

# THE MALL STUDY

*To flourish,  
malls need to become  
customer-centric  
experience experts.*

Becoming customer obsessed,  
and removing leasing barriers, can  
change the game for retail centers.

Carl Riley (11/2022)

We co-created with seven  
women, eight men, eight  
teens, eight seniors, and seven  
fashioned-obsessed shoppers  
across all age groups. Over the  
course of our Chicago-based,  
immersive sessions, here's  
what we uncovered:

## **Women (20s - 50s)**

Women we spoke to wished they could get their partners to come with them to the mall, even if they were not shopping together. They wanted to reconnect, review purchases, and enjoy being out together. They wanted to spend time by themselves and with family and friends. Women also wanted space that was just for them—something that offered them a break from their families. One group of women even dedicated an entire floor in their ideal mall as an “oasis for women”.

## **Men (20s - 50s)**

Men wished they could go to the mall with their families and not have a painful experience. They imagined posting up at a spot that had enjoyable amenities designed for them while they watched their young kids and their partner shopped. These respondents also loved high-tech ideas that drove convenience. They imagined technology that whisked their cars away, parked them, and then delivered them right back at the end of the day.

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## Teens

Teens were open to going to the mall with their families—but wanted the ability to split off and do their own thing. These respondents wanted the chance to easily reconnect with their parents, even for just a few moments. They wanted their physical, in-person experiences to blend with their social media experiences. For example, one group suggested technology that allowed them to purchase looks inspired by trends and outfits on their social media.

## Seniors (60+)

While the seniors we worked with did not cite many product needs for themselves, they craved time with their children and grandchildren. This group has disposable income and is happy to spend money for time with family. The mall, for some seniors, can be physically exhausting. These respondents wanted ways to show up and spend their energy with their family without overdoing it.

## Fashion-obsessed Shoppers (across all age groups)

Fashion-obsessed customers dreamed about a mall that could help them browse for purchases that bring their unique styles to life. These shoppers wanted digital tools, physical spaces, events, and services that were just for them—and kept amateurs out of their way.



We utilized a co-creative tool kit and basic canvas to empower the groups to use their imaginations, dream, and design their ideal Mall experience.

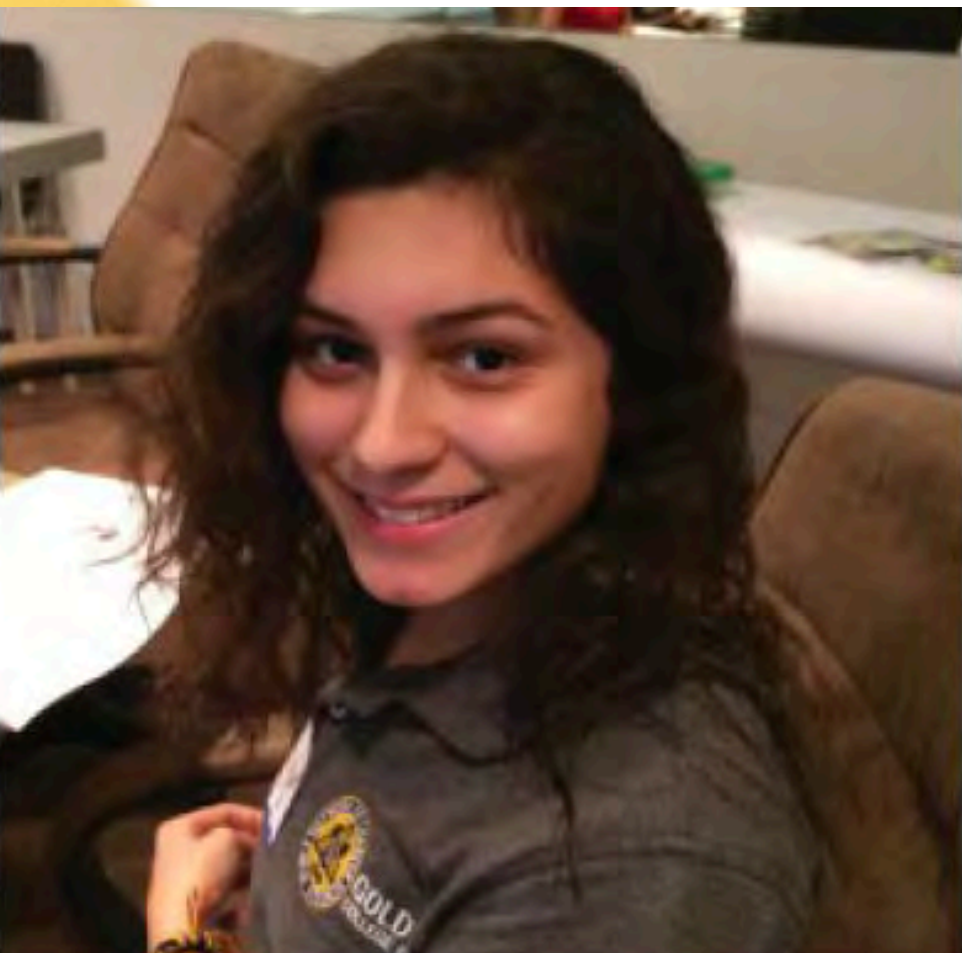
## Customer Centric Malls need to build around individuals—and family and friend groups

A main takeaway from our co-creation session? That our respondents were part of a family unit and wanted the mall to be an activity they could do together as a group, but no individual ever felt the mall was truly designed “for them.”

This disenfranchisement should come as no surprise. After all, malls have become so generalized that most people don’t feel compelled to go. Instead of serving as a space that offers “something for everyone,” malls have become a “nothing for anyone” space.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. The people we talked to—even many grandparents—still believe their local malls have the potential to become a family destination once again. But for that to happen, changes must be made.

For retail centers to reposition themselves as hubs, malls need to understand the independent needs of each family member they wish to attract. And just as importantly, these malls need to identify what families want as a whole. Once they’ve identified these desires, malls must offer products, services, and experiences that appeal to families, separately and together.



Even aching-for-independence teenagers reported they'd be happy to go to the mall with their families, so long as they could have their own experiences, then meet up with their families for shared experiences later.

Every generation sees the potential for the mall to offer shared experiences. So why aren't malls doing more to provide them? Outdated leasing strategies prevent malls from creating experiences families crave.

Believe it or not, one critical driver of the problem is leasing teams. Traditionally, commercial real estate is its own business and does not emphasize customer intelligence. Instead, leasing teams focus on favorable deals. They want to lease space, plain and simple. By default, customer experience becomes an afterthought. Leasing teams are not human experience designers, and they're not attuned to the people and full scope of trends that could transform malls into genuine community spaces. They are not here to design customer journeys but to rent out spaces.

This is not the fault of leasing teams. They are simply doing their job, operating under a legacy system that once functioned quite well. After all, when the retail landscape was less complex, creating customer journeys was a burden that belonged to tenants. But not anymore.

Now, everything has changed. Brands have been forced to overhaul how they interact with customers, design their spaces, and create experiences. Still, despite the massive shift in brand and customer behavior, malls continue to lease space in the same, outdated way. Without the resources—or financial reward system—to design a leasing strategy that yields great customer experiences, the mall will always fall short.

Malls need to find a way to incentivize leasing teams to fill spaces that genuinely serve data-driven, strategically-designed customer experiences. To attract every member of the family—and families as a whole—to the mall, leasing teams must work together with brand strategy and customer insights teams.

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## Tapping into peoples' desires begins with customer insights, data

In a perfect world, a vision for a property should be built on a strategic level and born out of customer insights and trend research. Leasing teams should focus on securing the right tenants so that together, these brands can build experiences designed for specific customer segments. Instead of focusing solely on quotas and lease lengths, leasing teams should use both that vision and excellent data to convince targeted brands to join the center's experiences.

To become cultural curators again, malls must skillfully gather and uncover customer and trend intelligence—like the insights uncovered in this report—and build experiences around that knowledge. Physical retail centers can and should play a key role in helping people find the products and services they want. But to do this, these malls must add value by curating offerings with a savvy point of view—one that offers in-person experiences and services a customer could never get online.

When the mall becomes a trusted editor of goods, experiences, and services, it can make customers' lives both easier and more exciting. That's what makes going to the mall such a joy for each customer group.

But to transform your mall into the place your customers need it—and want it—to be, you'll need great data. Centers must learn to gather customer intelligence and take action on those insights. Data should reveal customer segments and identity experiences that resonate with those groups.

If malls truly wish to compete in a digital world, there's no getting around this step. The better the customer insights, the more curated, creative, and indispensable malls can become. Customer insights should become central to the business and factor into all decision-making.

Become a sophisticated, data-rich brand of your own—not just a shopping center filled with a random mix of tenants. Become a cultural center that knows its customers and knows how to analyze and act on findings that drive traffic, sales, customer engagement, and sustained growth.

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After all, the mall is about so much more than just “shopping.” The best malls are an activity in and of themselves. They emphasize “doing,” and they offer something for everyone. Both alone and together.

### **5 steps to take, right now, toward designing customer centric experiences:**

1. Invite customer groups in, host conversations, get to know them, and focus on understanding how your property can play a useful role in their daily life?
2. Have customers map out their current journeys and seek to understand their pain points and gains points.
3. Use your insights to dream about ideal customer journeys for each target group.
4. Imagine what brands, amenities, services, conveniences, luxuries, deals, digital support, etc., would make your customer groups’ visits more joy-filled.
5. Develop a roadmap for each customer-centric journey to bring your ideas to life.

### **5 steps for long term sustainable growth through customer insights:**

1. Identify quantifiable customer segments.
2. Utilize qualitative research to create a deep understanding of these key segments.
3. From these insights, develop personas that can be used as a business tool. Use the personas to drive decision making.
4. Based on customer journey mapping exercises, identify all of your existing data sources and data gaps.
5. Implement customer experience technology to fill data gaps and merge data to create insight into how well your experience is performing.

**For a deeper dive into the full report. or help designing a customer centric retail center experience, contact us.**

**Carl Riley**  
is a Brand and Customer  
Experience Design Expert

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# Connect with us

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