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“De-mallificating” malls allows them to thrive - by Kate Terricciano Sirignano

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Let's face it: “Let's go to the mall,” just doesn't have the same buzz it once did. But does “Let's go to the shopping center,” sound any better?

Although malls were once the center of shopping and gathering, the word now often conjures up the recent narrative of the retail apocalypse. Business at the country's 1,100 shopping malls has suffered because of it. In a 2017 study, financial services company Credit Suisse predicted that about 25% of the nation's shopping malls will close by 2022. A record 8,600 stores were projected to close in 2018 alone, more than the previous record of the 6,200 stores shuttered in 2008, the first year of the Great Recession.

Some mall operators are making major investments and deploying new marketing creativity to attract and engage customers. For example, nearly 30% of U.S. mall owners are adding apartments, offices or hotels, according to a September 2017 survey by Jones Lang LaSalle. They're being renovated into open-air venues that offer entertainment and attractions such as concerts, movies, farmer's markets, fitness centers and medical offices.

Which begs the question for marketers: How can we best signal to the community, the transformation of the U.S. mall? New England has been fortunate its retail owners and management companies are among those that have made the necessary investments to transform their properties and fuel a market renaissance. But they still must cleverly inform, educate and convince customers that today's mall is different. That's where marketing teams come in.

In today's increasingly social media-driven world, we've been able to accomplish many ambitious marketing goals without expensive, full-on rebranding campaigns. We grow and leverage social media audiences with smart, eye-catching language that emphasizes a property's lifestyle focus over its retail offerings. We've partnered with community organizations to provide them with facilities and support. This, in turn has demonstrated to their supporters the evolving nature of their community's “mall” as a place to gather with friends, enjoy a meal in the expanding culinary offerings, conveniently schedule an appointment with a health care professional, or squeeze in a

workout at the gym.

In Connecticut and New Jersey, mall operators we work with have embraced branding and marketing to make these capital investments pay off. For example, recently in Trumbull, Connecticut, our client, the Westfield Trumbull mall won approval to change town zoning laws to allow for multifamily residential to be built on the property. We then made that addition the cornerstone of messaging highlighting the property's new live-work-play ambiance.

Since then, Westfield Trumbull has continued to strengthen and expand its bonds with the community by being more than a traditional shopping venue. This has created new ways to position and market the property. For example, the center hosts events and fundraisers benefiting nonprofits serving everyone from survivors of domestic violence to abandoned animals. Later this year, it will add an interactive aquarium that will no doubt attract families and organizations serving children.

Another client, Plaza at Harmon Meadow in Secaucus, N.J., has added a 469-unit luxury rental community that boasts public transit directly into Manhattan. We've helped that property continue to showcase its reinvigoration by offering community events such as artisan craft fairs, outdoor yoga and concerts. These features again create opportunities to publicize and market the property's reenvisioned focus.

A transformation can be sparked by something as simple as adopting a nickname. At the Connecticut Post Mall in Milford, we saw value in brevity, dropping the "mall" moniker altogether, and adopting the name "The Post" in casual uses and advertising.

"Today's mall operators know there's much more to shopping centers than typical department stores or inline retail spaces," said Taylor Coyne, senior analyst with JLL Retail Research. "By dedicating space that isn't necessarily retail, they're creating a halo effect which attracts an audience beyond shoppers."

The job of marketers is to position and communicate to existing and prospective patrons how these properties continue to transform to serve the evolving lifestyle preferences of their communities. These properties' jump-started success shows that our efforts are working.

Kate Terricciano Sirignano is founder and president of Image Marketing Consultants, Plantsville, Conn.