

E. THE MOMMY NICHE¹

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1. The Opportunity. Most downtown retailers cannot compete on price – they just lack scale and the clout with suppliers that the Wal-Marts and Targets of this world have. Consequently, as pressures mount on the discretionary expenditures of middle-income households, downtown retailers need to identify and home in on those shoppers who will be most resistant to the lure of low prices. Merchants in wealthy communities, with a lot of households having incomes over \$150,000/year, should not have much trouble finding recession resistant shoppers.

However, in downtowns dependent on middle-income shoppers, the challenge for merchants will be very real. The key to meeting this challenge is focusing on time-pressured shoppers. The following merits repetition here:

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.*

By avoiding cooking, cleaning and shopping time pressured parents have been able to not only juggle work and family responsibilities, but to actually increase the amount of time they allocate to each of them. Because of these very strong commitments to both family and work, it is very likely that parents who work away from home, especially mothers, will be loathe to decrease expenditures that enable them to outsource household chores and/or reduce the amount of time spent on them.

As argued in an above section, mommies employed outside of the home are the most time-pressured group and the one most likely to still give convenience a heavy weight in their purchasing decisions. For them, money spent to preserve quality time with the family is not only a sound expenditure, it is a psychological and moral imperative. Consequently, DANTH doubts that they will substantially reduce their expenditures on meals prepared and or eaten away from home, choosing instead to reduce disproportionately expenditures for apparel, vacations and away from home formal entertainments (e.g., movies, theater, sports events). These working mommies will also be looking for shorter shopping trips and be more inclined to satisfice with the merchandise available in their downtown’s shops. This means that even when they are reducing expenditures

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the enormous inputs Peter Beronio, Beth Ann Macdonald and Mary Mann have made to my understanding of this niche.

in a product category – say housewares – if satisficing on the assortments available downtown means a much shorter shopping trip, they *often* will do so.

For example, here is how one part-time working mom described shopping for children’s shoes in her downtown:

“I do shop at the children’s shoe store in (the) Village even though the staff is sometimes surly and the prices are not cheap. Why? Because I pass there on my way home from preschool and because it is right beside the ice cream shop and because they take the time to measure my children’s feet and make sure the shoes fit.”²

Table 3
Households With Mothers, Children by Age in NJ and Six Sample Towns in 2000

Children in HH	NJ	Bayonne	Cranford	Englewood	Maplewood	Westfield	West NY
under 6 yrs only	8.0%	6.6%	8.4%	7.8%	10.2%	10.2%	7.9%
under 6 & 6 yo 17 yrs	6.6%	5.4%	6.0%	6.4%	8.3%	7.4%	6.3%
6 to 17 yrs only	18.8%	16.4%	18.5%	16.8%	22.2%	19.2%	16.9%
Total of all HHs	33.5%	28.3%	32.9%	31.0%	40.6%	36.8%	31.1%

Table 4
2000 Females 16+ by Employment Status, Age of Children and Labor Force Participation Rate in USA, Cranford, NJ and Meredith, NH

	USA	Cranford, NJ			Meredith, NH		
		5-min	7-min	10-min	15-min	30-min	45-min
Own Children < 6 Only							
% of Females 16+		7%	7%	8%	5%	6%	6%
% of category in labor force	66%	67%	65%	64%	81%	76%	73%
Own Children <6 and 6-17							
% of Females 16+		6%	6%	6%	5%	5%	5%
% of category in labor force	62%	60%	62%	64%	73%	74%	71%
Own Children 6-17 Only							
% of Females 16+		16%	17%	17%	16%	17%	18%
% of category in labor force	77%	79%	79%	75%	84%	84%	84%
No Own Children <18							
% of Females 16+		71%	70%	70%	75%	73%	71%
% of category in labor force	72%	53%	53%	53%	51%	54%	56%

Source: US Census Bureau, ESRI

Women are our nation’s shoppers. Though they comprise a little more than 50% of the US population, they make over 80% of the consumer purchasing decisions, buy 60% of all cars and own 40% of all stocks.³

² Email communication.

³ “FOREVER TRENDS | FEMALE FEVER,” <http://trendwatching.com/trends/femalefever.htm>

Obviously, not all women are mothers taking care of children. Table 3 shows that in NJ about 33.5% of the households have mothers with children under 18 living with them. In 8% of the state's households the children are under six years of age. In 6.6% of the households there are children who are under six and between six and seventeen years old. Almost 19% of NJ's households have mothers taking care of children in the six to seventeen years old range.

Table 3 also demonstrates some interesting variations across some sample communities. For example, while only 28.3% of Bayonne's households have children under 18, the figures for Maplewood and Westfield are 40.6% and 36.8% respectively. Moreover, among the sample communities Maplewood and Westfield have the highest percentages of households with children under six. This suggests that a lot of people are moving to these affluent communities to have and rear children.

As can be seen in Table 4, nationally most mothers are in the labor force: 66% of the mothers with children under 6 are employed, as do 62% of the mothers with children both under 6 and between 6 and 17, and 77% of those with kids between 6 and 17. Available data DANTH had on hand for drive sheds for Cranford, NJ, and Meredith, NJ, basically reflect a similar pattern.

Unfortunately, DANTH's field observations across the nation suggest that most downtowns, regardless of size, have disappointing track records when it comes to attracting mommies, especially employed mommies into their shops. Confirming these observations is the fact that we have come across few downtown revitalization strategies with a mommy focus (whether they work at home or away from home), but many that target yuppies, empty nesters, hipsters, tourists, knowledge workers and the "creative class." Indeed, the hottest approach to downtown revitalization – residential-driven mixed use development – is often predicated on keeping parents with school age children out of new downtown residential units.

On the other hand, according to our field observations, small and medium-sized downtowns that developed strong retail arrays almost always have been successful in attracting a lot of mommy shoppers, with employed mommies often being avid advocates of their downtown and its retailers.

If attracting mommy shoppers is difficult, but possible, the question then becomes: how do you make a downtown mommy niche happen?

2. Goods And Especially Services For Kids...And Their Moms. DANTH first visited Downtown Englewood, NJ, in 1992 and we have returned frequently over the intervening years both to work on consulting assignments and to keep abreast on the progress of its impressive revitalization. From the first visit, the strength the women's apparel boutiques, children's apparel shops and its family

restaurants were apparent. In the intervening years, the downtown has developed very strong activity venues for children that attract their mommies and enables the latter to have some leisure time for shopping, chores and pampering. Peter Beronio, a key leader and strategist in this downtown's revival, recently provided this description of the Downtown Englewood's mommy niche:

“Englewood has developed a mommy niche that sits comfortably in the midst of an ever increasing number of kid stores, learning centers, exercise and martial arts studios and wholesome party places. Whether a small family owned business or a national chain there is a mix of activities that make the trip worthwhile for a number of reasons. Kids can spend an hour in Score, Huntington Learning Center, Tiger Schulman Karate, BergenPAC Performing Arts School and even the old City Library. Moms utilize the time to do errands, shop in one of the boutiques or chain stores, stop in spas, NYSC, one-to-one training, a late lunch with a friend or maybe just catching up on phone calls, emails and paperwork at Starbucks.”⁴

The kid stores and services draw the moms and give them free time to do things nearby in the downtown, while their children are well-occupied and secure. This provides a customer traffic flow of moms that downtown retailers and restaurateurs can try to capture.

Downtown Englewood also has a number of family-oriented restaurants such as Baumgart's, Blue Moon and Its Greek To Me, where evenings one easily can find many working parents dining with their children. One can also note cross-table conversations as diners recognize their friends and neighbors. Working parents not only want convenience, but also venues where they can spend quality time with their children. These family-oriented restaurants allow them to have both.

Englewood's mommy niche appears to attract both those who are working outside of their homes and those that are not. Given that it does not have a relatively high proportion of households with children under 18 (see Table 3), the success of this niche and its ability to serve a wide range of moms is probably due to some landlords and merchants having above average business acuity.

DANTH believes that the mommy niche is an important reason retailing in downtown Englewood has thrived and expanded although several big malls and many millions of square feet of retail space are just a few minutes away by car.

Over the past three or four years, the intersection of Springfield Avenue (SA) and Prospect Street (PS) in Maplewood, NJ, has become the locus of a very interesting revitalization effort that is based on a developing mommy niche. As a consequence, there is not only new vitality along this part of a three mile

⁴ Email communication.

commercial strip that was long something of a community afterthought, but a significant number of mothers have taken psychological possession of it and made it a legitimate commercial destination for the rest of the community.

Mary Mann, a well-known downtown authority, is a working mother who lives in Maplewood and frequents the SA-PS node. Here is how she explains its recent resurgence:

“Where Springfield Avenue is kicking a** is in the mommy and kid services area – dance and motion classes at Stories in Motion, prepared meals at DinnerSmith, yoga at Shakti Yoga, workouts at The Gym, lessons at Clain Pilates, cosmetics, etc. at the Fringe Aveda salon, food and drink in an intentionally kid friendly Café Meow, coffee and internet access at Net Nomads, knitting circles and materials at KnitKnack. There is a children’s toy store that definitely wins in the convenience war since the birthday party industry seems to rival the wedding industry in growth. It is worth it and often necessary to pop over to Wooden You Know for that birthday party that seems to sneak up on you every Saturday!”

“The classes are key. Every mom is looking for activities to ensure their child is stimulated and encouraged artistically etc. Stories in Motion was a real boon to SA as was Shakti Yoga. Moms signed up their children and themselves, then they walked by the café etc., saw the benches, noticed the cute “hostess gifts” at Furbish and they were sold on SA.”⁵

Meow Café may be the epitome of a mommy niche service operation. Its layout, furnishings and operation are designed to make it easy for moms to meet, have a bite to eat and a cup of tea or coffee to drink while their kids are close, safe and occupied. Whereas other eateries frown on kids crawling around the floor, at Café Meow it is SOP. There are also toys for the kids. The WC not only has the usual diaper changing stand, but also a small chair where kids can sit strapped in while mommy does what is necessary in a nearby stall. Maplewood moms like to go to Café Meow because they can socialize while their kids are nearby, secure and playing happily.

The leadership of the Springfield Avenue Partnership has carefully nurtured this node. Its executive director, Beth Macdonald, is also co-owner of one of the node’s few retail operations, Wooden You Know. It is a wonderful, destination toy store that is attuned to the sensibilities of a demographic group that is strewn across the archipelago of highly educated and financially comfortable nearby communities. As the Partnership well understands, the challenge now for the SA-PS node is to add-on more retail operations that can both share and grow the mommy niche customer traffic.

⁵ Email communication.

Currently, most of the customers of the SA-PS shops are mommies who are not employed outside of the home or are employed on a part-time basis.. In part this is due to the shops operating hours, which make only weekends available to employed moms – and the shops are reportedly very busy on weekends. Adding additional retail might also help attract more moms with children old enough that they do not require constant adult observation and protection.

Downtown “X”, in NJ, had a Kid’s Row niche, with 21 shops in such diverse categories as apparel, toys, bicycles, martial arts, and learning centers that attracted many children and their parents into the district. A number of public and parochial schools abutted the district. It also had a “pamper niche” with almost 30 hair and nail salons, gyms and day spas that attracted a lot of moms. The district’s 23 eateries also attracted many moms and kids. Yet, with considerable traffic of kids and mommies as well as economic functions to serve them, Downtown “X never developed a mommy niche – the district never became a hang out place for mommies as Downtown Englewood and the SA-PS node have become.

A comparative analysis with Downtown Englewood and SA-PS suggested that Downtown “X lacked three key ingredients:

- It had failed to develop venues where mommies could meet and socialize while their children were safely and happily engaged in some beneficial activity..
- Retail shops offering merchandise and a shopping environment that meshed with the needs, wants and preferences of local mommies who had money to spend. Apparel shops, for example, were aimed at females either in their teens or 50+ or wearing plus sizes and the merchandise typically had modest price-points with comparable quality. You can’t have a strong mommy retail niche if there are no retail shops that meet the consumer needs of local moms!
- Mommy merchants who live in town and consequently both understood the needs, wants and preferences of local mommies and were socially networked with them. Local mommy merchants are more likely to open retail shops appropriate to local consumer needs and tastes than independents coming in from out of town. Their local social networks also gives them potential marketing tools outsiders lack.

3. Gathering Places For Mommy Networks. Through their own social activities as well as their involvement in those of their children – car-pooling, pre-school, soccer, etc. – mommies need to be networked with other parents. This need may be especially strong for those who work outside of the home and rely on the networks to provide some level of care for their children. Consequently, in most communities there are strong “mommy” social networks that are usually the kind of exceptionally powerful word of mouth communications channels that advertising gurus drool about. The mommy networks in Maplewood and

Englewood are sending out lots of positive messages about their commercial districts; no mommy network was doing that for Downtown “X”.

Figure 1.
The Skein Attraction, Cedar Lane, Teaneck, NJ on an average morning



Below, Beth Macdonald describes how this mommy network’s word of mouth helps her district’s merchants:

“Jane is at a birthday party with one of her kids. She notices several purple bags with green tissue paper and wrapping paper in same color scheme. She asks Liz next to her – where are those from. Liz says oh that toy store up on Springfield Avenue. Haven’t you been? Blah, blah, blah, they chat.”

“Jane then stops into said store. Wow – I love this place. Look at the variety. Owner welcomes her. Talks to her about her kids, Need blocks oh, well I have 6 different varieties; let me tell you about them. Also we carry French, Spanish and Hebrew alphabet blocks. Yes, we wrap for free. Oh birthday registry as well. Oh and any purchase over \$50, we make local free delivery. Jane spends \$75 and feels wonderful, but exhausted from listening to this guy go on and on. She wants some coffee. Oh yes, across the street, nice café. On the way over Mary notices an Aveda salon. Wow – this is awesome I really do need to get my hair cut on and on. Jane spends almost \$100 today and makes plans to spend another \$100 at the salon. BINGO. She can’t wait to tell all her friends how smart she is.”⁶

⁶ Email communication.

Both Downtown Englewood and SA-PS have physical locations where moms come to socialize such as Café Meow in Maplewood or Starbucks and Baumgart's (especially between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.) in Englewood. These eateries are café centrals for their local mommy networks – in fact, they may be viewed as part of the physical infrastructure of these social networks. DANTH believes they are essential for building a strong mommy niche.

DANTH suspects that moms who work fulltime away from home and moms who are not thus employed participate differently in the mommy networks and indeed they may have different, if overlapping, networks. Away from home employment probably also influences when they visit a downtown and the kinds of shops they patronize.

4. Mommy Merchants. Over the past year, DANTH has had increasing reports about local mommies opening commercial establishments in New Jersey downtowns, e.g., Maplewood, Teaneck, Cranford and Morristown. These local mommy merchants have many assets that give them a higher probability of success than someone coming in from the outside. For example, they usually bring along networks of local friends who constitute a close-in customer base and cadre of likely store apostles. Consequently, they also are more likely to be attuned to local mommy needs, tastes and shopping habits. What's more, they are sometimes friends of other district mommy merchants and these social connections provide a spine for referrals and informal cross promotions.

Another characteristic of mommy merchants is that they often turn their shops into customer meeting locations and use informal local mommy networks as well as formal networks such as Mothers & More as key elements in their marketing strategies.

Two examples of this are The Beaded Path in the Springfield Avenue node discussed above and The Skein Attraction in the Cedar Lane SID in Teaneck, NJ (see Figure 1). The Beaded Path has run special events for the local chapter of Mothers & More, operated a day camp for kids and hosts birthday parties where beads and beading play a central role. The Skein Attraction gives knitting classes and invites customers to drop in and chat about their knitting projects.

Many of the new mommy merchants are well educated, had some interesting prior professional experiences, open to new ideas and comfortable with computer-based management technologies. Nevertheless, many still have limited capitalization and insufficient knowledge of bookkeeping, consumer behavior and marketing. More troubling are recent reports indicating a significant number of the mommy merchants are opening apparel shops. The apparel business is being hit particularly hard by the current economic downturn. However, for several years prior to the downturn DANTH was advising clients that apparel had become a very, very tough retail business for independent operators to enter –

and this was an opinion shared by many savvy commercial brokers, developers and industry experts such as Mickey Drexler, the current CEO of J.Crew. The next part of this assessment will provide greater detail on this problem.

Many mommy merchants probably can use technical assistance. DANTH estimates that typically between 7% and 25% of downtown merchants (depending on downtown conditions), will be interested in obtaining and actually using such assistance. However, because of their high educational attainments and prior professional experiences, it is likely that mommy merchants will have a high participation rate in such programs.

5. Conveniences and Amenities. Convenience and the amenities package supporting it also are critical to having a successful downtown mommy niche. Peter Beronio, for example, claims that the Englewood mommy niche hangs together in no small measure because of “the obvious walkability of the downtown, a garage with no time limits for parking, and strict enforcement of on-street spaces.” Parking is critical as Beronio argues. A mom with kids doesn’t want to walk long distances from a peripheral parking space to her downtown destination or drive around endlessly looking for a spot. Neither does a time-pressed mom coming downtown alone on a quick shopping trip. Anything that downtowns can do to both provide proximate parking spaces and make vacant spaces easy to find will nurture the development of mommy niches. Malls such as The Grove in L.A. and commercial centers across Europe are much more sophisticated and successful at reaching those two parking goals than American downtowns. This has to change.

It does not take a rocket scientist to understand that moms with kids need a safe and friendly pedestrian environment. Crossing streets certainly must be safe and easy. There are any number of steps that a downtown can take to achieve this objective such as: corner bump outs; frequent crossing points; light timings sufficient to give a mom her kids and their equipment enough time to cross; electronic crossing signs that indicate in numerals how much time remains before the light changes, etc.

Beth Macdonald’s comments above evidence another important urban design feature that nurtures the development of a mommy niche – the concentration of niche shops in a node where they can be easily noticed and relatively few steps are required to go from one to another.

Sidewalk seating, playgrounds and easy to find and accessible toilets are other amenities that visiting parents might greatly appreciate.

6. Why Moms and Not Teens or Boomers? Teens and baby boomers are certainly market segments that downtown retailers should be aware of and take into consideration. However, looking forward over the coming five years, it is hard to see them having the strategic potential that the mommies have.

Teens do have a lot of discretionary dollars to spend and they love doing so. But, most of their money comes from their parents and during tough economic times their “incomes” and retail expenditures can dramatically decrease. This was demonstrated during our nation’s last recession. Furthermore, moms have control over the spending of many, many more dollars.

We know that boomers are the pig that the snake ate that is moving toward the tail – they are starting to retire. It is also known that many will still be active after they reach retirement age with some working fulltime, others working part-time, and still others maintaining a busy schedule of social and leisure-time activities. But, boomers are not a homogeneous group and in many ways we do not know very much about their economic behaviors, especially among the boomer subgroups

Boomers also are likely to be among the least time pressed and have a lot of latitude about when and where they do things. The incomes of most retired boomers will be fixed and more limited than what they earned when they were working. Unsurprisingly, active seniors, in recent years, have been avid customers of big-box value retailers.

DANTH has not come across a downtown that has revitalized itself by focusing on seniors, though we expect there is some retirement community in the Sun Belt that has. However, most downtowns are not in such communities.

Seniors have had positive impacts on many downtowns because they are eager consumers of “early bird” dinners and often avid patrons of cultural events and institutions that they can afford. They also are large consumers of medical services. However, it is doubtful that such impacts can substantially sustain the vigor of a downtown’s retailing.

Also, to get boomers downtown in sufficient numbers will probably mean residential redevelopment or rehabilitation projects for them. It is hard to see such projects being completed over the coming five years, though somewhat less difficult seeing them getting started.

The boomers just do not seem to have the potential for a strong and strategic downtown impact that the mummies have. Nevertheless, the boomers are a huge market segment and they are just beginning to retire, so their strategic importance may change over time. As a result, DANTH will be doing a separate assessment on the boomers over this coming summer.

7. Mommy Niches and Downtown Organizations. The mommy niche is important for downtown organizations because its development and strength can help retailers survive the current stressful economic conditions. It is also important because the development and nurturing of a mommy niche will require

the overwhelming majority of these organizations to start to think and act in new ways.

Growing a mommy niche means that downtown organizations will have to think about how to make their districts more convenient for visitors, especially busy working moms and/or moms with children. Thinking about physical improvements in terms of a “convenience analysis” will be a new mindset for most of these organizations. Many parking projects, for example, are based simply on a kind of gross supply-demand analysis that does not take into consideration such factors as:

- The ease of finding the parking facility
- The ease of finding a parking space within the facility
- The ease and safety of getting out of the facility and then back to the car for a mom with kids and strollers, etc.
- The need for short-term parking spaces close to retailers, personal service operations and eateries that generate lots of quick customer trips
- How far the facility is from key downtown attractions for moms

Of course, after thinking and planning in a convenience mindset, these organizations -- and their appropriate municipal agencies -- will have to make the actual improvements.

If downtown organizations want to develop and grow a mommy niche they also will have to create and cultivate relationships with their local mommy networks. This means identifying the networks and the women in them who are the opinion leaders and message transmitters. How many downtown organizations have held focus groups with local moms or arranged discussion groups between local moms and downtown business operators?

What will be really new is for the downtown organization to figure out a role it might play in support of the local mommy network(s) and how, in return, the networks can be utilized to achieve economic growth objectives. In the past, networking and using networks has not been a strength demonstrated by most downtown organizations. For example, networking is seldom used in business recruitment efforts, though it is critical to their success.

Networking is also key to developing successful word of mouth marketing campaigns. Advertising is changing and one important direction it is headed toward is the use of face-to-face social networks and local area internet social networks. DANTH believes that savvy downtown organizations will learn ways to provide the infrastructure for and participate in local social internet networks that serve local mommy networks.

The networking skills that downtown organizations learn can also be used with teens and boomers.

Downtown organizations can also help develop and grow a mommy niche by identifying potential local mommy entrepreneurs and then helping them prepare viable business plans, find downtown locations for their new ventures and linking them to other sources of assistance such as the business schools at nearby universities, the SBA and state economic development agencies. The organization's participation in the local mommy network will facilitate the identification of potential mommy entrepreneurs.

This would be a more proactive and involved role in business development than most downtown organizations have been playing.