

Shopping festival -- sink hole or a boost for your town?

"Let's have a festival." Those words will be heard sooner or later at every town meeting or promotional group, whether in the suburbs or the country. They are words which the successful retailer will learn to dread, according to retailing adviser Geoffrey Heard.

It seems that most local shopping strips, arcades and mini-malls, have their once-a-year-pseudo-festival style of promotion. But few of them work says Geoffrey Heard, author of the book "Success in Store".

He tells of exceptions, but adds that most are "just a sink hole for promotional dollars".

Typical, he says, was a recent one which showed immediately the signs of being a waste of money.

For starters they had a "main sponsor" which was a business not in the shopping strip.

Then it was held on a Sunday, the day when most of the strip is closed. Unless the festival was really heavily promoted and packed with quite outstanding activities, it was not going to see much attendance.

The festival covered only a limited part of the strip. Obviously, a lot of the shops were on the periphery. If the festival had mattered, this would have mattered.

The festival was an isolated event, not part of a string of events and was not tied into merchandising for the strip.

Several of the retailers were "not happy!" and that should have been no surprise.

There is an argument for festivals and similar events, but as Geoffrey Heard states, they must meet a number of conditions. These include:

- The festival must be tightly focused on the customers and the retailers of the shopping centre. A festival might include some imported acts, but the real life of the festival must be the retailers and customers themselves interacting in unusual ways.
- The festival must have a primary purpose and theme which all (or the great majority) of retailers focus on and support.
- The festival must provide customers with the opportunity to buy and retailers with the opportunity to sell and to run appropriate programs to reward their customers and attract new customers.
- A good festival is part of a sequence of such events. A spring festival ought to be part of a sequence of spring, summer, autumn, winter.
- There should be several layers of activity to make the festival more than just a shopping promotion (e.g. by including fund raising for local charities).
- The festival must be heavily promoted beforehand in a variety of ways, at a collective level - and by individual retailers.
- Special "festival offers" are in, but cut price sale day is out.

An example of how festivals can work is detailed by the co-author of Success in Store, Gordon Woolf. He tells the story of a festival he helped organize which worked well for a small country center (festivals often work better in country towns than in the suburbs, by the way).

The retailers in this town wanted to put themselves on the mental menu and travel route of people in a couple of neighboring centres. So they organized a

festival with lots of activities, shop owners agreed to be out there and to offer appropriate "festival specials" – but to limit themselves to one or two, and the local community was joining in with fun stuff.

Then luck helped them along – a travelling circus came to town and the circus owner was only too happy to join in with acrobats, clowns and other events in the main street.

The organizers promoted this festival heavily locally and in the two neighboring towns which were their real targets. People from the target area flocked to the festival in droves and last Gordon heard, were still shopping in that town years later.

It had the keys, didn't it?

- Focus
- Commitment
- Community participation.

If a festival is suggested for the retail center of your town, which kind of festival will it be?

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Geoffrey Heard and Gordon Woolf are the authors of "Success in Store: How to Start or Buy a Retail Business, Enjoy Running It and Make Money, published by The Worsley Press. See www.worsleypress.com

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