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The marketing plan: Suburban shopping centers

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When the market is strong, retailers line up for the best positions, in the best centers, in the best markets. There are plenty of fees and deals for everyone. The leasing people are leasing, the construction folks are building, and the asset guys are looking for new product. It has been a good plan until 5 years ago...and now suburban shopping centers have a lot to work on.

It's time to get out of the office and look at the property with a critical eye, just like the remaining tenants do. Today, those retailers are not just looking to open in your market, or your center, they are looking at "opportunities" all over the country.

With the effective reach of internet sales, brick & mortar retailers are fighting for a smaller piece of the retail sales pie. While they are re-inventing themselves to compete, suburban shopping centers need to do the same. The premise that your center is in the most convenient location and therefore will always have traffic and sales is being undermined by the ability to just push a button at your desk, or better yet on your phone.

Certainly some things will require a visit to the "bricks and mortar" store, but a lot of those satellite shops that depended on the traffic to the "big guys" have lost out BIG TIME!

Now is the time to help these little guys survive and there is plenty to do at the majority of the retail centers right here in Massachusetts.

Check out the condition of the buildings at your center. Are they up to date? Can you do a facade remodel? How about the signage? Is it covered in overgrown shrubbery?

Does the center remind you of a time in the past, like when metal roofing was big in the 1980s - is it still there? Thank god I lost my BIG HAIR from that era!

Give a thought about access to the center. Older centers have other properties built up around them, sometimes changing the dynamic of how customers enter and exit. A well timed and well placed traffic signal can make a big difference to the ability to get that traffic off the road and into your parking lot. Then let's slow that traffic down once inside the parking field. Give the few people left to shop at a center (instead of on the net) a safe haven to walk from their car to their store. How many times do I think I will become a statistic getting around a center that has no islands, no curbing and no safe place to avoid getting into the traffic lanes.

Yes, putting an island in where they weren't before can be a challenge with a town board, but a well designed island could offer a permeable area for water runoff (a rain garden?) and maybe a seat for someone who is waiting for another shopper. Yes, the suburban shopping center has the ability to be a gathering place and a social setting only if we allow it to happen again.

In order to compete with my comfortable home or car, I will want my shopping experience to have nice landscaping, places to sit and meet friends over a coffee, entertainment for my kids and a connection to my community.

That's a tall order, but think about the advantages... By using the suburban shopping center as a

focal point of the community we can get shoppers to spend more time on site, thereby increasing the sales potential of each retailer. Town boards generally want what consumers want because they are consumers! So if the town sees a property that is upgrading their landscaping and becoming more water and energy efficient, they might be willing to adopt less strict parking rules even before they have a bylaw in place that spells it out.

Creating diverse, multi-message strategies can build the reach to the community. Offer a vacancy to a local art foundation, for a fundraiser. Start a website for the center with weekly "deals" or promotions for that center. Make the most of the property by engaging with the people who are already there. Coordinate a marketing campaign with the managers of the stores and see what ideas they have to increase customer traffic.

If you show sincere support to the retailers who are working hard to be in a business with shrinking margins, increasing energy and insurance costs, it is likely they will become your biggest asset by recruiting other retailers to your center.

Ria McNamara is a principal for Ria K. McNamara, Inc., Hopkinton, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540