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Holiday marketing – Let’s de-mallify the mall - by Kate Terricciano Sirignano

November 22, 2019 - Retail

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The holidays are in full swing, and what does that mean for marketers? Pull out all the stops, and de-mallify the mall.

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.

But some mall operators are making major investments and deploying new marketing creativity to attract and engage customers, especially during this busy holiday season. 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. When consumers have so many options for holiday shopping at their fingertips - literally - how do marketers drive traffic to centers and capitalize on the trend that people want more than just a shopping trip, they want an experience?

Which begs the question for marketers: How can we best signal to the community, the transformation of the U.S. mall? The Northeast 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 like ours 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, mall operators we work with have embraced branding and marketing to make these capital investments pay off. For example, recently our client, Westfield Trumbull 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 life-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. And they have embraced influencer marketing, especially during this busy holiday time of year.

A transformation can also be sparked by something as simple as Santa – well that is, if the experience is truly special as in the case with our client Connecticut Post Mall in Milford, Connecticut. They recently introduced a revolutionary Santa visit, offering guests a branded family entertainment experience that appeals to visitors of all ages – not just families with children. The new walk-through set – first in the world – combines the best elements of today's highly popular “selfie museums” with the grandeur of a major theme park attraction.

In Chicago, another property we work with is truly embracing the user-generated content that influencers can provide by documenting their holiday shopping experiences on social media. New followers have grown over 21% since working with ten local influencers over the past few months, all while at the minimal expense of inviting them in and helping guide through the center experience.

“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.

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