

## **The Nexus of Time Pressure, Downtown Proximity, Convenience And Customer Service: downtown retailing's best friend**

1. Since The 2003 Assessment. Since our last Trends Assessment, DANTH has maintained that the time pressures felt today by American consumers is one of the strongest forces behind the resurgence of many downtowns. Time pressure has, for example, enhanced the attractiveness of living downtown and made shopping being fast and easy an important factor in consumer decisions. In the years since 2003, DANTH has come to believe that it is best to see consumer time pressure as one part of a greater underlying behavioral dimension that tightly entwines time pressure with downtown proximity, convenience and customer service. Moreover, DANTH believes that the downtown retailers -- and their organizations -- who understand this nexus will be able to use it as a fulcrum to successfully compete in the tough retail environment that will characterize the 2008 to 2013 time period. It is their chief asset to win over middle-income shoppers for whom lower price recently has grown in strength when making purchasing decisions.

Proximity. Being close to a bolus of nearby residential shoppers has always been an asset of downtown retailers, but, for decades after WW II, it was an empty one as local residents were drawn away by long leisure-time shopping trips to regional malls that had many more stores and a huge selection of merchandise. Because of time pressures, consumers over the last 10 years have become much more interested in making their purchases quickly and that often means close-by. Downtown proximity has again become a real advantage! Fast-rising gasoline costs will reinforce the importance of downtown proximity.

Convenience. Time pressure has made convenience an important variable in consumer shopping decisions. Having a quick and easy shopping trip is now what most American shoppers are looking for. When economic conditions are fair to good, convenience rivals the importance of price and quality in consumer decisions. DANTH hypothesizes that the desire for quick and easy shopping trips is often so strong that shoppers are willing to "satisfice," i.e., to buy merchandise that is adequate in terms of quality and/or price to enjoy them. Satisficing shoppers are easier for downtown merchants to capture.

Many merchants believe -- and quite correctly according to research reported by Paco Underhill -- that the longer a shopper stays in the store the more likely she or he will buy something.<sup>i</sup> However, as Underhill goes on to point out:

"In stores, as in life, there's good times, and there's bad times. Good times -- meaning anytime a customer is shopping -- you want to stretch. Bad times you want to bend. Bad times are whenever a customer has to wait."<sup>ii</sup>

Building on Underhill's comments, DANTH believes that convenience not only entails a length of time component, but an "enjoyable time" component as well.

Shoppers will spend a lot time in an enjoyable shopping environment and still consider it convenient.

Underhill also points out that attempts to keep shoppers in stores by altering layouts can have counter-productive results:

“The old – fashioned strategy for luring shoppers through the store works. But it makes getting what you want and getting out a little less convenient. Once they caught on they began to feel manipulated. Which is not a good thing.”<sup>iii</sup>

Many important retailers are arriving at the view that the shopper’s time is limited and rather inelastic. For example, according to Wal-Mart marketing chief Stephen Quinn:

“We don’t decide how long the people are in the store. What we decide is how easy it is for you within the 21 minutes you’ve allocated to get what you want.”<sup>iv</sup>

The question at hand is can convenience still compete with price in consumer purchasing decisions during economic downturns? DANTH’s observations on consulting assignments and travels indicates that many independent downtown merchants have done little to make the shopping experience in their stores quick, easy and enjoyable. All too often merchandise cannot be found, it is hard to get around an over-packed store, check out seems endless, etc. Similarly, too many downtown organizations do not see making their district a convenient place to shop as an important organizational objective. Public parking facilities and the vacant spaces in them are too frequently hard to find. Crossing busy streets is a hassle, if not downright dangerous. Finding a safe, clean public WC is far too often a time consuming annoyance and a nightmare when with children. Such “inconvenient” retailers and downtown districts can only improve their competitive positions against low-price competitors by creating shop-level and district-wide environments that are convenient for shoppers.

Some other independent downtown merchants and downtown districts have succeeded to at least some degree in establishing “convenient” shopping environments. Relatively few independent downtown merchants have successfully played the low-price game, so it is unlikely that they can follow the optimal strategy of providing both low price and convenience. As the success of Walgreens and Kroger during the current recession suggests, convenience can still be an important asset when selling such household necessities as food and drugstore items. Undoubtedly, some shoppers will be strongly conflicted by the need for both convenience and low price. It is difficult now to foresee the outcomes, but some kind of split is likely where on some occasions low prices win out and on other purchases convenience triumphs. Given this scenario it

would appear reasonable to conclude that the more convenient a shopping environment is the more it will be able to withstand low-price competitors.

Customer Service. To an increasing degree customer service is being understood by shoppers in terms of the efficient and enjoyable use of their time. In other words it is becoming synonymous with *the means* of providing a convenient shopping environment.

A significant number of relatively small shops in the New York - New Jersey-Connecticut region (e.g., Mary Jane Denzer in White Plains, NY) have learned how to lucratively attract upscale shoppers in no small part through exceptional customer service. This is how one reporter explained their successes:

“They treat their customers like kings and queens. They send limos and greet clients by name, dispensing cappuccinos and elaborate gift-wraps along with fashion advice. They send cards for birthdays and anniversaries, thank-you notes and flowers after large purchases. They know their clients’ favorite baseball teams and, more to the point, their preferred designers. And on request, they let patrons shop after hours.”<sup>v</sup>

2. A Closer Look At Time Pressure. Today, time pressure is a major restructuring force and its impacts are appearing throughout our society as the diversity of the examples presented below demonstrate:

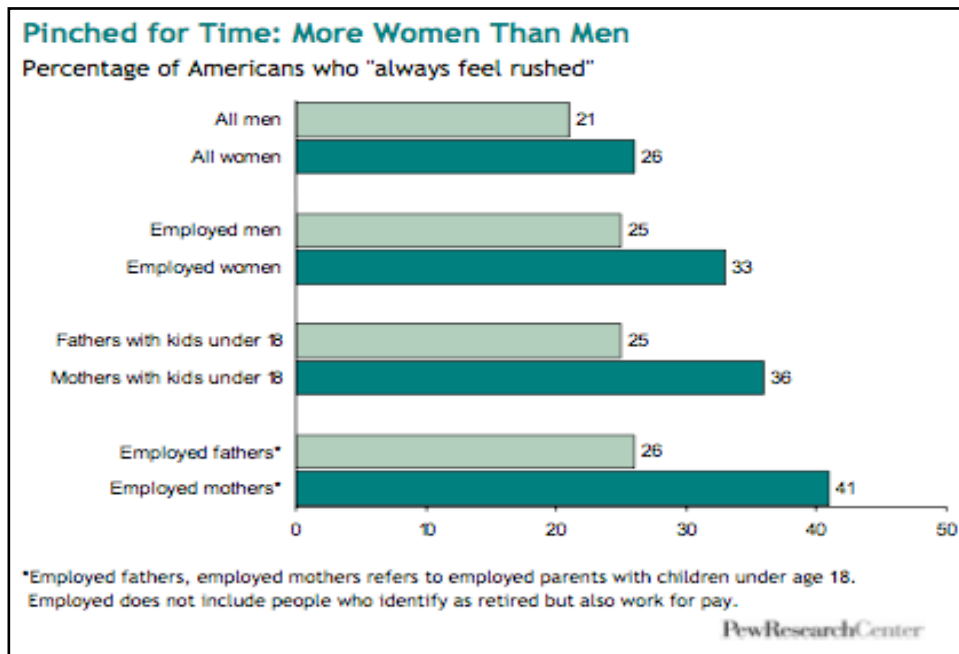
- American’s evangelical movement has built mega-churches to meet the needs of time-pressed professionals by offering such things as day-care centers, self-help groups, and networking opportunities<sup>vi</sup>
- The number of people who play golf 25+ times a year fell from 6.9 million in 2000 to 4.6 million in 2005, which represents a loss of approximately 33%. Industry experts account for it by a lack of time among golfers caused by rising work requirements and changing family dynamics that mean more player involvement in family activities and chores<sup>vii</sup>
- The world famous Metropolitan Opera is starting to whittle back the length of intermissions and entire productions. This is part of a wider trend in New York City among dance, opera and theater companies to reduce the amount of time they require from their audiences because their managements believe that the “modern consumer wants express entertainment” quick in and quick out<sup>viii</sup>
- The current rage among health clubs is the 30-minute “drive-by” workouts that cater to the people who are time-pressed.<sup>ix</sup>

The Effects On Shopping And The Family. Two economists, Mark Aquiar at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and Erik Hurst at the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business, studied how American adults between the ages of

21 and 65 spend their leisure time, and how it has changed from 1965 to 2003.<sup>x</sup>  
Their study found that:

- True, the number of hours that Americans work (market work) has increased during this time period
- But, their leisure hours also have increased, six hours a week for men and four hours a week for women!
- They found that any increase in working hours for women was more than offset by reductions in time spent on such tasks as cleaning, cooking and *shopping* (non-market work). Equipment and services such as microwaves, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, takeout food, pizza delivery or other innovations helped in this.
- The actual number of working hours of men decreased, but was partly offset by the increased time they are spending on housekeeping and “other chores.”

**Table 1**



A 2006 survey of 3,014 adults by the Pew Research Center found that the group that felt the most rushed, i.e., starved for time was working mothers with minor children, with 41% reporting (see Table 1) that they “almost always feel rushed.”<sup>xi</sup>

Another recent study claims that, today, American mothers and fathers spend at least as many hours caring for their children each week as parents did forty years ago during the hailed “golden age of family togetherness.” Nevertheless, the study also found that many parents complain of feeling rushed and of not having enough time with their sons and daughters.<sup>xii</sup> One explanation presented by the

researchers “is a gap between parents' self-evaluations and the currently high cultural expectations for ‘intensive parenting.’” The study agreed that today’s parents, especially those in dual income households, are busier than parents were in the “golden years,” decades ago.<sup>xiii</sup>

The research reported above indicates that, when allocating their time, American adults give their highest priorities to work that yields financial compensation and spending “quality time” with their children. *If anything is going to give it is the time allocated to household “work” such as cooking, cleaning and shopping.* DANTH believes that downtowns and their retailers, eateries and service providers stand to benefit from the aversion of time pressured parents, especially working mothers, to “non-market work.”

The impact of time pressure on shopping patterns has been profound. Back in the 1970s and early 1980s families would pack up and spend most of the day at their local regional mall. “Years ago, you'd arrive at the mall at 10 and leave at 3,” according to Konda Dees, marking director at Deer Park Town Center in Deer Park, IL.<sup>xiv</sup> Back then shopping was a leisure-time activity and the mall was not only a place to make purchases, but often also where you met friends and neighbors.<sup>xv</sup> For a decade or so, while downtowns were in general decline, malls almost became America’s agoras. Today, things are quite different. Americans are making fewer trips to the mall and these trips, according to a recent report by the ICSC, are now down to about an average of one hour in length.<sup>xvi</sup>

The nature of shopping trips for comparison shopper’s goods – the stuff you find at malls and in department stores – has also changed. Such trips are far less frequently leisurely and more often carefully planned and tasked, with a major objective being to get as much done as possible in the least amount of time. In response to this behavior, developers have built new malls and retrofitted old ones to accommodate shoppers’ desires for quicker and more efficient shopping trips. Major retailers such as CVS have undertaken major programs to try to make their stores more responsive to the needs of their time-pressed customers. Big box discounters, such as Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Sears, etc., have experimented with smaller store formats and ways of speeding up the shopper’s experience -- even including self-checkouts.<sup>xvii</sup>

Time pressures have been good for downtown revitalization because they:

- Have created a huge demand for local eateries of all types to provide meals away from home, be they take out or sit down
- Stimulated the growth of service companies in downtowns that take on “non-market work” tasks, such as housekeeping services, lawn services, “meal factories,” pet care, valet dry cleaning, party planning, etc.
- Most importantly, encourage nearby residents to look local for goods and services and be willing to sacrifice on price, quality and brand for convenience.

3. Downtown Retailers, Downtown Organizations and Time-Pressured Shoppers. Far too often time pressured consumers and customer convenience are not in either the vocabulary or consciousness of downtown retailers and their organizations. The lag on these issues between them and major retail chains and mall developers is demonstrable, worrisome and in need of correction.

Take for example parking garages and compare The Grove in Los Angeles with its electronic signs directing drivers to available parking spaces and its attractive, clean and working escalators that take car passengers from and back to their cars with what one normally finds in a typical downtown parking structure –even the new ones. A number of other possible downtown convenience improvements were mentioned above. The time has come for downtown organizations to take on the consumer convenience issue in a comprehensive and effective manner.

Downtown merchants seldom can compete on price, but they, alone or organized, can hit home runs on convenience. It is certainly one of the best ways they can capture more dollars from busy working mommies.

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Paco Underhill, Why We Buy: The Science Of Shopping, Simon and Shuster, New York, 1999, pp. 248, p.37

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p.189

<sup>iii</sup> Paco Underhill, The Call Of The Mall, Simon and Shuster, New York, 2004, pp. 217, p.51

<sup>iv</sup> Kris Hudson and Ann Zimmerman, "WSJ: Big Boxes Aim to Speed Up Shopping," [http://www.indyme.com/news\\_events/story.php?id=8](http://www.indyme.com/news_events/story.php?id=8).

<sup>v</sup> Marcelle S. Fischler, "A Cappuccino With That \$5,000 Suit?", New York Times, November 18, 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> 1. Alan Wolfe, "And The Winner Is...,"

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200803/secularism>.

<sup>vii</sup> 1. Paul Vitello, "More Americans Are Giving Up Golf - New York Times," <file:///Users/danthinc/Library/Application%20Support/Firefox/Profiles/jqlbsyk5.default/zotero/storage/1746/21golf.html>.

<sup>viii</sup> Miriam Kreinin Souccar, "Cultural groups learn to sell short," Crain's New York Business, January 28- February 3, 2008

<sup>ix</sup> Francesca Lunzer Kritz, "30 Minutes and Out (washingtonpost.com)," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34415-2004May17.html>.

<sup>x</sup> The report on this study is drawn this excellent report: Randy White, "The shifting nature of leisure time and expenditures", "Leisure eNewsletter - January/February 2008,"

[http://www.whitehutchinson.com/news/lenews/2008\\_february.shtml](http://www.whitehutchinson.com/news/lenews/2008_february.shtml).

<sup>xi</sup> Paul Taylor, Cary Funk, and Peyton Craighill, Who's Feeling Rushed? (Hint: Ask a Working Mom), Pew Research Center: A Social Trends Report, February 28, 2006.

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<sup>xii</sup> D'Vera Cohn, "Do Parents Spend Enough Time With Their Children? - Population Reference Bureau,"  
<http://www.prb.org/Articles/2007/DoParentsSpendEnoughTimeWithTheirChildren.aspx>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Kim Mikus, "Daily Herald | Busy lifestyles shift leisure shopping time,"  
<http://www.dailyherald.com/story/?id=153711>.

<sup>xv</sup> The author remembers reading a newspaper article back in the early 1980s that reported a university research project showing about half the couples getting married that year in a city in North Carolina had met at a regional mall. Unfortunately, the actual article has not been found. The finding, however, was certainly memorable.

<sup>xvi</sup> D'Vera Cohn, "Do Parents Spend Enough Time With Their Children? - Population Reference Bureau,"  
<http://www.prb.org/Articles/2007/DoParentsSpendEnoughTimeWithTheirChildren.aspx>.

<sup>xvii</sup> Kris Hudson and Ann Zimmerman, "WSJ: Big Boxes Aim to Speed Up Shopping," [http://www.indyme.com/news\\_events/story.php?id=8](http://www.indyme.com/news_events/story.php?id=8). Kimberly Palmer, "An Rx for Women - US News and World Report,"  
<http://www.usnews.com/articles/business/economy/2007/11/01/cvs-caremark-aims-to-be-a-one-stop-shop-for-stressed-customers.html>.