

High school analysts probe mall potential

Why isn't Orchard Mall operating at its full potential as West Bloomfield's major shopping center?

A complex question, maybe, but that's the marketing case study four West Bloomfield High School students set out to examine earlier this year.

And for their intensive analysis of the shopping center located in the heart of the Orchard Lake-Maple commercial district, they captured top state honors in the Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) competition.

The four high school seniors—Maureen LaLonde, Janis Brynn, Sue Kowalski and Donna Murray—will now take their number one ranking to Washington, D.C., later this week to compete for the national title in creative marketing at the DECA national conference.

The analysts based their 100-page study on a survey of mall merchants and customers.

Interviews with 50 customers went smoothly, but their project hit a snag when they began talking with mall merchants.

"The women were disappointed that just 10 of the mall's 33 merchants responded to the survey."

"Some didn't even bother to answer it. Some didn't take it seriously. Some didn't want to get involved," said Ms. LaLonde.

But their survey did reveal some interesting theories why the mall might be experiencing less than desired customer traffic.

HERE'S WHAT a sampling of the survey showed:

- Most surveyed didn't conceive Orchard Mall as a place to do their everyday shopping.

- Selection of merchandise was rated only "average."

- Customers desired a fast-food restaurant and increased hours at the mall.

- Half the shoppers who frequent the mall live within two miles of the shopping center.

- Mail security, lighting and parking were rated "adequate."

Merchants suggested adding more stores, improving maintenance and using more promotions and advertising campaigns, including the use of fashion shows to draw more shoppers to the mall.

But why did the four even decide on investigating the marketing situation over at the mall?

"Donna and I knew it was slow there because we worked there. We decided to find out what we could do about it," Ms. LaLonde said.

The students worked in cooperation with Orchard Mall Manager Sue Roberts, who also serves as an adviser to the high school's DECA chapter.

Students and sponsor Jerry Whitlock commended Mrs. Roberts for her interest in the project.

"When we showed her the study, she was really happy with it. She even made the effort to show it to her boss," said Ms. LaLonde.

"WE WERE PLEASED they wanted

to do this," Mrs. Roberts later said. "They came up with some interesting ideas. It was an opportunity to give the students a chance to look at the real world. It was also a chance for us to take a look at their world."

Ms. LaLonde, who plans to attend the University of Michigan this fall, sees the project "as a good reference"

since "I'm going into business." Ms. Brynn said she "really saw a lot of the problems that could arise" in

retailing. She will attend Michigan State.

Both Ms. Kowalski and Ms. Murray will head for Northwood Institute, a business school in Midland, this September.

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ABOVE: Donna Murray prepares tabulations of the Orchard Mall survey responses. BELOW: Sue Kowalski works on graphics which are included in the award-winning shopping center analysis compiled by four West Bloomfield High seniors. (Staff photos by Charles Kidd)



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