened we were just trying to meet everyone. And when the MTA project, the L Taraval project (happened) we got a lot of groups involved to try to change it and we did make some change – not as much as anyone wanted in the neighborhood. But we at least made some change, and that was POPS. But other than that, not a lot about the groups. A lot of individuals, businesses and residents, but nothing, nothing at the organized group." **Doug, Underdogs Too**

A wealth of opportunities to explore

Through these conversations our small business owners have surfaced many avenues for assistance and innovation to further discuss.

A wide range of suggestions were made, regarding help strengthening neighborhood (and microhood) identity, navigating complex bureaucracy, and increasing community cohesion and business collaboration, to name a few.

The major conceptual buckets for improvements and solutions included (details on following slide):

Assistance with navigating bureaucracy

Amending current laws that stifle businesses

Improved channels of communication

Help with marketing and promotion

Improved streetscapes

Creating a cohesive identity and connective tissue for the Sunset (“One Sunset”)

Assist with navigating bureaucracy

Help businesses navigate bureaucracy and red tape
Help businesses know of and write effective grants

Amend current laws that stifle businesses

Make commercial corridor zoning more flexible
Make it easier to get funding and permits for tenant improvements
Enforce and increase empty commercial space fees to help drive rents down

Improve channels of communication

Communicate effectively with neighbors, especially when problems arise or changes are being made to a business, i.e, adding seating or parklets
Better and more proactive communication from MUNI/SFMTA
Create a single newsletter or publication of some kind to promote businesses/activities to Sunset residents
Create a communication hub for merchants to cross-promote, inform, and assist each other, i.e., when grants are available

Help with marketing and promotion

Help businesses to advertise and promote themselves, to “get the word out”
Encourage and facilitate events: pop-ups, markets, street fairs
Promote the Sunset as a destination

Improve streetscapes

Mitigate “urban blight” — homelessness, graffiti, crime, neglected green spaces
Create the infrastructure that facilitates “hanging out” and “community:” plants, benches, string lights on streets, bulletin boards, aesthetically optimized storefronts... in other words, [“placemaking”](#)

Create a cohesive identity and connective tissue for the Sunset (“One Sunset”)

Define the Sunset as a distinct and cohesive neighborhood
Facilitate collaboration among businesses
Create connective tissue among Outer Sunset business corridors



White Cap successfully partnered with Smokin' D's BBQ in their parklet space for a traditional 4th of July cookout.

What other collaborations can be fostered among Outer Sunset and other businesses - pop up vendors, food trucks, street fairs...?

Next Steps

The conversations that informed this report are the first step in a concerted and long-term effort among many invested stakeholders to elevate our Outer Sunset small business owners – and, by extension, the Outer Sunset neighborhood.

The immediate next step is a “One Sunset” retreat, including Supervisor Engardio’s office, Outer Sunset Neighbors, and many other invested groups, including merchant and mercantile associations.

There is also considerable forward-looking energy for a new, Outer-Sunset-specific merchant association.

We will keep our Outer Sunset merchants informed of progress and developments as they evolve.

Thank you to everyone who participated in this work.

Appendices



A note on qualitative methods/reporting

'All': The issue impacted every participant.

'Almost all' or 'A large majority': The issue impacted all participants except for a few outliers. As a guideline, this would impact about 90–99% of participants.

'Most', 'Many' or 'Majority': The issue impacted a majority. As a guideline, this would impact about 55%–90% of participants.

'About Half': As a guideline, this would impact about 45%–55% of participants.

'Some' or 'Several': The issue impacted a minority. As a guideline, this would impact about 20–45% of participants.

'Few': The issue did not impact any participants except for a few outliers. As a guideline, this would impact about 1–20% of participants.

'None': This issue did not impact any participants.

Phase 1

Phase 2

Owner	Business	Address	Owner	Business	Address
Ben	Tunnel Records	3614 Taraval	Kathryn	Black Bird Bookstore	4541 Irving
Eddie	Avenues	3606 Taraval	Jeff and John	Bearing West	2325 Taraval
Brittany	Andytown	3629 Taraval	Mike	Beach'n, Judahlicious	4300 Judah
Doug	Underdogs Too	3600 Taraval	Chason	White Cap	3608 Taraval
Laura and Colin	Damn Fine	3410 Judah	Vanessa	JR Studios	3906 Irving
Poppy	Offix Edge	3811 Noriega	Jeana	Sealevel	4331 Irving

Thank you

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