

Sears thrives after \$5 million renovation at Gwinnett Place Mall

New-look Duluth model seeks more female, teen shoppers; is first company store of its kind in U.S.

by Christopher Lancette

If you haven't visited the Sears, Roebuck and Co., at Gwinnett Place Mall in a while, you might not recognize the place: The remodeled Gwinnett location is the first store in the country to feature a new look.

Gone are the interior walls stacked from ground to ceiling with merchandise. You can see across the entire floor, like a show room, on each level. You'll also notice a number of other changes ... a "customer solution center" that's equal parts concierge desk and Internet café. "Lifestyle vignettes" that look like cutouts of a home and show how various Sears' offerings could look in your house. Expanded display areas of major brands such as Lands' End clothing. And 13,000 feet of additional shopping space.

For Sears, the \$5 million project is aimed at providing a better shopping experience for greater numbers of patrons – and enhancing its position in the marketplace.

"We've always had a dominant presence in kids' clothing," Hall says. "With Lands' End (owned by the Sears Holdings Corporation), we're able to better accommodate parents."

Sears also made a major investment in clothing for young men by acquiring the Structure clothing line.

Retail analyst Scott Rothbort observes that the new concept appears to be a good move – giving the company a chance to win more women and more teenage customers. His research has found that twice as many men than women name Sears as their favorite department store.

"Sears is not afraid to test new concepts," says Rothbort, a professor at Seton Hall University and the president of Lakeview Asset Management. He notes as a disclaimer that one of his company's holdings is the Sears group of companies. "It sounds like it has an experimental concept there that could potentially begin to pay off in terms of achieving what Sears



The new Sears store model invites shoppers into a more wide open, showroom-type environment.



The whole design is about "the customer experience from beginning to end," store general manager Michael Hall says. Sears launched the improved store last November. "It was obvious that we needed to step ahead of our competition.

We want our customers to be comfortable. A lot of retailers are getting away from that - using every inch of the store for selling space and leaving the customer behind."

Hall adds that Sears brass likes what it sees so far, meaning that the Duluth model may start appearing at more of its 866 full-line stores located across all 50 states and Puerto Rico, primarily mall-based locations.

The Gwinnett Sears is focusing a lot of attention on women and on teenagers. For the former, the company converted its inventory of Lands' End merchandise to the largest such store department in the Sears chain.

needs to achieve - ming notes in its merchandising and marketing portfolio by making the store more attractive to women and younger shoppers."

Retail specialist Bob Phibbs says the idea of creating a warmer, more inviting environment is part of a national development.

"This is right on trend," says Phibbs, whose Retail Doctor consulting practice has helped hundreds of small and medium-sized businesses in a variety of industries. "The idea of creating the feeling of home is what the best stores from Starbucks to Pottery Barn are going for. The way they are looking to differentiate themselves from the old retail model of aisle after aisle of product helps cut down customers' choices so they can envision themselves with the product."

Hall, meanwhile, is finding that the renovation project is paying another dividend.

"We have one of the nicest stores in the country," he says. "This is making it a more desirable place to work - giving us a bigger applicant pool to draw from. The Duluth model is a big win for our customers and our company overall." **GBJ**

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The Lands' End area of the Duluth Sears is now the largest of its kind in the country.



Sears has placed a series of lounges in many departments.