



“At your Service”

Services are the future of shopping centers. But what does this really mean?

E-commerce is booming, the sales area per capita (in shopping centers) is growing – centers face tougher competition. Many operators rely on providing individual services to stand out from their competitors: Offers that make the visit to the center more convenient and provide a good experience. But which services do customers really want? Which services are must-haves that enthrall customers and which trends are on the horizon?

In 2017, ECE launched the “At your Service” campaign: This holistic approach aims to bring the services of its centers to a new level and provide a positive shopping experience from its beginning to its end. ECE intends to treat the visitors not only as customers but welcome them as their guests. In a first wave, approximately 190 million euros will be invested into up to 60 shopping centers until 2021.

During a study ECE looked at the entire customer journey to ascertain the expectations of its customers – from the preparation of the shopping trip at home to leaving the shopping center. Based on the study’s findings, ECE will identify relevant improvements for the existing services at a center and work out a concept to optimize the services for every center individually and depending on the expectations of its customers. In addition, ECE has been testing new, innovative services in selected centers, at its so-called “Future Labs”. After all, both, fulfilling the wishes of the customers and to surprise them with the unexpected, are important.

The survey has showed that two-thirds of all center visitors demand services even before they start their shopping trip. They turn to social media channels, apps, or the center's website for information and shopping inspiration. Most customers expect shopping centers to operate a website. Moreover, ECE created its “Love to Shop” app that enables shoppers to

inform about the latest offers or events at the center. More than 300,000 downloads are proof for the appeal of the app.

The pilot project “Digital Mall” gives an insight to the future of shopping: Customers can use the homepages of the five pilot centers (e.g. Alstertal-Einkaufszentrum in Hamburg) to find out whether the product of a certain brand is available at the center in their favorite color and the right size. Currently 400,000 products can be checked online for availability. Displaying the availability of a product is one of the services that provides the most relevant value to the customers.

Express parking, Wi-Fi and “Digital Playgrounds”

To eight of ten customers, arrival and departure are important service touchpoints. Therefore, ECE has developed a number of services for this part of the Customer Journey. They include parking guidance systems, a Car Finder, and especially express parking with an RFID card that opens the entrance and exit gates automatically. It also eliminates queuing at the payment machine and looking for small change: The parking fee is automatically debited from the customer’s bank account. The “Same Day Delivery” service targets customers arriving by public transport: It allows items purchased in the shopping center to be delivered to their homes on the same day.

“Nowadays, shopping is no longer just about purchasing an item; it is part of how people spend their free time,” says Joanna Fisher, Managing Director Center Management at ECE. “Besides an attractive tenant mix, centers have to offer customized services, entertainment, and dining options.” The percentage of restaurant space in a shopping center has been increasing in the past years; approximately 60 percent of the center visitors make use of the food and beverage offers in the center. 40 percent even choose their favorite shopping center by the dining options available. Moreover, customers expect relax services such as quiet zones and free Wi-Fi. Some target groups get enthused by services like the Selfie Photo Box where visitors can have themselves photographed in front of different backgrounds and share them on social networks, or by “Digital Playgrounds” for the youngest visitors.

Quality of stay and convenience in focus

“The customers' demand in terms of services and hospitality has been increasing”, ascertains Markus Lentzler, Managing Director Architecture & Construction. Whether it is parking spaces, air conditioning, or restrooms – already in the planning stage of a center, the main focus should be on quality of stay and convenience. In line with this, the key elements of “At your Service” are attractive lounges and seating areas, the upgrading of restrooms or – if necessary – of the entire mall.

According to the ECE study, customers first and foremost wish to have information services in the shopping center. 74% of the visitors expect good signage and 70% a customer information desk. ECE's 3D-Wayfinder that allows visitors to view the route to their desired shop in authentic 3D or download it to their smartphones is a trendsetting feature. It is used approximately 1,000 times per day at Milaneo shopping center in Stuttgart. However, the “classic” staffed customer information desk is still one of the most important services in shopping centers.

Always in touch with the pulse of time

Center operators can also enhance the shopping experience itself. The gift-wrapping service and the center vouchers are in high demand. Yet if you wish to surprise your customers, you have to offer more than just standard services, for example a senior citizen service that helps elderly people with shopping. Every year, ECE gets praised for its “Heavenly Services”: During Christmas season, a number of special services are available to the visitors, such as gift advice, childcare facilities, or Christmas pages, who carry the shopping bags to the customer's cars.

“Dining options and services in the center will become an important distinguishing factor in the competition with e-commerce retail,” says Alexander Otto, CEO of ECE, reassuringly. Besides market research, his company focuses on the power of innovation. The strategy entitled “Ideas to Innovations” combines all measures that ECE will be implementing as it moves in new directions and opens up new potential for its shopping centers. This way the company stays in touch with the pulse of time with regard to customer orientation.

To download the study, go to <http://www.ece.com/en/media-center/publications/>

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