

May I See Some ID, Please?: Youth-Escort Policies Are Gaining Popularity at Malls Across the Nation, But Are They Right For You

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While the concept started back in the mid-90's, the implementation of youth-escort policies is on the rise, leaving both mall owners and their tenants to wonder if such a policy will become necessary in their area. Most often implemented to combat negative public perception surrounding large gatherings of teenagers, youth-escort policies generally require teens under a specific age to be accompanied by an adult if on mall property past a certain hour. Proponents of these policies argue that they are necessary to promote a safe and pleasant shopping experience and encourage attendance by adults and families, who wield more spending power than the groups of unaccompanied teenagers being affected. Others worry that such policies will bring negative press attention and create unnecessary hassle for shoppers, which may in fact lead current and potential customers to find alternate shopping locations. No matter which side you are on, one thing is clear – mall owners and tenants alike need to understand the implications these policies can have on both their reputation and their bottom line and be thoughtful about how and when they are implemented.

Scope. The most successful policies are limited in their scope, often imposing such restrictions on individuals under age 18 on Friday and Saturday nights past a certain hour (often 5 or 6pm). A policy with a limited scope may be more palatable to concerned tenants, especially those whose business relies on the teen demographic for its core business. Depending on the tenant mix, the policy may need to include carve outs for movie theatres, restaurants, or other on-site tenants to whom such a restriction would be detrimental. It is also important to consider any special events or other times when the restriction may need to be lifted. Some malls combat this by planning family friendly events during such hours to encourage attendance.

Implementation. In today's social media-driven world, an unhappy customer can quickly become a groundswell, making communication and a well-thought out implementation plan extremely important. Mall owners and tenants often worry that the implementation of a youth-escort policy will lead to negative public reactions or, worse yet, actual demonstrations. Early community involvement and communication is important. Mall owners considering such policies should involve tenants early in the process and may even want to consider reaching out to local law enforcement, community groups and customers for input. Once a policy has been decided on, communication is important. It is important for the community to understand the motives behind the plan, how and when it will be implemented and who they can call with questions. Mall representatives should be ready to answer questions in the media and respond to any issues that do arise.

Enforcement. Enforcement is where the rubber meets the road for these policies. Much of the negative press associated with these policies centers on the potential for inequitable enforcement by mall owners and their personnel, making uniform enforcement the key to a successful policy. While posting security staff at mall entrances to check IDs upon arrival seems to be the easiest way to ensure fair enforcement, it can lead to greater inconvenience for all customers and doesn't address the groups of teenagers who may already be in the mall at the time the curfew takes effect. Spot checks cut down on these issues, but can lead to inequitable enforcement if security staff is not properly trained. Mall owners imposing such policies should be careful to implement thoughtful training programs for tenants, employees and security personnel to help alleviate these concerns.

Cost. With additional security staff and oversight, comes additional cost. Since security charges are often passed through to tenants as an operating charge, mall owners may find themselves with unhappy tenants, especially those who may not have seen any direct negative impact on their bottom line due to the teenage population hanging out in the mall. Tenants looking to control their costs in this regard may be more inclined to seek a cap on operating charge increases in their leases. Even greater tensions will arise if the policy actually leads to decreased sales for tenants due to negative public reactions, disparate enforcement, or perceived or real inconvenience to shoppers that results in them finding alternative shopping centers, which may in turn cause the mall to lose tenants.

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