

Stay and Play

Lifestyle shopping centers augment traffic and goodwill through outdoor exercise classes



by FIONA SOLTES

In recent years, upscale destination shopping has added a variety of elements to encourage consumers to “stay and play.” Most recently, those shoppers are giving more than just their wallets a workout: Free group fitness classes offer community, tie-ins and promotions with onsite retailers, and an infusion of fun into the shopping experience.

“I love seeing this community we’re building,” says Sherri D’Alessandro, director of field marketing for WS Development, whose dynamic mixed-use properties draw the likes of Lululemon Athletica, Warby Parker, Shake Shack, Bluemercury, SoulCycle, Sweetgreen, Equinox, Barry’s Bootcamp and Legal Sea Foods.

“When I see people coming back week after week, making new friends and getting together after class, that makes me happy.”

BUILDING BRAND AWARENESS

The recent rise of boutique fitness facilities like SoulCycle and Pure Barre — places where a sense of belonging and community is as essential to the mix as the exercise — led WS Development to start thinking harder about the potential use of its common spaces a few years back, D’Alessandro says. Over time, a single event here or there has turned into weekly classes that range from Oh Baby! stroller fitness classes to yoga, kickboxing and boot camp.

At WS Development’s Boston Seaport property — the largest single real estate project in city history, with 1.1 million of 6.3 million square feet devoted to retail — some 260 classes were offered from the summer through early fall. Some even raised money for charities.

“It’s pretty incredible,” D’Alessandro says. “This formula of community and partnership with retailers and charitable organizations really is a wonderful mix. And we love that our visitors are enjoying it so much.”

Count the retailers among the happy. Two of Juice Press’s five Boston stores are at WS Development properties: Seaport and The Street, located at Chestnut Hill. In the summer of 2016, Juice Press

supported the outdoor fitness classes at The Street with samplings of its organic vegan juices, smoothies and snacks. After opening at Seaport this year, Juice Press took part in the “Seaport Sweat” summer series.

“They’re super fun,” says Sophie Bikofsky, Boston brand manager for Juice Press. “It’s the perfect way to enjoy the summer weather and take advantage of the fitness offerings with well-known instructors such as ‘Kick It by Eliza.’ There is always a very positive, upbeat, energetic vibe.”

Along with that vibe, Bikofsky says the events have helped bring in new customers, as well as spread awareness about the brand. The health aspects are a natural tie-in with the audience.

“It is fun to see familiar faces come in after class,” she says. On nice nights, it also adds energy to outdoor seating areas, as people may purchase food or snacks and bring them back out into the fresh air.

In addition to connecting with consumers, the classes present opportunities for retailers to connect with each other. It’s not just that employees often join the classes; Juice Press paired up with YogaWorks for the studio’s recent anniversary.

“We’re all here to support each other,” Bikofsky says. “It’s always fun to team up with others on the property and collaborate for different events and holidays. It helps to foster that sense of community.”

CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

Aside from The Street and Seaport, classes also are offered at numerous other WS Development properties in Massachusetts; among them are Legacy Place in Dedham, Derby Street Shoppes in Hingham and MarketStreet in Lynnfield. WS Development properties in Florida have their own offerings; consider “Bend & Brew” with Lululemon at Hyde Park Village in Tampa and Highland Village



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in Jackson, Miss., combining yoga with craft beer samples.

In addition, a new green space has recently been opened at Hilldale in Madison, Wis., ripe for new opportunities.

D’Alessandro, who has her own health and fitness blog, says her personal experiences at different fitness events throughout the city helped with ideas as well as connections.

“When we started talking about fitness at a multitude of properties and specifically the program at Seaport, I knew all the right trainers to call, and I knew how we could work to make the program amazing,” she says.

The program at The Street began in 2014, with Seaport and Legacy Place starting the year after. Diversity is key, she says, and there’s an attempt to hit all audiences through the variety of classes. “We really have a great mix of people attend every event.”

Most classes are during the evenings — when they often draw area commuters looking for some exercise and social time

before heading home — as well as on weekends. A midday yoga class drew large crowds over the summer, especially with those who worked “summer Friday” hours, she says.

D’Alessandro particularly enjoys seeing the stroller classes — especially from the vantage point of a window seat at Derby Street’s Capital One Café.

“I love it when I look out and see all of these moms,

working together toward the same goal,” she says.

“This gives them an opportunity to be outside, to meet with other moms, to have their babies with them and still get a workout in. It just really makes you feel good to see that ... Fitness is more than just fitness. It’s not just about getting in a workout any more. It’s about driving relationships and fostering community, and helping people feel like they’re part of something. The fact that our places offer this to our community, in addition to a great retail mix, is what makes them places that people love.”

MAKING A DESTINATION

At The Street, Bikofsky says, the upbeat fitness environment is congruent with the fun-loving, happy feel that the property presents, helped in no small part by the colorful art display by Curtis Kulig introduced last year.

The installation includes a three-story, 50-foot by 8-foot “99.9% Happy” mural of smiley faces, with one frowny face thrown in for good measure. Juice Press provided green juice for an unveiling event that also included an interactive art element with stickers.

“It’s just a cool way to bring it all together and to keep on spreading the joy and excitement,” Bikofsky says. “It’s a destination.” **STORES**

Fiona Soltes, a freelancer based near Nashville, Tenn., loves a good bargain almost as much as she loves a good story.