

# CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY

## Centres are finding new ways to engage with their local communities

At the Destination R conference held last month in Birmingham, a major topic was around how centres have adapted in the past ten years, moving from offering just retail and shopping customer service, to becoming one stop destinations for whole days out.

In particular, 'A Tomorrow's World: Designing the future', a talk by Make Architects, showed an in-depth knowledge of how people wanted shopping centres to create an emotional connection, as well as a shopping experience. Research by Gensler found that 94 percent of visitors took their time in spaces, meeting friends for coffee and, where they could, enjoyed taking part in standalone initiatives such as climbing walls and soft play areas.

"While that's all very well and good for thriving centres with big budgets and strong redevelopment plans, does this mean that the others are left behind?" asks Andrea Petrou, social media manager at marketing agency, OnBrand. "In our view: no."

The trick, says Petrou, is how to retain the lessons and apply them when budgets dilute the opportunity. "That's where creative solutions to get footfall and community messaging through the door, come into place," she explains. "Yes, a lot of that does lie in events, but it's also about making the most of social media and engaging with the wider community."

The key to this is experimentation when it comes to social media as, after all, each scheme has a different audience and agencies like OnBrand need to see exactly what engages whom.

"For each scheme we have a content plan that tests social content and how it's received. We explore celebrity, fashion, food and community content to see what resonates best with the local catchment.

"Photos of charity collectors in the building, mentioning centre staff and store managers who had gone above and beyond, and, of course, promoting external events around the area, have all gained high engagement. We've also found talking about local human stories have done well.

"All of these initiatives result in building positive brand reputation," she adds.

It may not result in immediate footfall, but this type of strategy is a long term push. It means more followers who see the centre as the source of good quality informative local content. The more association to them means a better advocacy and loyalty, thus converting to shopper visits and higher visibility of all content.

"The more of a community reputation there is, the better it stands out from a competitor in a small radius with the same offerings, thus increasing the footfall moving forward," says Petrou. "We have already seen strong evidence of how a small budget event coupled by a strong community social media offering has equalled strong results."

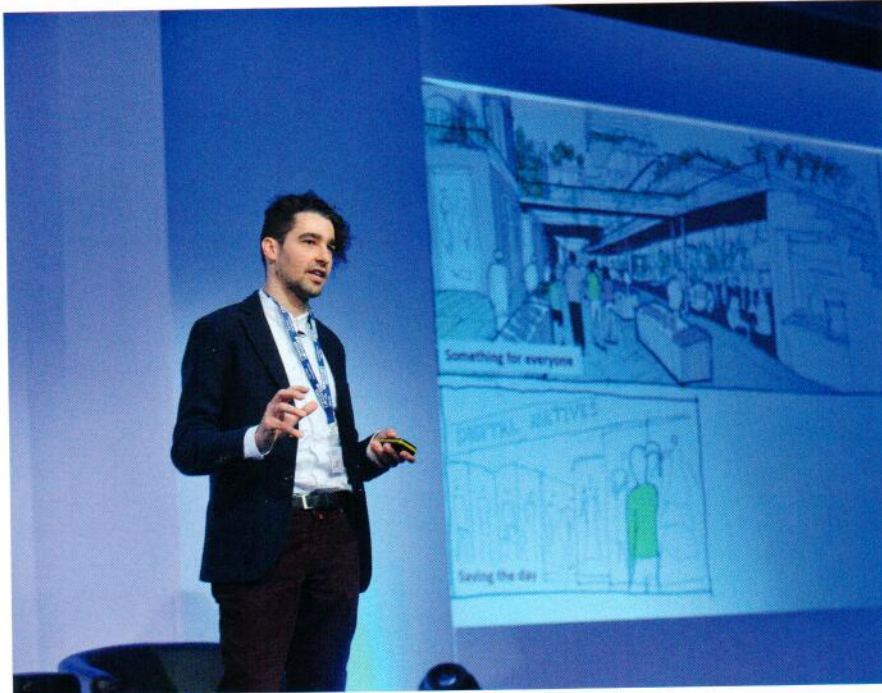
A valuable opportunity to engage with the community are empty units, according to Emma Thompson, marketing solutions at OnBrand, saying that the agency has been working towards this idea for a few years: "We have been able to convert dead spaces into energy-filled spaces that benefit everyone," she says.

"Where a local business or charity can't afford a permanent shop, but the centre management doesn't like to see too many closed-up units, we are able to create an event, workshop or even local business marketplace and brighten up the unit for a day or a weekend. Shoppers are intrigued and happy to join in with the activities, so this approach is a win-win situation."

Thompson points to evidence of using empty shopfronts for branded photo opportunities, charity events such as sponsored cycles, music days or recruitment areas, which have seen increased footfall and local business branding. But she believes that there's an opportunity to go further with initiatives such as introducing empty shops as community spaces, connecting like-minded shoppers through events such as cookery classes, storytelling times for new mums or an area where kids can learn and play.

"Of course," adds Thompson, "we need to engage more with a raft of stakeholders and local councils. We want these initiatives to be longer term, but it's worth the work."

**Below.** Grigor Grigorv (Partner at Make Architects) at the Destination R 2019 conference.







## Centres need to rethink their marketing to older generations

**A**s people live longer and have fewer children, there is set to be a significant rise in the proportion of the UK population over the age of 65. Currently, the older generation makes up around 18% of the country's population, and it has been predicted that in the next 30 years, that will rise to 25%. As many of this age bracket are set to live longer, and with the number of people over the age of 85 expected to triple by 2050, now is the time to consider how this should be addressed by the retail industry.

While they make up less than a fifth of the population, the over 65 consumer demographic hold nearly 40 per cent of the UK's total household wealth, but studies have shown that a large proportion of this consumer base feel they are being ignored in their needs and desires by retailers and marketers. The Centre for Future Studies has predicted that retailers who are not adequately elderly-friendly by 2030 could be losing out on up to £4.5bn annually.

So what can retailers and landlords do to capture this market? Janet Monks, director of marketing and commercialisation agency Shoppertainment, says that the key is in creating and advertising centres as a place for social experience. "With shopping centres moving towards becoming lifestyle destinations, they are laying the groundwork for making retail spaces areas that families and friends of all ages go to spend time together."

Loneliness is widely reported as being one of the biggest issues faced by ageing populations, with three quarters of older people polled by Gransnet, a social media network for over 50s, reporting that they suffer from loneliness.

"If shopping centres are placing more of a focus on being community hubs, then they are positioning themselves to be able to perfectly attract older generations, potentially without meaning to, because they can effectively provide a solution to this problem," says Monks.

Void units are an ongoing problem for many retail destina-

# SIXTY FIVE IS THE NEW THIRTY

tions, and making these units into a place where consumers, specifically older people, can come and socialise then it fills this void. It takes away the problem of "where do we go" which is one of the main barriers that older people have when it comes to socialising. Many of the over-65 population are reluctant to leave their homes, especially if they are worried about a shopping centre not being old-person friendly, and so giving them somewhere specifically designed for them to just have a seat during their shopping trip can be a positive way to entice them to the centre.

"If shopping centres are looking to market themselves as a community hub then one of the most effective ways to do that is to allow community groups to take over empty space within the centre," says Monks. "For example, it could offer space once a week for the elderly in the community to meet and have afternoon tea, or perhaps provide space for a local yoga or dance group that offer senior classes. Another way that centres can attract older shoppers is by ensuring that their events are relevant to that demographic, maybe by holding events on days when the centre is slightly less busy."

The 'Silver Pound' exists and it is a massive opportunity for retailers, and landlords who look ahead to address the needs of the older shopper will be far more equipped for the growth of the ageing population.

"The key is inclusivity," adds Monk, saying that instead of targeting one specific demographic with an event, centres should make it as relevant as possible to everyone. "For example, we organised a Summer Garden Party to help launch a community allotment initiative at a centre, the event and the allotment appealed to shoppers of all ages."

"In fact this should be applied to every aspect of the centre, from its marketing material to its built environment such as how much seating is available. If all these aspects are as inclusive as possible to all demographics then a centre is going to find attracting an ageing population is easier than they think."