

Chapter 9

City Trees and Consumer Response in Retail Business Districts

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ABSTRACT

Many cities and communities are working toward urban sustainability goals. Yet, retailers and merchants may not find environmental benefits to be compelling when compared to the direct costs of landscape and trees. Nonetheless, a quality outdoor environment may provide atmospheric effects that extend store appeal to the curb and heighten the positive experiences and psychological reactions of visitors while in a shopping district. A multi-study program of research shows that having a quality urban forest canopy within business districts and commercial areas can promote positive shopper perceptions and behavior. Positive responses include store image, patronage behavior, and willingness to pay more for goods and services. This chapter provides a summary of the research, connects results to psychological marketing theory, provides evidence-based design recommendations, and makes suggestions for potential future research activity.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades researchers have explored the connections between store environments and shopper activity. Many retailers and merchants use evidence-based strategies to enhance shoppers' experiences. Interior design, product integration and placement, the appearance and behavior of sales associates, and even the choice of background music are implemented and tweaked to influence consumer behavior. Retail establishments from small independent shops to chain department

stores work to make the shopping environment alluring, comfortable, and profitable.

Meanwhile, gardeners and philosophers have celebrated the pleasures of trees and nature for centuries, noting the role of plants in aesthetics, cultural symbolism, and therapy. Recent research confirms the benefits that people gain from nature experiences. However, the two research pursuits – investigations of human experiences of retail place and studies of nature settings – have rarely intersected.

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City trees provide many environmental benefits such as clean air and water, reduced heat island effects, and reduced energy usage. Yet merchants often do not find such benefits compelling. To address the more direct interests of retailers a series of studies has explored both business peoples' attitudes about trees and shopper response to urban forest canopy. The research results make the case for the importance of business investment in a tree program, in order to address urban sustainability, but more importantly, to enhance the appeal and success of business centers in cities and towns.

This chapter builds the case for the importance of having trees and quality landscapes in retail settings. The first sections address the broader issues of urban sustainability, retail settings, and recent research about urban forest benefits. A background section then presents the psychological theory about people's response to place, retail settings, and nature. A program of research studies has explored how business district visitors respond to city trees; key findings are summarized. A research discussion section is followed by guidelines for urban forest planning in contemporary shopping environments. This presentation of theory and research presents several research opportunities, the focus of the last section in the chapter.

ISSUE: RETAIL ENVIRONMENTS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Local governments are increasingly interested in pursuing urban sustainability goals. Science, technology, and professional best practices have evolved to integrate natural systems and elements into the basic functions of cities and towns. Yet not all property owners are necessarily committed to ecology and landscape development for the sake of sustainability. For instance shop owners within the retail and commercial districts of cities often lament the dis-services of street trees and vegetation, calling out the costs and annoyances

of blocked signs, debris, and sidewalk damage. These practical concerns often lead to plans and practices that preclude plantings, in the belief that open, clear streets provide optimal shopping environments.

The basis of consumer behavior has changed in recent decades. While the retailer-consumer relationship still involves rational economic transactions, it also includes a variety of non-economic factors. Shopping has become much more than an activity of necessity, and now has leisure and entertainment components. The aspects of the retail environment that attract customers and encourage them to purchase are not fully understood. Behavioral economics and neuromarketing are emerging fields of study that pursue better understanding of economic and retail behavior.

Facing competition from online and big box competitors, many merchants in local and neighborhood shopping districts give greater attention to the quality of experience in their shop and customer service. Curiously, in many instances the attention to retail experience and place does not extend beyond the front door. On approach a customer encounters blank walls, barren sidewalks, and large paved areas devoted to parking. The appealing retail experience that is carefully cultivated within the store is often absent at the curb and other outdoor areas of the business district or site.

Central business districts are the retail and civic centers of many urban neighborhoods and smaller cities. As business associations implement district improvements and strategies to attract and retain shoppers, some retailers may overlook the importance of a quality streetscape on visitors' encounters with a business district. The direct costs of an urban forest improvement program can be readily tallied; assessing the consumer response benefits is more difficult. Yet, trees and landscape are playing an ever more important role in urban quality of life.

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