

Care in the community

Christmas has always been a time of goodwill and for shopping centres it can be a great time to support community and charity projects, spreading festive joy while giving shoppers another reason to visit

Every year there is a flurry of activity as centres strive to come up with fresh and exciting campaigns designed to raise much-needed cash for worthy causes and benefit the community. Here are a few of 2010's Christmas triumphs.

The Lowry Outlet Mall at Salford Quays was one of last year's stars raising over £25,000 for Francis House Children's Hospice, the highest amount in the mall's ten year history, with its Festival of Trees project.

Now in its fourth year, the project saw local and national companies and organisations donating and decorating a spectacular array of Christmas trees, with shoppers bidding to take home their favourite one.

This year sponsored trees included signed goodies from Manchester United FC, a L'Oréal tree packed full of styling and

electrical products and others donated by the cast and crew of Coronation Street and Emmerdale. Artist Harold Riley also donated a tree featuring his 'Dancing Nuns' artwork which sold at auction for £1,500.

David Woodrow from Francis House was pleased with the outcome.

"This has been our best year to date at the mall," he says. "The trees looked fantastic, companies were very generous and the bids just came rolling in. Our pop-up shop was always bustling with shoppers wanting to bid on the high quality of trees and goodies on display. We are thrilled to have raised such a significant amount for the charity."

Throughout December the mall also played host to Harold Riley's pop-up art shop. Funds raised from the exhibition were donated →





"It's really important to give the community the Christmas they want"

→ to a host of charities including St Ann's Hospice, Henshaws for the blind, Imibala, Salford Lads' Club, Slide, the Riley Education Foundation and Francis House.

thecentre:mk took a different approach, incorporating a walk-in wishing well into its Christmas Storyland adventure show, raising over £9,000.

Normally, money from the wishing well is donated to a single charity but this year there were so many applicants that the centre chose to support two - the RSPCA and the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust.

The money will go towards an ambulance used by the RSPCA to save small animals within the community and the rest will help the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust to buy easy-access chairs, an exercise bike and other equipment to inspire patients with acquired brain injuries.

"We carry out a thorough application process before we select the charities who receive our support to ensure that all

charitable donations will be used within the local community on tangible projects which are for the good of the local people," says Melanie Beck, head of marketing and communication at the centre.

The wishing pool has been the focal point of the annual Christmas show since 1985, raising more than £340,000 over the years.

Last year the wishing pool was made more interactive than ever allowing people to walk inside and watch their loose change travel down a series of pipes, to collect in a pool at the bottom.

"The wishing pool is always really popular, people expect to see it and they're interested to know how much is raised every year," says Jessica Evans, PR Officer at thecentre:mk, who says that supporting charities is paramount.

The management team also brought in over 30 local musicians and choirs to perform on a bandstand as part of the Christmas show in the centre's Middleton Hall.

Meanwhile Coventry's West Orchards shopping centre invested £65,000 on a striking purpose-built monument or Wishing Tree, prompting what centre manager Andy Talbot describes as "tremendous" feedback from visitors.

The monument, complete with LED lights was custom made by LDJ Design & Display and erupts into a dramatic illumination whenever coins are dropped into one of the slots on the stainless steel tree.

The Wishing Tree is permanent and was installed in the run-up to Christmas. So far the money raised has been donated to a →

→ host of beneficiaries, including The Royal British Legion's Poppy Appeal, Breast Cancer Research and Myton Hospice.

"We see this project as very much our way of giving something back to the community and a great way for the centre and tenants to show our continued support for both local and national charities and good causes," says Talbot.

"I'm sure it will be an iconic part of the centre for many years to come and hopefully lots of people's wishes will come true."

The Beaumont shopping centre in Leicester had the novel idea to enlist school children to design its Christmas grotto. Over 50 pupils from Beaumont Lodge primary school took part in the competition with six-year-old Aaliyah Lawrence announced as the winner.

Her drawing, featuring a cosy fireplace, a Christmas tree and a purple window with a snowy scene outside, was brought to life in the design of the grotto by the centre's in-house team. Another eight drawings were chosen as runners up which were made into posters on display outside the grotto.

Sarah Duffin, centre manager at Beaumont, said: "We wanted Santa's room to be just as a child would imagine it. So it seemed a great idea to let young children have a hand in creating the design and we all thought that Aaliyah's drawing was absolutely brilliant."

"Our winner and finalists all came to our Christmas launch event with their parents and grandparents. They were bursting with pride when they saw their drawings made into posters displayed around the grotto. When we took the grotto down Aaliyah and her Mum came to take home the window we recreated from her drawing."

"It's really important to us that we work with the community to give them the Christmas they want."

According to Duffin, feedback from visitors was brilliant and the centre had 18 per cent more children visiting last year than in 2009.

The centre also had a Giving Tree with hundreds of gifts donated by shoppers and retailers going to women and children living in Beaumont Leys women's shelter.

And as part of a full programme of community orientated events, the centre held a carol service in conjunction with a local church.

There are many innovative ways to collect money for charity but combining this with an added service to offer customers can reap further benefits, impressing customers as well as supporting the community.

Manchester Arndale opted for an environmental twist as part of its community initiatives, saving 17 trees worth of paper by encouraging staff and shoppers to recycle their discarded Christmas cards and wrapping paper.

"Our Christmas recycling campaign proved a hit with people and next year we will set the bar even higher," promises general manager, Glen Barkworth.

"Christmas is known as the 'golden quarter' because of the number of sales within that period and as such a heavyweight marketing campaign is put into promoting it," says Barkworth. "It only seems fitting for us to be doing something proactive to give back to charitable groups and also to the environment during this time."

"There is also so much wastage from cards and wrapping paper during the festive season that recycling seemed like an appropriate theme and one which relates to everyone – retailers, staff and customers alike. Individual small actions can add up to make a big effect; there are over 10,000 retail staff at Manchester Arndale so even if they just brought in one card each, the volume speaks for itself."

Another service led campaign took place at The Whitgift

shopping centre in Croydon, which raised over £20,000 from 'It's A Wrap', a campaign running throughout November and December, with volunteers on hand to wrap customer's gifts in exchange for a donation to the Royal Marsden Cancer Charity.

Hundreds of shoppers took advantage of the service each day paying £1 per parcel. The team wrapped a staggering 7,090 gifts with money raised going to Key 103's Cash for Kids.

In addition, the centre used the Whitgiftcard to raise further funds by donating £1 for every Giftcard bought worth over £10.

"We are delighted with the total raised and are pleased to be able to continue to support such a worthwhile cause," says centre manager Andrew Bauer. "Our shoppers' generosity and sense of community continues to impress us, especially at a time when consumers are having to be extra careful with their spending."

The 'It's A Wrap' service has been running for fifteen years raising over £610,000 for the Lisa Thaxter Trust and The Royal Marsden.

As a way to bring in families, several centres chose to host 'meet and greets', narrations and shows from a range of children's cartoon and film characters.

Rainbow Productions arranged appearances in a number of UK centres.

Bob the Builder and Wendy & Spud starred in their 'Never Mind the Breezblocks' stage show at Chapelfield shopping centre in Norwich and at Golden Square shopping centre in Warrington while Peppa Pig and George narrations took



place at Whiteleys shopping centre in London.

Other characters visited Christmas light switch-on ceremonies including Fireman Sam at CrownGate shopping centre, Fifi Forget-Me-Not at The Mall Camberley and Postman Pat and Jess the Cat at Princes Mead shopping centre where they helped to collect letters for Santa.

These experiential activities help to drive footfall by engaging with families in a shopping environment, in turn helping to

deliver positive effects on secondary spend through increased dwell-times.

Of course, meet and greets can be used at any time of year but when combined with other Christmas events and activities it can be a magical experience for children.

Community and charity projects often take centre-stage during the festive season and they are rewarding for centre management and customers alike. And the possibilities are almost endless. So, what will you do this year? ■

Find out more:

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