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JANUARY 2010  
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## How many friends does your mall have?

Centers are busy marketing themselves on Facebook, Twitter and other social media

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ILLUSTRATION: TODD UNIKERGER

# HOW MANY FRIENDS DOES YOUR CENTER HAVE?

SOCIAL MEDIA ARE A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TOOL, MARKETERS SAY  
By Steve McLinden



**E**VERY ECONOMIC DOWNTURN SPURS companies to innovate and to reallocate talent, and this one is no exception. These two strategies are, in fact, vigorously present among shopping center marketers and merchants anxious to leverage rapidly evolving social-media technology to connect with the next generation of consumers.

Talk to any shopping center marketer these days and the terms “tweet” and “feed” are sure to pepper the conversation. In fact, the prescient minority of major retailers that used Facebook, Twitter and other social-media sites in 2008 had become a prevailing majority by the time holiday season 2009 rolled around. That ICSC is adding a New Media category to the Maxi Awards this year is further evidence that social media have gone mainstream.

Macerich started weaving social media into its marketing platform on Twitter for all its centers early last year, with some Facebook exposure as well. “From

our perspective, social media provide shoppers with the information that they want, which in turn supports our retailers — which goes right back to our core focus as a company,” said Mechelle Peters, assistant vice president of retail marketing at Macerich. For the fall opening of Macerich’s Scottsdale (Ariz.) Fashion Square expansion and the grand reopening

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of the redeveloped Northgate mall, in San Rafael, Calif., social media became the tool du jour to build excitement, Peters says.

Social media’s other applications in the retail space are manifold. This holiday season Macerich put its Holiday Essentials guide on Twitter and Facebook for special offers and seasonal programs, including free photos with Santa, Midnight Madness sales and gift-card giveaways. Macerich’s tweets brought 1,400 children to the reopening of the Disney Store at Arrowhead Towne Center, in Glendale, Ariz., to have their photos taken with Mickey and Minnie.

The list of retailers using social media has grown exponentially.

Aeropostale, Cheesecake Factory, The Children’s Place, Gap and Macy’s are among those that created sites and were at work with developers customizing social-media promotions late last year.

Jones Lang LaSalle researched social media for about 18 months before rolling out its program last June with the aid of The Dealey Group, a Dallas-based creative agency. Jones Lang LaSalle primarily employs Facebook but also uses Twitter. “We wanted to be selective about what we chose to do,” said Beth Faulkner, a regional marketing manager at Jones Lang LaSalle. One of the challenges is to make mall messages relevant while not seeming overly commercial, she says. “For us to be successful with this, we knew we had to give our friends helpful information they couldn’t get elsewhere.” Jones Lang LaSalle started the work with 13 malls and added nine more in September, with the rest of its management portfolio scheduled for early this year, says Faulkner, who explains that the phase-in approach allows for trial and error.

Twitter users can visit a shopping center’s page and click “follow” to receive messages, called “tweets,” from the marketing team. The user can respond with questions or comments, or forward the message to the user’s own “followers.”

On Facebook, a user chooses to become a “fan” of the center. Updates appear in that user’s “feed” along with exclusive promotions and events.

Jones Lang LaSalle malls, for instance, chat up the latest video-game release coming to the stores with such messages as, “Don’t forget,



DJ Hero inventories are in, and trucks arrive every Tuesday and Thursday.”

Quantifying the sales impact of these social media remains a challenge, Faulkner says, but a good measure of success may be if a post creates a sizable buzz. “When [shoppers] post a picture or a great deal, that’s like nirvana,” she said. “We can see that it’s created chatter. Social media have this incredibly viral effect that newspapers, radio and TV can’t duplicate.”

Sometimes shoppers start fan sites before owners do. Such was the case with Forest City Enterprises’ Shops at Wiregrass, in Wesley Chapel, Fla. One devotee amassed about 1,000 fans on his own mall Facebook page before turning the project over to Forest City, which has since added exclusive deals and other fan content, says Stephanie Shriver-Engdahl, Forest City’s director of advertising. Forest City works with Mallfinder in its social-media ventures, and 90 percent of its centers are also on Mallfinder’s Shoptopia.com, an online social-shopping community. Some retailers offer Shoptopia-



only events. Forest City has settled on a 70-30 formula — its social-media messages are about 70 percent related content and 30 percent direct-sales-related, so people will continue to find them interesting.

“People know we are selling, they just don’t want us to be lazy and un-

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imaginative,” Shriver-Engdahl said. “It really takes a very strategic thinker to make this thing live and breathe,” she said. “It needs to be personal and creative, and the message needs to be engaging.”

CBL & Associates expanded its social-media program to half a dozen centers, including two in North Carolina: Hanes Mall, in Winston-Salem, and Triangle Town Center, in Raleigh. “We see it as a tool we will definitely expand in the future, and we’re evaluating the best parts of it and having lots of fun with it,” said Barb Faucette, CBL’s vice president of mall marketing. “We are trying to drill down further and see where this is leading.” It’s becoming evident that instant consumer responses on social-media sites help landlords gauge success, she

says. “It’s like having a reporter following you around, saying, ‘Let me report that.’”

Simon Property Group launched Facebook and Twitter test programs in November involving nearly 40 of its properties. The firm is ironing out kinks before trumpeting the programs, says a spokesman. The Simon Fashion Now series, which showcases clothing available at Simon centers in mall runway-style fashion shows, has expanded to a Facebook page that features interactive multimedia, discussion boards and other features.

The social-media campaigns last summer for two MGHerring centers north of Dallas — The Village at Allen and The Village at Fairview — were built around the unveiling of a landmark art piece the Dallas-based developer commissioned. “It was the perfect opportunity to build our follower base,” said Heather Herring Stanton, the firm’s corporate communications and marketing director. “We ran contests, sparked

saving shopping ideas with an ecologically conscious overview. The character even has her own blog, Facebook and Twitter pages and makes “personal” appearances at centers nationwide to proffer promotional items, coupons and the occasional laptop. Inland Western has Facebook pages for The Shops at Legacy, in Plano, Texas, and also at the Gateway Mall, in Salt Lake City.

Social media are apparently here to stay. “Social media is so valuable,” said Faulkner, “because it is a place where we can talk to the customer instantly.”



bers and hundreds of peers, who in turn engage in contests, giveaways and special events.

“Such interactions add value for customers and tenants,” said Cheryllyn Megill, Inland Western’s vice president of marketing. When the center launched its Facebook page last year, it attracted about 5,000 fans in 60 days.

Inland Western introduced Holly Green last year, a fictional “green” guru who shares lifestyle and money-



saving shopping ideas with an ecologically conscious overview. The character even has her own blog, Facebook and Twitter pages and makes “personal” appearances at centers nationwide to proffer promotional items, coupons and the occasional laptop. Inland Western has Facebook pages for The Shops at Legacy, in Plano, Texas, and also at the Gateway Mall, in Salt Lake City.

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