

All Ears

Mall of America monitors online chatter to engage with shoppers

by **BRUCE HOROVITZ**

All the woman wanted was a place to quietly — and privately — breast-feed her baby.

That's not such a simple thing when you're inside the Mall of America, one of the nation's largest shopping centers, with a hungry, cranky child. So she did what any savvy Millennial mother would do: She griped on social media.

Her post on Mall of America's Facebook page went right to the point: A mall this big — with more than 500 stores and nearly 5 million square feet of shopping space — should have at least one space where a mom could privately nurse her baby.

The mall actually has such a space.

In fact, it has several such spaces. And it was able to let her know, right away.

Mall of America heard her cry almost instantly thanks to a social media “listening” platform set up three years ago with Geofeedia, a location-based social media intelligence platform that is starting to seriously impact the way malls, retailers and even media organizations do business.

Whether on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr or Picasa, the mall receives both aggregated social media information and individual cries for help.

“People will be talking about Mall of America online no matter what,” says Erin Vande Steeg, Mall

of America's senior social media and communications strategist. “We can ignore those conversations or engage in them. And if you engage in them, you'll likely enjoy higher revenue.”

PRICELESS GOODWILL

Within a matter of moments, the mall's social media team posted a response advising the mother that, besides special nursing areas by the restrooms, the Nordstrom store inside the mall also had a lovely, private nursing section.

The mother was ecstatic, apologizing on the site and thanking the mall for its advice. But it didn't stop there. After the social media team found out where she was eating lunch, mall executives personally brought her and her family free passes to the mall's indoor amusement park.

“She told us that she'd tell all of her friends about this experience,” says Vande Steeg.

That is precisely what the mall wants — especially if the mother tells her friends about the happy resolution via social media. “We are selling an experience,” she says. “For us, it's about selling and retaining a great customer experience.”

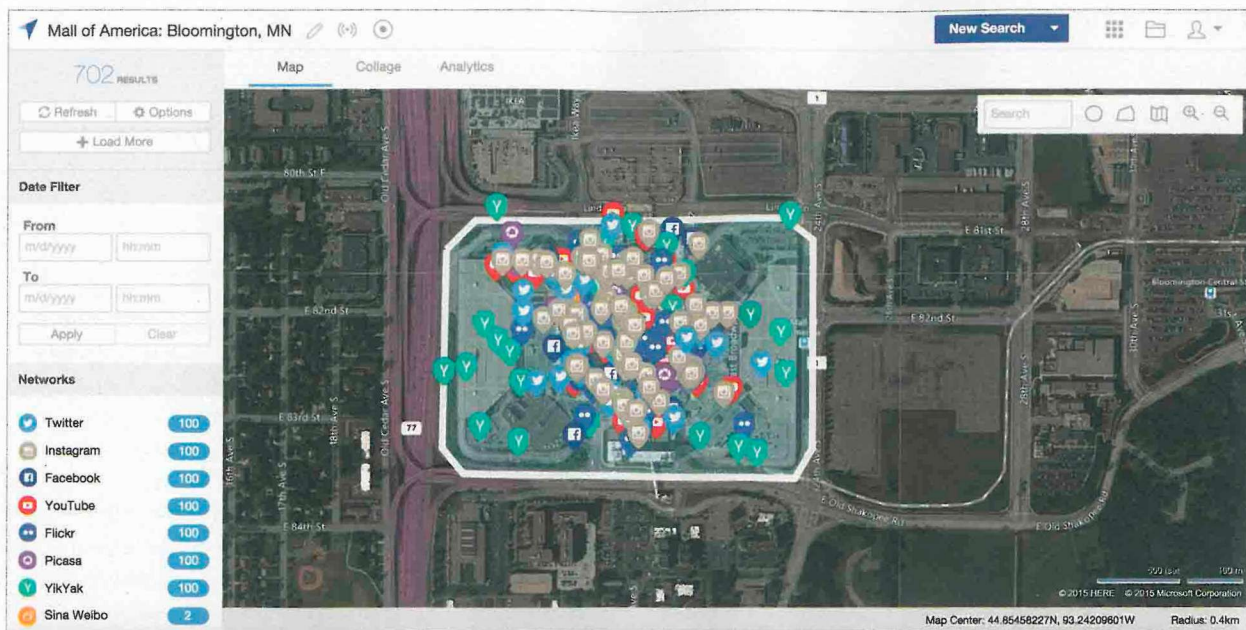
Retailers and malls ignore information shared via social media at their own peril: Digital interactions influence about 64 cents of every dollar spent shopping at mall stores, according to a recent Deloitte study.

“I think it's just as important for mall developers to pay attention to social media as anybody else in the retail or service industry,” says Dick Seesel, principal at consulting firm Retailing in Focus.

“Given that review sites like Yelp tend to attract complaints more than praise, they are still hugely influential in shaping buying decisions.”

SURPRISE AND DELIGHT

Mall of America debuted the new system, a consolidation of all the channels through which visitors interact with the mall — telecommunications, security and the social/digital and public relations teams — in 2013. Essentially, with the help of Geofeedia,



the mall drew a virtual perimeter to listen in on visitors who publicly post related social media content.

“The biggest and best source for understanding a place is ... the conversation that’s happening at that place,” explains R.J. Talyor, vice president of product management at Geofeedia. With location-tagged social media (and shoppers who have agreed to share their physical location), malls and retailers can do just that.

Once a physical address is typed into the software, location tags from social media posts can be pulled into an aggregated feed and viewed in aggregate or individually. In aggregate, the mall can learn the general sentiment of what’s on shoppers’ minds on any particular day, says Talyor. Or it can focus on keywords like “Mall of America” and “bathroom,” allowing users to, say, pick up a post about a mall restroom that’s dirty and needs immediate attention.

“The goal is to connect with guests wherever they might be and whenever they might need us,” says Vande Steeg. Mall of America monitors shopper sentiment from about an hour before the mall opens at 10 a.m. until an hour after it closes at 9 p.m.

It’s not just trouble-shooting: When one couple posted that they were eating at the mall restaurant where they had their first date, the social media team spotted the post and quickly

brought them a gift card. Another couple that was getting married in the mall (which has hosted more than 5,000 weddings since it opened) posted wedding photos on the mall’s site — and was immediately thanked by mall staff with flowers and balloons.

Social media-watching also can help alleviate bad vibes. A handful of years ago, if a shopper had a bad experience at the mall on a Friday night — if a cashier at a store treated him poorly — he might speak with a desk-based guest service representative about it. That rep might hand the shopper the business card of someone from the public relations department. If the customer bothered to send an email, it might not be seen until Monday and re-routed elsewhere. Soon a week has past and the ticked-off shopper has heard nothing.

But now, any negative comment received or posted on social media is instantly available for mall officials to view and resolve. The team passes relevant compliments or complaints on to individual retailers.

AN EXTRA EAR

Monitoring social media gives security a boost as well. The mall routes notifications from social media posts to its security department about 15 times monthly, Vande Steeg says, anything from a celebrity sighting to a shopper who observes shoplifting or

other suspicious behavior.

The system will only become more important with the mall’s 750,000-square-foot expansion scheduled to be completed this fall, which includes more retail and dining space along with a new hotel. Mall of America also plans to install mall-wide complimentary Wi-Fi, which will further encourage guests to communicate via social media.

“It’s all about achieving our overall goal of getting shoppers into more stores and keeping them in the mall longer,” Vande Steeg says.

Mall of America recently experimented with moving efforts outside the mall, monitoring consumer comments at Minneapolis - St. Paul International Airport, located 10 minutes away by light rail. A tourist who had just arrived at the airport tweeted out an announcement: “I’m here, Minneapolis!” Mall executives spotted the tweet and responded, “We’re glad you’re here,” along with an invitation to visit the mall.

The tourist was so flabbergasted that he vowed to add the mall as a vacation stop — despite his busy schedule. “I never had a mall welcome me before,” the traveler tweeted. **STORES**

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