

CHAIN STORE AGE

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Malls market for the cause

Today's mall marketing programs have a philanthropic bent

By Katherine Field

In a down economy, you'd think that retailers and mall owners would be focused on just one thing -- eking out sales.

But in reality, another focal point has emerged in the marketing efforts of both landlords and their mall tenants -- "cause marketing."

Creating marketing programs designed to raise funds and consciousness on behalf of various charities has allowed both malls and retailers to drive traffic while simultaneously supporting a worthy cause.

Oakbrook, Ill.-based Inland Western Retail Real Estate Trust has developed a comprehensive program of charity-based causes that the developer has rolled out either individually or regionally among its shopping center holdings. For example, at Southpark Meadows in Austin, Texas, the "Lift Up America Food Drive" drummed up 30,000 lbs. of frozen chicken to benefit the Capital Area Food Bank of Austin.

Maple Tree Place, in Williston, Vt., donated new school shoes and socks to the Lund Family Center and Women Helping Battered Women in a program Inland Western called "New Shoe Shuffle."

Riverpark Shopping Center in Sugar Land, Texas, distributed 1,000 backpacks and 200 bicycle helmets to children in need.

"Cause marketing has become very important to Inland Western," said Cherilyn Megill, VP marketing. "We partner with community groups and look for ways to benefit our retailers as well." The developer has found its tenants to be and large champion Inland Western's philanthropic efforts.

"Especially in our smaller properties, the retailers get very involved, personally collecting canned food for food drives, assisting with fundraising, and more," said Megill.

Tenants are also quick to suggest causes to promote. At Southpark Meadows, the restaurant operators suggested a taste-off program that Megill and her team helped coordinate and hold on their behalf. In Utah, a local center proposed a family fair to benefit the foster care foundation in the area.

"We work closely with our retailers to help them orchestrate cause marketing programs that speak to them and their local markets," said Megill.

One national program has garnered Inland Western a great deal of press. The company created a sustainable ambassador, named Holly Green, who promotes living and being green on a countrywide scale.

Introduced last year, Holly Green is a custom-created character that shares ideas on how to live an eco-friendly lifestyle through advertising, social media such as Twitter, Facebook and a blog, and via character appearances at Inland Western malls across the United States.

"Holly Green has made a real impact about telling people how to live green," said Megill. "She is a successful ambassador for us."

Evidence that cause marketing is gaining ground not just within the Inland Western ranks but through the shopping center industry? The International Council of Shopping Centers' annual MAXI awards, which recognize excellence in shopping center marketing, has added a cause-related category to its awards program for 2010.