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How can retail developers help local retailers and restaurants get a successful start?

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Increasingly, local retailers and restaurants are playing a more prominent role in major shopping centers. These individual operators bring a new dynamic to the shopping center—a local flavor that can significantly enhance a center's retail mix. Owners of these local stores are typically entrepreneurs and are passionate about their businesses. But they are also often challenged by the lack of time or resources to generate publicity, a key component to a successful opening.

The retail developer and onsite management team can help this process by proactively assisting local owners to publicize their stores prior to opening. WS Development has recently launched the New Tenant PR Program to help our new local tenants. The program consists of several components including media relations, onsite signage and online initiatives.

Here's how it works: a new tenant signs a lease, WS Development issues a press release announcing the signing, and the local media uses the release to share news about what's coming to the area. These releases include standard information about the store, its offerings, and where the store or restaurant will be located within the center.

While gathering information for the press release, we also try to uncover interesting points about the store or its owners. Sometimes this could be an interesting point about the owner's personal background or something unique about the company, its products and menu items. For example, WineNation, a new wine lifestyle store coming to The Shoppes at Blackstone Valley, is building a classroom inside its store for wine education classes. When the classroom is not in use, WineNation is offering its use to the community as a free resource.

Roster, coming soon to Legacy Place, is another great example of how our program communicates unique information to the public. This retailer is relatively small and locally-based, but they are leaders in a new category of sports-licensed product called sports lifestyle apparel. Getting this story angle to a reporter is key to generating the additional coverage.

In addition to working with the local media, the WS Development program kicks off the signage portion of the program at the shopping center level. We replace generic For Lease signs with Coming Soon signs to announce the store's opening. The Coming Soon signs include the store's logo and imagery that represents its offerings. We unrolled Roster signage that highlights its Red Sox, Bruins, and Celtics team apparel.

As the store's grand opening approaches, WS issues another press release to alert the media. Typically, at this point, the store has been mentioned in the local paper at least one other time. In addition to general information, we communicate offers or promotions that are part of the grand opening event as well as inviting the media to any pre-opening event festivities.

Online initiatives are the next step in our process and supplement the media outreach and onsite signage. We list the store on the shopping center website, post press releases and link or display

any articles that mention the store. Photos of the store's offerings and menu items are posted on the center's Facebook page where the public can also preview photos of the store's interior. All of this is supplemented with email blasts to each center's email club and include coupons and special offers. These online efforts are particularly effective for the new retailer who hasn't yet built its local customer list. Conversely, today's shopping center boasts a robust email club, loyal Facebook fans, and many visitors to its website.

When an all center event is scheduled prior to the individual store's opening, the retailer is included in the event so that additional publicity is generated. Recently, Spoil'd, a new fashion boutique opening at Legacy Place in July, participated in the center's "Sex and the City 2" fashion show event. The event attracted over 1,000 people where Spoil'd had the opportunity to display its merchandise alongside existing retailers and interact with new customers. All of these publicity efforts culminated in Spoil'd being included in the local newspaper's article about the event and Legacy Place.

Revolutionary? No, but all of these marketing and publicity efforts systematically combined provide the shopping center developer and onsite management team the opportunity to provide the new retailer or restaurant with a head start on their successful opening.

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