

Databases selected: ProQuest Newspapers, ProQuest Central

Shoppers Seeing Dropoff In Service

ASHLEY M HEHER. The Ledger. Lakeland, Fla.: Apr 5, 2009.

Abstract (Summary)

"If having a business open an extra hour is more of a cost than a benefit, it's a pretty easy decision to cut back on hours," said Virginia Commonwealth University **marketing** professor David Urban. "In the big scheme of things, consumers are already cutting back dramatically on dining, travel, and other non-necessary expenditures to stay afloat financially. So in a sense, they are doing the same things in their personal lives that retailers are doing in their business lives."

"You need to provide a breakfast experience, but you don't necessarily have to provide a huge spread to do that," Laura Paugh, the Bethesda, Md.-based company's vice president of investor relations, told analysts recently. "So there's always more things you can do should business continue to weaken."

"When you get seated, the first thing they say is, just to let you know, tonight we're out of our blah blah blah," she said. "It's annoying, but you can't really get too annoyed when the **economy's** so bad. There's a certain amount of leniency you give to people."

Full Text (819 words)

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CHICAGO | First came the housing bust, followed by eroding job security and dwindling retirement accounts.

Now, the worst downturn in decades is nibbling away at something so entrenched that people took it for granted: simple, everyday convenience.

It can be as little as driving a few extra miles to buy sheets at Bed Bath & Beyond instead of the now-defunct Linens 'N Things. It's the grumbling that comes with the trash being picked up once a week instead of twice. Or finding there's a long wait to use a computer at the public library.

Regardless of the cause, navigating the altered landscape can leave people scrambling.

Los Angeles costume designer Laura Frecon found the store where she custom-ordered vintage-inspired tap shoes for a musical darkened and locked when she arrived to fetch the footwear.

The business, which once operated from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., cut its hours in half because of sluggish sales. Some days, it doesn't open at all.

With the lead actress shoeless, Frecon stood in the store's parking lot and called the owner, who eventually drove over so she could retrieve her shoes.

"When I placed an order and I needed to pick it up and they're not open during regular business hours, that affects my job," the 32-year-old said. "It makes it tougher to do my job well."

The changes businesses are making - like the law office in Chicago that stopped providing employees with free coffee - are usually aimed at staving off more drastic initiatives like layoffs and wage cuts.

SHORTENING HOURS

In the most dramatic instances, experts said, small changes can help businesses keep their doors open as consumer spending falls and unemployment grows.

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The 55 malls in the U.S. owned by Westfield Group - many in California, but also in 11 other states - started curtailing their hours on March 1. Most will open half an hour later and close half an hour earlier during the week. Some will close an hour earlier on Sundays.

At three Central Florida malls owned by Westfield, that means stores will open at 10:30 a.m. during the week and close at 8:30 p.m. The decision was made to help tenants, many of whom are struggling with falling sales as shoppers dramatically cut back spending, said spokeswoman Katy Dickey.

"Naturally retailers and landlords alike hope this would be temporary," she said.

Walgreen Co., the nation's largest biggest drugstore by sales, is in the midst of scaling back hours at about 10 percent of its nearly 1,600 24-hour pharmacies to cut costs. The Deerfield, Ill.-based company wouldn't say how much it hopes to save by the effort, which began late last year. Pharmacies across the country are affected.

CREATIVE CUTBACKS

Beyond shorter hours, other businesses are getting creative.

Travelers trying to power up on Vitamin C may find fewer options at breakfast buffets. Executives at Marriott International said the hotelier may drop items such as some fruit selections from the breakfast buffets - or ditch them entirely for menu ordering - if occupancy rates at some locations are too low because fewer people are traveling.

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Ansley Whipple, a 26-year-old from Atlanta who eats out several times a week, said she often has to swap appetizer and drink orders because restaurants run short on menu items.

"When you get seated, the first thing they say is, just to let you know, tonight we're out of our blah blah blah," she said. "It's annoying, but you can't really get too annoyed when the economy's so bad. There's a certain amount of leniency you give to people."

At the U.S. Postal Service, which has seen a mail volume drop of 5.2 billion pieces this year, hours are being curtailed. The head of the independent Postal Regulatory Commission has suggested closing small and rural post offices to help save money. Meanwhile, Postmaster General John Potter has asked Congress to consider allowing the agency to cut mail delivery back to five days per week to save money.

Elsewhere, budget cuts mean planning carefully what days to cook fish and could mean waiting longer for subways and buses.

Credit: ASHLEY M. HEHER, The Associated Press