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With Few Shoppers, The Progressive Shopping Mall Is Becoming An “Experium”

BY TOM BROWN

With well over half of all merchandise now being bought on websites with reliable same-day or next-day delivery, the wonderful 1960s invention, the shopping mall, is most days a very lonely place. To lure customers back, a few malls, like the one in downtown Stamford, Connecticut, are trying a whole new approach: it is now an “Experium.”

What is an Experium? It’s an emerging concept in the marketplace, thus precise definitions are hard to lock down; however, the Stamford Experium offers a kind of definition-in-progress. The huge crowds jamming the doors of the former mall are some indication that Experiums may be the new model of a “mall” for the foreseeable future.

Gone are 65 percent of the merchants which were there just 11 years ago. Those who remain have merchandise on display — but none to take with you. Instead, you use your MeCard® or some other all-purpose PIC

(personal identification card), to e-process your order. First, you scan the bar code of the merchandise you want, then your PIC — and the store's warehouse processes the order, charging your bank account simultaneously.

But selling goods is really a small part of what's happening today in Stamford. What makes the old mall a new Experium is the boundless experiences which now occupy what used to be traditional retail space.

Want to actually feel what it would be like to climb a rugged mountain? Whole 'Nother World Tours will provide you a sound/image/motion experience which actually simulates the terror and terrain of a mountain climb. In fact, they have 23 different choices of mountains to "explore." Needless to say, they would be glad to book you for the real thing, should you fall in love with the ambiance of a Mount Hood — or even an Everest.

Then there are the numerous "Careeriums." If you want to know what it's like to work in the world of e-commerce, WowNow! will provide a simulation room where you can get the feel of it — and how. One simulation produces the stress of having 15,000 same-day shipping orders hitting your computer desktop at once. They even have a manager who will scream, "Get moving on those orders!" The fact that a Careerium participant can actually be placed in a real job makes the experience a double treat.

Even the restaurants are different in an Experium. Take Chez Surround. It's above-average French fare, but the holographic Eiffel Tower, the simu-smells recreated by Aromatists are just like what you'll sniff on the Champs Elysees. People are driving to the Stamford Experium from Norwalk, just 30 minutes away, and plunging themselves into Paris, France, at the same time.

"We didn't come to the old mall — at all!" says Penny Trilack, who is from Norwalk. "Now, our family is at the Experium four or five times a

week. It's unbelievable! Kids are actually getting homework assignments requiring them to come to the mall. And that's not just because the town library moved here!"

Ernest Patioppi, who manages the Stamford Experium, says that revenues were so bad a few years ago that the mall actually considered shutting down, despite the one or two merchants who were doing a good business.

"Going all the way back to the start of this mall, our revenues are now so great that they're beating all records. In fact, we can't accommodate all the Experium merchants who want in. We just might have to expand!"

"What's so special about an Experium?" Ms. Trilack asks herself. Then, in two seconds, her face twists into an expression of wonder and glee.

"Have you been in the Roaring Waters store? Did you get all that spray all over you? Did you have to go to the dressing room to have your clothes dried off while you sat in the sauna?"

"I mean, it's a real, ummm, experience!" |<

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