

## Vigo County Public Branch Libraries

---

**Darlene Kemplen,  
Assistant Reference Law Librarian  
Latham and Watkins  
Chicago, IL**

---

---

**Background.** Where do the majority of American families spend most of their time eating, playing, socializing, and learning? The answer is, at their local shopping center. A 1985 survey revealed that 78 percent or 185 million Americans went to an enclosed mall at least once a month, and 93 percent had been to a mall within a six-month period. Other statistics show that American teenagers and Americans in general spend more time at the mall than anywhere else except home, school, and work (Kowinski 37).

Considering these extraordinary figures, is it not common sense that more and more libraries should consider taking advantage of these prime locations, especially since malls, both strip centers and enclosed duplexes, are not only for retail markets anymore? Shopping mall developers such as Ernest Hahn in Los Angeles, an avid supporter of the "mixed-use center - which mixes recreational and community facilities with retail outlets in an effort to make shopping centers a focal point of community life" ("A Spurt in shopping Centers" 92), are catering to not-for-profit services. In 1978, Hahn opened the University Towne Centre in San

Diego in which 17 percent of the leasable space-much of it supplied rent-free - is for non-retail attractions such as a folk art museum, an ice-skating rink, and even a pre-school day-care center ("A Spurt in shopping Centers" 92). Even more recently built was the Southdale Mall just outside of Minneapolis. "Southdale was designed to be a community center, surrounded by various forms of housing, a hospital, library and TV station" (Kowinski 42). Without doubt, the country is inundated with over 25,000 malls in various locations; therefore, marketing professors such as Mercia Grassi are advocating that well-designed malls gear their services to the community and look beyond profits (Grassi 70).

This being the case, libraries need to make the attempt to use this high-visibility space, especially with the recent concern for improving the library's image and becoming more accessible to the public. Grunenwald aptly states that "traditionally, library management has been concerned with problems of organization, budget, management, personnel management, and architectural design. The concentration of library manager upon these items has left techniques in areas like

marketing largely unutilized" (Grunenwald 21). "Libraries have only recently discovered marketing," he continues (22).

What is marketing? Specialists such as Darlene Weingand explain it as an "exchange relationship - making people want something they didn't know they wanted" (Weingand 491). With this definition in mind, she and others such as Tony Leisner support the "marketing mix" which he dubs the "4 P's: product, promotion, place and price" (Leisner 87). By using the mix to carry out the library's mission, "marketing and libraries can coexist," Leisner says (87).

With good marketing skills, a library can go far in reaching its consumers and supplying their needs, and libraries in malls can be one approach to promotion. As Leisner points out, "It is not enough to promote within the library for the benefit of existing users, you must go out into the community both to promote existing activities and also to determine what other offerings and resources are in the community" (Leisner 87). Grunenwald's definition is best: "Promotion means nothing more than to place one's self or one's products in the best possible light in the eye of the public" (Grunenwald 29). Libraries in shopping malls are doing just that. The key is to position the library so that it holds a unique spot in the life of the community, and what better place than the local shopping center?

This study looks at the Vigo County Public Library which has four branches, three located in shopping malls. For this study, only two mall libraries were explored in depth, the Meadows Branch Library and the South Branch Library. Each library is in a slightly different community setting as well as under different management making a good comparison study.

### **Meadows Branch Library.**

Located between two heavily traveled downtown streets just three miles east of the main library, this branch is in the basement addition of an enclosed, modern strip shopping mall. The Meadows Branch Library illustrates one vital consideration when first deciding whether to locate in a mall, that is it is essential to know the owner(s) and/or management of the particular mall. In this specific case, the owners operate both the Meadows Shopping Center and Plaza North, where the North Branch Library is located. Unlike many shopping mall designers, such as Hahn, who support non-retail space, the mall management of these two Terre Haute shopping centers seem reluctant to provide similar rental space in its mall operation. For instance, management rules specify that the library, as well as the other lower level stores, which consist mostly of various community organizations, cannot advertise with signs outside the mall building. Therefore, unless one is familiar with the entire mall, the library is virtually hidden. The only listing of Meadows Branch's location is in a mall directory located next to the escalator which indicates only "Library."

Another disappointment is the small space allocated to this branch. Opened in 1958, the Meadows Branch Library was the first shopping-mall library in the United States (Rawls-Heiser). Over the past twenty-five years, the library has occupied two other spaces, also in the lower level of the mall. However, when the owners remodeled the mall in 1983, they did not re-lease to the library, and it was not until 1985 that the branch was again designated space, and that at a much reduced size. The library has only 1200 square feet with no space for a conference room nor restroom. Also as part of the contract, a clause specifies that materials can not be

hung on the large window-wall entrance. This added limitation is a deterrent for library advertising.

Charlene Pierard, branch manager, has struggled with the owners' policies. Only recently has a tenant's association been re-organized and the library has been invited to attend the Merchants Meetings. Pierard states that she attends these meetings whenever possible with the hope of achieving improvements for the library. However, even with the setbacks it has experienced, the library does quite well. For instance, the inadequately small space is carefully designed to create spaciousness; the cream walls and good lighting give an illusion of grandeur. The open-door policy creates no barriers and exudes welcome. The bookshelves are aligned against the walls with a few horizontally protruding to form small cubicles. This arrangement allows freedom of movement in the center of the facility as well as good exposure to materials. Due to the small size, the creative layout, and constant monitoring of the front desk, theft is not a problem with the branch. The use of an electrical anti-theft device is not necessary.

Because of limited space, the branch has to be quite selective of its inventory. The library can maintain room for a maximum of only 13,000 volumes, therefore, the facility does not contain any special collections or expensive archives. The core of the collection is best sellers and recreational periodicals which are located up front near the entrance. Pierard describes the collection as "tried and true fiction" such as V. C. Andrews, Cookson, Demure and John Jakes. She also explained that due to the location of the shopping mall, between an established section of town and a developing "yuppie" area, the branch serves an older clientele with a core of 30-40 regular patrons who enjoy

coming in to browse the shelves and read the newspapers or use the copier. However, one important disservice for these patrons is access to the library. Since the mall is privately owned, mall management is not legally obligated to provide elevators and ramps. Only last March did installation of an elevator begin. In the past, with only an escalator and stairs leading from the main floor to the lower level, access had been difficult for some patrons including the elderly and the physically handicapped.

In the children's section, the library attempts to keep a current book collection and stocks the Newberry Books, Young Hoosiers and Caldecott series. A regret of Pierard's is that the facility is not of adequate size to accommodate special community services. She would for instance like to have room to offer once a month storytime hours for elementary school children. However, at the present time this is not feasible.

A restricted budget eliminates the possibility of special or extensive marketing techniques, however, Pierard does occasionally distribute library fliers to the various retail shop managers in the mall. She mentioned that normally she stays at the south end of the mall, because managers at the other end rarely have time to visit the library. Pierard commented that she found mall managers' library habits quite similar to other patrons: "If the manager is a person who normally does not use the library, I think he probably would be unlikely to come to the branch except for a specific purpose like using the copy machine."

Although Meadows Branch Library does have some distinct problems, they have worked around them to the best of their ability. Pierard and other staff members would like to see other changes made in the long term. Yet

overall they are pleased with the service they provide and feel that they adequately meet the needs of their public. The mall is an advantage both in cost and in location. As the only shopping center on the east side of town, and located with an Osco Drugs and a Kroger grocery store, the mall, and the library in turn, receive a large number of customers. Also, while leasing leaves the library at the mercy of the owners as exemplified in 1983, land and building costs are so astronomical that the rental cost of a little over \$1,000 a month can be an advantage over annexation and construction. The library can also attract some clients who while shopping might stop in and browse. If the branch were located in a separate exclusive building, these people might not take the time to drop in.

**South Branch Library.** While the mall management of both Meadows and North Branches has created problems for the librarians, South Branch Library is lucky to have a local group of businessmen who care for and support the stores to whom they lease, including the not-for-profit library. For a rental cost of \$2,700 quarterly, South Branch maintains a huge facility with space for a large conference room, restroom facilities, workroom, and manager's office. The branch is also located in a prime market area: the middle of the shopping strip with a bank on the right and a grocery store and drugstore on the left. "It is a big advantage to have the drugstore and grocery store," reported Suzanne Van Reed, South's branch librarian. However, she has observed a proportional decline in patrons as a result of Kroger's leaving and its replacement by a local grocery store.

Very similar to Meadows, South's core patrons consist of the elderly, the retired, and mothers with children. "It is not uncommon for mothers who

go grocery shopping to drop their children off," said Van Reed. Yet, she does not mind this "babysitting" service as they do have a large collection of children's books and provide regular storytime hours. A key element of the collection consists of popular reading material, most in paperback format and journals. Since the facility is not conducive for supporting a large reference collection, they maintain a basic collection of reference materials. Also, after three years a book is discarded, which means it is either sent to the main library or bagged for charity.

"We emphasize being a friendly, neighborhood library," Van Reed commented, adding that she knows fifty percent of the clients by name. Apparently the marketing technique works for, within an hour, at least twenty people came and went, and at one table at the far end of the library, two retired gentlemen read the local paper and chatted in a leisurely fashion. This amicable and picturesque setting was reminiscent of a Norman Rockwell scene. The hometown atmosphere has several distinct advantages. For example, patrons are quite benevolent toward the library and each other. They regularly donate old paperbacks and journals as well as cookies and such uncommon oddities as mannequins and dollhouses. Yet these seemingly bizarre contributions are an asset. For example, the dollhouse was recently used in a window display welcoming a new store to the shopping center. The sign in the display read, "Fill your house with Crown Rental Furniture." Surrounding the dollhouse were various how-to and furniture books that could be borrowed from the library. "We received quite a few compliments on that display," Van Reed smiled. "And in December we plan to use the train set that someone donated to us."

As well as the window display, Van Reed enjoys implementing other marketing techniques which tie the library in with the other shops along the strip. Over Labor Day, the mall had a sidewalk sale during which the library sponsored a sidewalk book sale and sold \$186 worth of books in three days. The librarian also regularly opens the thirty-chair conference room to community organizations and businesses such as sorority groups and the Lion's Club. Even Hardee's holds employee-training meetings in the library's facility.

Van Reed is very pleased with the library's location and finds it to be a great asset in meeting the needs of the community. The small, family-oriented atmosphere and the fact that the library does not carry any expensive special collections or videos reduces theft. "We don't have the space to accommodate videos, and the library has discovered that it is more convenient to have one good centralized location at the Main Library than to attempt to order five videos of each title for each branch," Van Reed explained. The branches are also not

set up for the cleaning and technical maintenance aspect of such a collection, explained Caroline Rawls-Heiser, Administration Coordinator of Vigo County Public Library. Van Reed also pointed out that the ground-level library has easy access due to the short distance from the front door to the parking lot, making it convenient for the elderly with walkers and canes. Overall Suzanne Van Reed had only positive comments for her library's location.

**Summary.** In conclusion, the study of the Vigo County Public Library's mall branches demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of locating in shopping malls. Advantages include the family-type atmosphere, the opportunity of catering to a specific community's needs and wants, and promoting and marketing the library. Weingand might say that the major advantage is the opportunity of presenting the library to potential target markets and making them aware of a product for which they have been yearning unknowingly (Weingand 497).



*Patrons at the checkout desk of the South Branch in Southland Shopping Center. Courtesy of the Vigo County Public Library, Communication Services, Char Minnette, Publicist.*

Although the advantages are encouraging, several factors might be carefully considered before locating in the trendy retail market. First is the matter of dealing with mall managers and owners who, as this study has shown, may resist not-for-profit ventures. Second, the limited amount of space discourages large library facilities and balanced collections. Normally all that the mall library can carry are the most current popular titles. Third, the cost of leasing can be quite high, especially in large enclosed duplexes.

But times are changing, and as the nation becomes more and more service oriented, libraries must keep pace. Current trends transcend shopping malls. For instance, in Atlanta the everyday commuter can find a small circulating library in the depths of the Marta subway system, and in Kansas City a grocery store shopper, while picking up a carton of milk, may also borrow a favorite Stephen King novel from the local library. A Cincinnati mall has built "porta-structures," a very popular solution for the spacing problem. These particular extension outreach libraries might be constructed out of plexiglass and revolving lazy-susan paperback bookshelves (Martin).

Finally, a 1985 *Publishers Weekly* survey concluded that 27 percent of Americans never go to the library and 45 percent visit haphazardly every three months or so (Wood 20). These statistics are disturbing but not unbeatable. Obviously, only the librarian's lack of creativity and assertiveness can limit the library's growth and marketability during this age of limitless opportunities for location and design. All that needs to be accomplished is to tap into that potential resource and go where no library has gone before. Now it's up to library management to make that all-important marketing decision.

## Bibliography

### Prints

Grassi, Marci M.T., "Buy It at the Shopping Mall: an American Institution." *USA Today*. 116: 68-70 March 1988.

Grunenwald, Joseph P. "Steps to Take: Marketing the Rural Library." *Rural Libraries*. 4: 21-35, 1984.

Kowinski, William Severine. "Endless Summer at the World's Biggest Shopping Wonderland." *Smithsonian*. 17: 34-43 December 1986.

Leisner, Tony. "Mission Statements and the Marketing Mix." *Public Libraries*. 25: 86-87 Fall 1986.

"A Spurt in Shopping Centers: Developers Move to Offbeat Locales and Downtowns; some 'mixed-use' facilities." *Business Week*. 92-94: 15 January 1979.

Weingand, Darlene E. "The Role of Marketing in the Future of Rural Public Libraries." *Illinois Libraries*. 68: 490-499 October 1986.

Wood, Leonard. "Library Use: an Irregular Habit." *Publishers Weekly*. 228: 20-21 November 22, 1985.

### Interviews

Martin, Betty C. Director of Vigo County Public Library. November 1, 1988. Terre Haute, Indiana.

Pierard, Charlene. Branch Manager of Meadows Branch Library, Vigo County Public Library. November 1, 1988. Terre Haute, Indiana.

Rawls-Heiser, Caroline. Administration Coordinator of Vigo County Public Library. November 1, 1988. Terre Haute, Indiana.

Van Reed, Suzanne. Branch Manager of South Branch Library, Vigo County Public Library. November 1, 1988. Terre Haute, Indiana.