

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

In this fast-paced, gotta-get-you-to-notice-me world, merchants have four seconds – more or less – to get a shopper's attention.

Now, imagine you're that shopper. You're at the mall, surrounded by hundreds of shops, each needing *your* four seconds, and your decision to buy, to stay in business.

Overwhelming? Perhaps. Pressure? Definitely. But, to die-hard shoppers – and merchants – it's the thrill of the hunt and the pleasure of the fantastic finds that elevates shopping beyond merely getting what you need. Shopping malls embody that luxurious fantasy that tells us we can have what we *want*. And behind the scenes of this never-ending retail drama is an entire profession most people don't even know about.

Women managing retail space keep shoppers shopping and merchants hopping

Mall management rose quietly alongside the more obvious shopping center boom of the late 20th century. Falling into two basic categories – leasing and marketing – mall managers maintain landlord/tenant relationships and continuously find new ways to show off a property's appeal and attract the customers who complete the cycle. In its early years, men dominated the field, coming from more traditional commercial real estate and property management ranks.

But the niche has proved to be one for which women are particularly well suited.

It fits

Mona Lowe hadn't counted on shopping center management becoming a career. Literature degree in hand, Lowe worked briefly for a New York City investments firm before returning home to San Antonio. Thinking she wanted to pursue another job in a corporate setting, Lowe was sending resumes to a number of

different companies, but in the interim, took a job with a real estate company to pay the bills. When she got a job offer from one of the resumes she'd sent out, the real estate company countered the offer, so she stayed.

In commercial real estate, Lowe found a career with plenty of room for professional growth. She spent a dozen years with one of the nation's leading commercial real estate companies. But it was time for a change. In 2001, Lowe

took on a brave new challenge: Starting a company from scratch. The lone employee of Reata Property Management, Inc., Lowe had precisely zero square footage to offer tenants.

With a bullet

One year later, Reata Property Management was in the San Antonio Business Journal Book of Lists as one of the top 20 local retail property management companies. In 2003, the company moved up to number six on the list. In 2004, Lowe was listed in the business journal's Who's Who in Commercial Real Estate. After only four years, Lowe and her team of 12 employees manage 1.8 million square feet of top tier retail, office and mixed-use property in San Antonio.

"I've learned the importance of having the right team," Lowe says. She relies on chemistry to guide her choices, "but instinct caps it off."

Lowe also believes her own chemistry has led her to success in this business. "I'm able to do this by nature. I'm a calm person. Give me a problem, and I want to solve it. That's what property management is about, breaking big issues down to smaller ones."

Her problem-solving ability was put to the test in July 2002, when a surprise summer flood left Reata's Houston Street property under water. Lowe literally broke it down to solve the problem. "It came down to getting the water out, repairing the damage and getting tenants back in business," she says. She credits quick connections in all

the right places – and teamwork – to getting the job done.

"You have to be a critical thinker in this business," Lowe says. "You have to be level-headed, assertive and self-assured. You have to get things done."

The shoe's on the other foot

Mollie Calvert began her career in fashion retail while she was still in high school. Intent on studying fashion merchandising in college, Calvert got a head start by snagging an internship with a New York clothing designer. College internships with top retailers like Neiman-Marcus and Lord & Taylor followed.

But retail was also in her genes.

Her grandfather, James H. Calvert, was vice president of Allied Stores, which owned the venerable Joske's department

store, a downtown landmark until the store closed in the 1970s. The building, now home to a national retailer, remains an anchor for Rivercenter Mall.

Today, as senior marketing manager for General Growth Companies, which owns North Star Mall and the Shops at La Cantera, Calvert feels like her time in the retailer's shoes helps her do a better job. "I feel like I understand the tenant's concerns," she says. From sales and shopper traffic, to buying the right merchandise for the market and

having the right number of employees, merchants' decisions generate sales.

Mall marketing is part science and part buzz, but it all comes together to get people in the doors for an exciting shopping experience. Calvert oversees all the public relations, advertising and promotions for both malls. "The job is more than attractive window dressing," she explains. "The retail business requires analysis just like any other industry, and a little psychology."

Indeed, the retail industry studies research that dissects every aspect of shopping behavior. There are statistics to show the average age and gender of shoppers, how long

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*Mollie Calvert, Senior Marketing Manager,
General Growth Properties*

the average shopper stays in the mall, how much money a shopper spends per visit. Because San Antonio has so many international shoppers, that adds a layer of complexity to the mix. "We have to learn about shopping habits on so many levels, but there is also a cultural piece we need to be aware of with our Mexican shoppers. We have to be aware of their expectations and be responsive to that."

Calvert's job is particularly exciting right now because North Star Mall is undergoing a head-to-

toe renovation and the long-awaited Shops at La Cantera – San Antonio’s newest mall – is opening soon. She goes from addressing renovation concerns to meeting with retailers at the new mall to plan their grand opening promotions to discussing advertising needs for both places. “The hardest part is juggling and organizing,” she says. “I have to give 100 percent to whatever I’m working on. I have to think on my feet, and always be ready for whatever is coming my way.”

One of the tools Calvert says she relies on daily is negotiation. “It’s a constant in this job – everything is negotiable,” she says. Having taken classes to hone her negotiation skills, she boils it down to one skill: Listening. “It’s the first thing you need to do as a successful negotiator, but it’s the one thing so many people don’t do when they’re negotiating.”

Common knowledge

Like Calvert, Camilla Basse jumps between North Star Mall and the Shops at La Cantera. As General Growth Companies’ group business development representative for both malls, Basse oversees what’s known as “common area leasing,” real estate-speak for the mall’s walkways and courtyards. Basse manages everything from new car displays to kiosk merchants. With North Star Mall’s renovation, that means plenty of detours and unexpected experiences for merchants and shoppers alike. “The environment needs to be clean and safe, and I also have to help the kiosk merchants stay up and running,” she says. It’s not always an easy task. “We had to move one kiosk merchant eight

times over several months because of the renovation.” In a business where location is crucial, it’s easy to see how merchants look to Basse for support and advice. “I’m kind of like the mayor of kioskville,” she laughs.

Basse likes the flow and excitement of her kiosk town. “One day I’m meeting with a national merchant to seal a multi-year kiosk deal and the next I’m helping someone set up a weekend business.” She describes kiosks as a low-risk way for people new to retailing to test the waters. “It’s intimidating, to be the little guy amidst all these big national stores,” she says. “I feel like I’m helping people live out their dreams. It’s very gratifying to watch them become successful.”

The success is sweet: Common area merchants at North Star Mall produced \$5 million in revenue in 2004.

Retail therapy

You know shopping is serious business when your shopping center is one of the top three tourist attractions in Texas. For Lorie Kennedy, marketing manager for Prime Outlets in San Marcos, being right up there with the Alamo and the Riverwalk translates to few, if any, dull moments. “I connect with so many different groups: Merchants, shoppers, store employees, the community and our corporate offices,” she says.

To do that well, Kennedy needs to know about public relations, store security and everything in between. Her experience in managing retail accounts for

advertising agencies serves her well. She thrives on the fast pace, but occasionally reaches for a touchstone. “I think back to my first day on the first job I had out of college,” she says. “I just sat there, at my desk, and I had nothing to do. My co-workers laughed and told me to savor that moment, because it’s the last time I would ever have nothing to do.”

Of course, Kennedy has plenty to do these days. Outlet malls typically operate with a smaller staff than traditional malls, which translates to fewer assistants and support employees. She shifts gears quickly between the more visible aspects of her job, like conducting tours and acting as

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*Lorie Kennedy, Marketing Manager,
Prime Outlets*

company spokesperson to the behind-the-scenes activity, like managing administrative work, budgets, advertising and legal requirements. Her ability to turn on a dime has been put to the test: She can put together a press conference at a moment’s notice and figure out how to get 50,000 flyers printed by tomorrow. “There is no typical day,” she says. “I’ve learned to improvise and not to panic. What seems like the worst crisis at the time is not the worst crisis.”

Growth curve

All the women agree that retail is booming in San Antonio – a good indicator of overall economic health. New shopping centers are popping up across the city, particularly in areas that have not seen much growth until recently. “San Antonio is moving to the next level, and it’s reflected in real estate,” says Lowe.

Basse says that one look at the merchant roster for the Shops at La Cantera reveals San Antonio’s retail growth spurt. “There are several national merchants who never looked at San Antonio

“This was my first job out of college – I never knew there was an industry that runs shopping centers – it’s not exactly the sort of career that people are conscious of.”

Jennifer Green, Rivercenter Mall marketing director

before,” she says. “It really shows the way the industry is heading.”

Professional associations, such as the Institute of Real Estate Management and the International Council of Shopping Centers, serve the industry. Both offer continuing education and the opportunity to become accredited in several areas of specialty within the field. While most of the women either have or are working toward accreditation or licensing, and they all agree that the certifications and designations are held in high regard, some

companies place more importance on the distinction than others when making hiring or promotion decisions. “Some companies are really serious about it and offer study groups and help hotlines,” says Jennifer Green, marketing director for Rivercenter Mall. Green holds the Certified Marketing Director designation from ICSC. “My company respects it but doesn’t require it. I wanted for myself, personally and professionally.”

River dance

Green, who joined Rivercenter Mall’s staff right out of college with a degree in marketing and communications, says the job appeals to her because she doesn’t feel pigeonholed into a defined skill set. “I’m doing a little bit of everything – marketing, PR, advertising, promotions and events. It’s what keeps me here.”

Because of its location near major tourism and sports attractions,

Rivercenter Mall is a frequent backdrop for national broadcasts and promotions. When San Antonio hosted the NCAA Final Four in 2004, several national sports programs broadcasted live from the mall during the competition. The segments gave Rivercenter about a week of solid national exposure. “It’s always exciting for shopping centers,” Green explains. “It’s a challenge because there are so many people involved – so much to do.”

Green says that one of the things she likes most about the shopping

center industry is that the rewards come the old fashioned way – through hard work and dedication. “I appreciate my career movement thus far,” she says. “You need to be professional, confident and creative, but I like that the focus is not so much a specified career path – if you work hard, you get the rewards.”

She’s a little surprised at how the diversity of her co-workers has shaped her. “I’ve learned a lot about leadership and working with a team,” she says. “What’s fun is working on a team with diverse talents, backgrounds, experience and perspective. I’ve learned to work toward my goals and the company’s goals and, in many ways, they complement each other.”

Recently purchased by New Rivercenter Mall, LLP, the shopping center is set to begin a major renovation project. The possibilities are exciting for Green. “Retail is very strong in San Antonio right now and I think we will see more retail activity downtown. In retail, you see consumer needs and behaviors change all the time. Retailers who keep up with the trends will succeed.”

Small packages

As a girl, Anne Marie Zapata didn’t see herself becoming a career woman. After high school, she took some college courses, and she got a job as a receptionist at South Park Mall, not thinking that it would turn into a career path for her. Working her way up through the ranks, Zapata joined Trammell Crow, a commercial real estate company with properties across

the United States, in 1998, where she is now a property manager.

Zapata proud of the fact that she's worked her way up through the industry. Having experience in just about every aspect of the shopping center business prepared her well for her current job. "I worked really hard to be here," she says.

Zapata is responsible for five shopping centers in San Antonio and Seguin, managing everything from tenant/owner relations and on-site staff at each locations, to the more administrative details of the job, such as accounting and marketing.

She's proof that good things do come in small packages. Standing just 4'9", Zapata says that she occasionally has to overcome the impression that her small

stature is a barrier. Confidence is her ally: "I'm not afraid of anything. I always find a way to get things done," she says.

Part of being a property manager is responding to problems and emergencies, which don't always happen nine-to-five. When that happens, Zapata has to coordinate solutions on multiple levels. "When there's an emergency, or an accident, you have to act quickly," she says. "It affects a chain of people, from the owner of the building, to the tenant to the customers."

Being responsive when things happen also affects the work-family balance. Zapata and her husband share parenting responsibilities for their son and daughter, ages six and eight and her mother is also part of her support system. "It's hard to fit it all in – school, sports, family time – it takes all of us working together," she says. She recalls thinking, as a young girl, that she'd be a stay-at-home mom. "I thought I'd be baking brownies and leading the Girl Scout troop," she says. "But I'm not complaining one bit. This is the path I was meant to take."

She sees managing shopping centers as a natural career choice for women.

"Women enjoy shopping and we're typically good at dressing up our surroundings – making this look good; a shopping center

should be comfortable and appealing to women." Zapata

Adding culture to bricks and mortar

"The paradox is that while this business engenders creativity and inspiration, the harder business issues stand at the forefront," says Lowe. She balances that harder edge by finding ways to put soft skills to work and to focus on the human connection. Lowe injects a novel twist into her approach. An artist and emerging art collector, Lowe supports local arts organization ArtPace and is a board member of the Mind

Science Foundation. She tries to combine her love of art and culture with her success as a businesswoman. "I try to bring culture to people via real estate. To me, that's the ideal initiative for any business person is to bring more value than what's expected."

"I'm not afraid of anything. I always find a way to get things done."

Anne Marie Zapata, Property Manager, Trammell Crow