

TRENDS: COLLEGE TOWN RETAIL

What's your community's retail niche? How do you get the right mix? Downtown organizations and local municipalities can play an important role in cultivating desired retail. To explore this topic further, P.U.M.A. interviewed downtown organizations in four communities: Ann Arbor, Michigan; Berkeley, California; Evanston, Illinois; and Westwood Village, California. These communities are similar in that they are each home to a large university and located within a larger metropolitan region.



EVANSTON, ILLINOIS



BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA



WESTWOOD VILLAGE, CALIFORNIA



ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN



Progressive Urban Management Associates (P.U.M.A.) is an economic development and planning firm that delivers community-based solutions to create thriving downtowns, corridors and neighborhoods. A national leader in downtown and community development, P.U.M.A. advises clients on a wide range of management, marketing, financial, urban design and implementation tactics that help communities and organizations create and sustain dynamic places.

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*Note: Evanston photo from Madcoverboy, <https://commons.wikimedia.org>; Westwood Village photo from Ken Lund, www.flickr.com; Ann Arbor photo from Traveler100, <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

LESSONS LEARNED

1 Face the Challenge to Maintain a Diverse Tenant Mix

Ann Arbor, Evanston, and Berkeley have all experienced an increase in the number of restaurants and entertainment outlets, to the point where some downtowns are concerned about over-saturation of dining choices as they start to see closings and empty seats during prime hours. Another trend has been the growing number of ground-floor service uses, such as finance, fitness and salons. In turn, the number of retail uses has dropped in some of these communities causing them to start thinking more proactively to maintain a strong mix. Given these pressures, community-mindedness and local building ownership have become important pieces to retaining independent and unique retail in key locations.

4 Harness the Power of Social Media

To further cultivate its dining scene, Downtown Evanston hired professional Chicago area Instagrammers – with a total of about 350,000 followers – to review downtown restaurants. Over the course of two nights, Instagrammers were given free food at 12 restaurants; they were required to do a certain number of reviews (posts) and the reviews had to be positive. The initiative was a huge hit with the restaurants.

2 Retain Regional Relevance

Maintaining (or establishing) regional relevance can be a challenge, especially when a municipality is located within a larger metropolitan area. However, in each of the examples studied, the community is seeking to define its own niche. In Ann Arbor, the focus is on walkability and locally-owned businesses; in Berkeley it's the arts; in Evanston it's dining; and in Westwood it's the historic "village" atmosphere. A well-defined identity gives downtown organizations and municipalities a clear direction for maintaining and growing relevance within the region.

3 Actively Court Desired Merchants

Downtown Evanston (DE) does proactive outreach to the stores and restaurants they want in their district, with a specific focus on attracting regional businesses looking to open a second or third outlet. DE's active courting involves visiting businesses directly and providing them with DE promotional materials. They also bring prospective business owners to Downtown Evanston, where they show them available space, lead a walking tour of neighborhood highlights, tempt their palates with local cuisine, and provide an opportunity for them to meet and talk with existing merchants.

5 Beware of Over-Regulation

Westwood Village used to be a regional destination and a happening place, primarily because of its movie theaters – patrons either went to Hollywood or Westwood. Due to the popularity of the district, surrounding communities were experiencing problems with parking, noise at night, and other nuisances. As a result, the city passed a plan that put heavy restrictions and/or caps on certain uses. Bars were banned, and restaurants and hotels were dealt tough restrictions. While this curbed the nuisance issues, it also created a district that was essentially dead at night and district vacancy increased to 15%. The local business improvement district is now lobbying the city to rewrite the plan.