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How can we invigorate Boston's retail scene? Let's work with innovators to keep sales flowing

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I am excited by several ideas for invigorating the Boston retail scene. Now is the time to act decisively, especially since three of our most worthy retail locations are suffering: Faneuil Hall Marketplace, The Natick Collection, and The Atrium in Chestnut Hill.

We are coming out of the recession and shoppers and retailers are no longer obsessed with the Internet. For sure the world has changed. We are still over worked and too busy, but shoppers have not disappeared. They just want to see something new and interesting as part of their shopping experience.

Consider Apple Stores, the model of perfection: it's fun to be there; the environment is welcoming; staff is knowledgeable; merchandise is artfully arrayed; point of purchase is wherever you are in the store. Not too mention the various interactive events. Apple stores consistently draw crowds, yet everything they sell is easily available on the Internet.

Replicating the Apple experience for each retail merchandise category and store is neither appropriate, nor possible, but the innovative approach and break from the standard formula are keys to keep the sales flowing.

Scouting outside the Boston region Todreas Hanley Associates found numerous innovative stores and eateries desirable for import to the Boston region. Some are local or national chains; others are one of a kind.

Here are some examples:

Fred Segal, an original concept from a Los Angeles-based fashion retailer who has created an upscale fashion emporium. The Fred Segal collection is a series of individually owned boutiques under one roof with the look and feel of one store. New shops are added as trends develop. For example now there is an apothecary, spa with yoga center, and a gourmet burger restaurant added to the men's and women's fashion, shoes, accessories, home furnishings, and gifts.

Dry Bar, a growing chain of hair salons for women. Services are limited to wash and blow dry at \$35, a price below most salons. The time allotted for each customer is 35 minutes which attracts busy women. Additional hair services, priced by the minute, can be added, such as a 10 minute head massage for \$10. Reservations are made conveniently on line.

Underground at Parker Meridien in NYC, a one stop shop for grooming and fitness. A convenient oasis of 20,000 s/f of personal grooming, fitness and relaxation, it consists of individual vendors from street locations. Here clients can work out, take Pilates, yoga, have a facial, massage, shampoo/blow dry, manicure/pedicure, and a choice of vegan or carnivore organic fare for eat-in or take out. There is no membership. Pricing of services is the same as on street locations.

Le Pain Quotidien, a French chain now in major markets in the U.S. The café/eatery features organic homemade breads, soups, salads, pastries, coffees, and teas and daily specials. Each café has the same rustic wood furniture and a community eating table.

Unami, a gourmet burger-only restaurant offering artisanal burgers with exotic ingredients such as truffle oil with homemade buns come from a local Portuguese bakery. The beers are locally brewed, craft quality while the wine selection is from quality local producers. Unami is a LA based local chain.

The Market, Santa Monica Place, a one stop shop for foodies composed of local merchants and fabricators featuring heirloom coffees, organic meats, local cheeses, fresh-baked breads, pastries, chocolates, flowers, wines, gifts, seasonal artisanal herbs and ingredients, and other small shops related to the culinary arts. Included are a communal kitchen for demonstrations and cooking classes and an organic café. Surrounding The Market are three restaurants and a bar. This is a smaller, more focused version of Quincy Market.

Wine Shop and Wine Bar, set in a small and dated 1950s plaza with parking in front, is a conventional looking wine store featuring a variety of bottles from vendors around the world. Directly in the back of the store through an inconspicuous doorway is a low-lit 20 tabled minimally furnished restaurant featuring tastings, wines by the glass, and light complementary fare of cheeses, salamis, and breads. What differs is that three nights a week chef-operated gourmet trucks are invited by the wine bar to park in the Plaza so that patrons can bring in selections to pair with their wines.

Sports Medicine and Therapy, a convenient one stop center for diagnosis, medical, and alternative treatment for sports orthopedic health and wellness. This is a center for integration of medical and holistic practitioners for coordinated therapy that includes doctors, chiropractors, and physical therapists.

These are only a few ideas that could add excitement to the Boston retail scene. While they are concepts from other cities, they could be tailored to the Boston scene; they could be inspiration for local retailers and developers. The message: let's not rely only on the tried and true of a former era; let's work with the innovators.

We did it once: Faneuil Hall Marketplace. Let's do it again.

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