

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

Cultivating the Mommy Niche

By N. David Milder and Mary Barr Mann

Women are our nation's shoppers. Though they comprise little more than half the population, women make over 80% of consumer purchasing decisions, buy 60% of all cars and own 40% of all stocks. But unlike the image of the 1950s woman (or even the 1970s woman) who can devote her day to shopping and caring for the home, these women are juggling full-time or part-time work while ferrying children about, volunteering for the PTA and keeping up with their own interests.

Not surprisingly, mothers employed outside the home are the most time-pressured group and the one most likely to give convenience a heavy weight within their purchasing decisions. At-home mothers with young children are the second most time-pressured. These mothers are looking for shorter shopping trips and are more inclined to "satisfice" (compromise between price, selection and convenience) with merchandise available in their downtown shops. They are also looking to spend "quality time" with their

children as conveniently as possible, and downtown restaurants and activities can provide the perfect venue.

It follows then that a strong strategy for downtowns is building and/or strengthening the "Mommy Niche."

Activity-driven retail

While women's and children's apparel shops are helpful, activity-driven retail seems to be the key-stone for many mommy niches. Family-friendly restaurants that encourage children with play areas, baby and child-friendly restrooms — even toys — and affordable prices and kid-friendly food will attract mothers with young children. Another key factor is children's learning centers — dance studios, art studios, kids yoga, karate, even the town library. Mothers can spend time with their children at these activities or drop them off and be free to shop and catch up on salon needs, errands and shopping.

This mix of services and activities provides a customer

traffic flow of moms that downtown retailers and restaurants can capture.

Niche core

At the outset, mommy niches need a compact core area where it is easy and safe for mothers with children to move from one activity to another. Dispersed mommy niche functions will prevent the niche from cohering and becoming a real socio-economic entity.

At the heart of this geographic core should be an eatery or coffee-house where mothers can meet, socialize and network. Such places have become anchors for mommy niches, places that are destinations as well as gap-fillers between activities. The mommy niche did not happen in one downtown — despite 20 businesses that featured toys, games, kids apparel, kids shoes, martial arts and dance classes, plus numerous salons and eateries — because of the lack of such a meeting place.

Mommy networks

Through their own social activities as well as their involvement in those of their children — car-pooling, preschool, soccer, etc. — mothers need to be networked

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with other parents. This need is especially strong for those who work outside of the home and rely on the networks to provide some level of care for their children. Consequently, in most communities there are strong “mommy” social networks that provide word-of-mouth communications channels.

Local “Mommy Merchants”

Over the past year, there have been increased reports about local mothers opening commercial establishments. These “mommy merchants” have many assets that give them a higher probability of success. For example, they usually bring along networks of local friends who constitute a close-in customer base and cadres of likely store apostles. They are also more likely to be attuned to local mommy needs, tastes and shopping habits. Even more, they

are sometimes friends of other district “mommy merchants” and these connections provide a spine for referrals and informal cross promotions.

How to make a Mommy Niche happen

Downtown organizations need to think about how to make their districts more convenient for visitors, especially busy working mothers and /or stay-at-home moms. Thinking about physical improvements in terms of a “convenience analysis” is the first strategy. Downtowns need to have streets that are easy to cross, public toilets available and kid-friendly parking that is easy and safe for mothers with children and strollers, short-term parking that generates lots of quick customer trips, and a reasonable distance between parking facilities to shopping and activity. Down-

towns also have to cultivate relationships with their local mommy networks. This means identifying the networks and the women in them who are the opinion leaders and message transmitters. Hold focus groups with local mothers or arrange discussion groups between downtown business operators and local moms. Finally, help potential local “mommy entrepreneurs” prepare viable business plans, find downtown locations and link them to other sources of assistance such as business schools, the SBA and state economic development agencies.

For the full report on *Cultivating the Mommy Niche*, visit www.danth.com.

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