

Downtown and the Youth Market

by Dan Casanova*

The market for children and young adults is often overlooked by downtown merchants who often focus on young professionals and empty-nesters. However, the purchasing power of children is significant and should not be overlooked. Children are responsible for a significant number of purchases and have a strong influence over the way their parents make spending decisions.

Many characteristics of downtowns can attract children and their spending power. This article provides data on the size of this market, the benefits of capturing the children's market, examples of towns that have been successful in bringing children downtown, and suggestions for making downtown attractive to children.

The Purchasing Power of Children

Children have an enormous amount of disposable dollars that they spend on things like entertainment, food, music and clothes. For example, "tweens" (ages 8 to 14) are expected to each spend \$1,294 in 2004. As a group, the 29 million tweens will spend \$38 billion in 2004. Furthermore, their parents are expected to spend another \$126 billion on them. (Kennedy 2004). Texas A&M professor, James McNeal, estimates that children have influence over another \$485 billion of purchases that parents make, on such things as groceries, computers, and cars (Goff).

To make these purchases, children combine allowances with part-time jobs. According to a study by Jay Zagorsky, about half of teenagers between the ages of 12-16 receive an allowance. The average among those that get an allowance is \$50 a week. The amount of allowance a child receives is directly related to the income of the family. Households with an income in the \$30,000-40,000 range give an average of \$21 a week in allowance, while families over the \$100,000 mark give \$175 a week (Brazil). The other way in which teens supplement their income is through part-time jobs. These can be jobs at a store or restaurant, or just providing services for friends or neighbors, such as lawn mowing and babysitting. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that half of all teenagers hold a part-time job (Goff).

According to Stephanie Redman of the National Main Street Center, more 13-to-19-year olds are rejecting conventional shopping malls in favor of smaller, less

predictable retailers. The sameness of the mall, the image that malls are for parents and pre-teens, too many rules and the growth of the Internet as a meeting place for teens, all factor into their rejection of the conventional shopping mall.

Retail Benefits Gained from Children

There are many benefits of being able to excite children about going downtown and spending their money there.

- It brings new business to downtown stores. The most obvious advantage to bringing children downtown is to capture a portion of their disposable income to help existing businesses remain viable, or even allow new businesses to succeed.
- It creates a lifelong connection. Children that grow up visiting downtown, patronizing its businesses, and attending events there, are likely to continue to enjoy and support downtown when they grow up. Downtown is a friendly environment for children because they can walk or bike to most places. Businesses such as candy stores, ice cream parlors, book stores, and toy stores are all very inviting to children.
- Children bring their parents. A side effect of having children downtown is that their parents are often nearby, which means additional purchase opportunities for downtown businesses.



How Downtowns Have Involved Children

The following are examples of ways in which downtowns have been successful in bringing children downtown and/or getting them involved with improving their downtown.

- Morgantown, WV: Holds a free one-day festival in the summer called "Kids Day" where there are a number of activities for kids and their families to do downtown. Designed to "foster an affinity for main street" among the children of the community.
- Plymouth, NH: Had area high school students develop an historical architecture history tour of the downtown area. The students give the tour to elementary students to teach them the history of the community and hopefully develop a connection between them and downtown.
- Lafayette, IN: Built a children's museum called "Imagination Station" that features exhibits of a 1910 automobile, turboprop engine, flight simulators, fire engine, and other science and history related displays. The museum was built in an old downtown building and is staffed by volunteers.
- Newkirk, OK: Started a Junior Main St. program where junior high students learned about the architectural history of downtown buildings and volunteered for other projects to help the Main St. program.
- Columbus, WI: Created a coloring book that has the outlines of important downtown buildings and distributed them to schools, businesses, and doctor's offices. The intention is to increase the identification of local historical buildings by children.
- Unionville, MO: With the help of a local artist and 18 children, they made a mosaic that highlighted buildings around the town square. This got area children involved in the downtown and also created some good media attention.
- Antigo, WI: Developed a Student Advisory Committee to broaden the volunteer base and find better ways to promote downtown to local youth. The result has been many events that are primarily run by students, including a Back-to-School Fashion Show.

Suggestions

The following is a list of suggestions for bringing children downtown, making downtown a kid-friendly environment, and fostering a personal connection between children and downtown.

- Children's Festival. Whether it is yearly or weekly, having a small festival that is targeted towards children is a great way to bring children and their

parents downtown to visit local businesses. Family friendly activities are a key advantage that a downtown area can have over its suburban counterparts. Musicians, magicians, and other performers are an easy way to entertain children.

- Offer popular products. While the downtown may not be able to support an entire candy or toy store, existing businesses may be able to expand sections of their stores that appeal to children. A pharmacy could expand its candy selection. A book store could create a larger children's section. Other popular items include sports equipment, games, and clothes.
- Create a special attraction. There are many attractions that can be built to attract children. A children's museum is an option, as well as a band shell for performances, a skateboard park, or even a ride such as a merry-go-round.
- Provide opportunities for children to get involved. Particularly in the summer months, children are looking for something interesting to do. Options include public art projects, planting flowers, or volunteering at various events. Creating an organization for children to help their downtown is a great way to make them feel invested in the community.

**Dan Casanova is a 2004 Graduate of the University of Wisconsin School of Business.*

Sources:

Brazil, Jeff. "Play". *American Demographics*. December 1, 1999.

Goff, Lisa. "Don't Miss the Bus". *American Demographics*. August 1, 1999.

Kennedy, David. "Coming of Age in Consumerdom". *American Demographics*. April 1, 2004.

Redman, Stephanie, *What do Shoppers Want from Main Street?* Main Street News. April 1998.

Examples came from Main Street's *Network Notes* issues: Sept. 2000, Nov. 1998, Sept. 1998, July 1998, July 1997, July 1994, and Nov. 1993. <http://www.mainstreet.org>

Additional assistance from Thomas R. Harris, Ph.D., University of Nevada, Reno

Selected photos taken from www.downtownmorgantown.com

Summarized by Dan Casanova and Bill Ryan, production by Alice Justice and editing by Michelle Oddo-Marohn, UWEX Center for Community and Economic Development.

Center For Community Economic Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
610 Langdon Street, Madison, WI 53703-1104

PH: (608)265-8136; FAX: (608)263-4999; TTY: (800)947-3529; HTTP://WWW.UWEX.EDU/CES/CCED
An EEO/Affirmative Action Employer, UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA requirements.