

Shoppers Find a Bargain

Free Tax Filing at Your Local Mall



Millions of shoppers visit malls throughout America each year. Malls are typically located in densely populated areas and able to attract large amounts of foot traffic, making them ideal places for outside businesses and community organizations to hold events and reach additional customers and clients. With support from the Walmart Foundation, One Economy Corporation, and United Way Worldwide, the United Way of El Paso established a tax filing site in Basset Place Mall in West Texas and provided free income tax assistance to more than 350 visitors over a three-week period.

Visiting the Mall

Basset Place Mall advertises itself as a locally trusted community establishment, with anchor retail chains including Ross, Target, Kohl's and Marshalls. Located on a major highway, the mall is close to both the El Paso International Airport and Fort Bliss, a major military base. There are a number of educational institutions nearby, including the University of Texas, El Paso and the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center. The area around the mall also contains a large population of tech savvy clients between the ages of 18 and 34 who fall into the low- to moderate-income bracket.

Setting Up in a Mall

The United Way of El Paso leveraged its board members' business connections to sign a short-term lease for a semi-permanent storefront space in Basset Place Mall. After securing electricity, the partners signed a short-term contract for high-speed Internet connection

through AT&T. Finally, The United Way of El Paso County purchased a mall-required insurance policy.

Marketing and Advertising Campaigns

To increase the effectiveness of their community outreach and marketing campaign, the United Way of El Paso used additional grant funding to contract with a communications firm. This allowed the Tax Campaign partners to focus their efforts on the program activities, while the communications firm ensured the campaign attracted new audiences.

Marketing and advertising campaigns developed by the communications firm targeted both general mall visitors and the greater El Paso community. Specific campaigns included:

Signs and Banners

Signs and Banners were used within the mall to publicize the tax campaign and attract shoppers that were unaware of the tax site's location. A large banner was displayed over the door of the storefront housing the tax preparation site and large stand-up signs were placed in the doorways of the mall to point clients in the direction of the tax site storefront.

Newspaper

El Paso's daily newspaper, the El Paso Times, printed an article and interview with details about the benefits of filing online at the mall. This activity appeared to be the single most effective form of outreach with several clients saying they had "read about it in the newspaper".

Collateral

Local staff and volunteers distributed business cards to shoppers throughout the mall. The business cards included the website URL, the tax site location and hours of operation for the site. Fliers were passed out to all of the businesses at the mall to help create a buzz. The fliers announced the location, dates, times and documents needed to file taxes.

Lessons Learned

- Hiring a communications firm allowed the organization to focus on programmatic operation and services.
- Press releases alone are not effective at establishing a relationship with a journalist to generate print articles and/or televised news.
- Timing is an important factor; the site should be secured and running during peak operations between late January and late February.
- The Beehive Tax Tool is not available in Spanish; to support a non-English speaking population, bilingual volunteers supported the site to ensure clients received the best service or a referral to a VITA site.

Conclusion

Successful malls see heavy foot traffic and are easily accessed by the surrounding community. The retail locations that are located within low- and moderate income communities are ideal settings for nonprofits to deliver services directly into the neighborhood. This innovative model succeeds in expanding the client base with new users who do not traditionally seek tax filing services.