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Lifestyles: Jill Hambek 857-1938 or 1-800-735-3229; e-mail jhambek@minotdailynews.com



Photo courtesy of Mall of America

While the hundreds of shops attract visitors to the Mall of America each day, the mall has much more than just shopping. One of the big draws is a four-story high rope course that is challenging and exhilarating for all ages.

## Six things I learned at the Mall of America without shopping

By John Bechtel  
Freelance writer

With almost 5 million square feet of space under one roof, over 520 stores and 50 restaurants, and 1,200 mall employees and another 15,000 store employees, the Mall of America is not just another mall.

If you've never been there and you're trying to visualize this, you can put seven Yankee Stadiums inside the mall. It has a 1.2-million-gallon aquarium and an entire 25-ride Nickelodeon amusement park indoors, including a ferris wheel and roller coasters. The building cost \$650 million to build, and they intend to invest half that much again enlarging and improving it in 2015. A little more than halfway from here to Chicago, the number of visitors the Mall of America gets each year from Chicago alone exceeds the entire population of North Dakota.

So how is it I spent a recent weekend there without shopping? My first exposure to the Mall of America as a place to learn was when I asked Dan Jasper, a one-time resident of North Dakota and now public relations vice president of the mall, about the blue bracelet on his wrist.

It was engraved with the words "Make Someone Happy Today." All the mall employees wear the bracelet, and it is about enhancing the guest experience. "Guest" at the mall is not a euphemism. The Mall of America harnesses technology to make people feel welcome in new and creative ways. How many of us, when put on hold making a phone call to a business, have been subjected to endless sales promotions or propaganda about how wonderful the enterprise is? Sometimes it feels like technology being used to torture a trapped audience.

### Keeping the "social" in social media

There is a department in the basement of the mall called Enhanced Service Portal that does just the opposite. One wall is covered by flat screen TVs, and there are more of them on the desks. The staff monitor all use of social media on the property, from Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, even email. Unless you set your smartphone on private, you can tweet the mall about where to buy the best ice cream, a particular movie (14

### without shopping

theaters), or where to find Herobot, the largest Lego model in the world, made from 2.8 million Lego bricks, and weighing about six tons. As famous blogger Marty Weintraub recently discovered, the ESP staff are empowered to give the guest truthful opinions rather than a politically correct list of your options.

Mall of America doesn't preach, it serves. For example, the parking lots are huge, and everywhere there are signs asking if you need assistance, text this number. If you can't find your car, or if you see someone behaving suspiciously, or even if you want to know what entrance to go in or the best place to shop for something specific, when you text the number listed you will get a human response.

There are signs in restrooms: Hygiene problems? Text this number for immediate service. Otherwise it could be hours before the matter got handled, to the dismay and disappointment of how many guests? Using ESP in this way has improved efficiency, helping

management recognize problems, such as perhaps this one particular restroom has problems at about the same time of each day. Guests lost in the mall? Don't understand the directories? No problem, text this number and someone from ESP will respond.

Jasper says part of making people happy is recognizing what guests are really communicating when they ask one thing but want to know quite another. For example, a question "When is the 4 o'clock parade?" translates into Where is the best place to see? or Where is the fastest place to exit; we don't want to get stuck in traffic.

On one occasion a guest jokingly tweeted: "Did you know the average life span of the housefly is 24 hours?" The good-humored response was: "Let's hope it lived life to the fullest."

The point is, many businesses are stumbling their way into social media and perceive its use as for broadcast only. Used that way it can be perceived as a heavy-handed and annoying sales tool rather than social. As



Photo courtesy of Carolyn Ferguson

A herobot towers over the crowd near the Lego store at the Mall of America. Built with 2.8 million Legos, the herobot invites people to try to build their own masterpieces.

Weintraub says, brands that don't listen come across as deaf. Social media is about being social, two ways. It invites honest feedback. It is a guest engagement tool.

At Mall of America they go one step further and have a program called "Surprise and Delight" and throughout the day they will randomly approach guests with free tickets, coupons or other surprises and engage them in conversation. If you have previously been in contact with them through social media, they may even track you down to give you a gift.

There was an early morning program at the mall that day honoring veterans, and there were a lot of uniformed service people on the first floor observing the proceedings up on the balcony above us. 1st Sgt. Robert Renning, 52, of Woodbury, Minn., a few months ago had rescued a trapped motorist by bending in half a locked car door of a burning SUV to extricate the driver. After receiving recognition for his heroic action, Renning, with his girl-

friend by his side, dropped to one knee and proposed to her in front of the crowd. "Surprise and delight" seemed to be in the air. Twenty unpaid mall volunteers came in at 5:30 that morning to prepare for the event, even though they had just come off a long Thanksgiving weekend.

On that same Thanksgiving weekend, surprise and delight rose to a whole new level, thanks to technology, with the tweet-activated blizzard, or Twizzard for short. The mall installed a big thermometer with the temperature set at 72 degrees and for every 1,000 tweets the temperature dropped to 0 and it started snowing inside the building — a Twizzard, for sure.

In one way or another all of us in the workforce are in the service business. We have customers, patients, guests. Even without a snow machine, have we made someone happy today?



Photo courtesy of Carolyn Ferguson

After growing up in North Dakota, Dan Jasper has found his home as public relations vice president of Mall of America.

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## □ Mall

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### Having Fun and Building Self-Esteem

Another learning experience awaits you at the Dutchman's Deck Adventure Course, a rope challenge course, the second highest in the country. There are four levels to this adventure that will test your tolerance for perceived risk and capacity for mind over body. At all times you are safely tethered, so you're not going anywhere, but somehow when you look down at the roller coasters below you it doesn't feel that way. The higher you go the more tenuous your footing, until at about 55 feet above the concrete floor of Nickelodeon, you are inching your way across a single cable. This is a lesson in trusting your harness, the ropes, and the engineers who designed this apparatus. It is about facing your fears. It is about being supportive of others, not ridiculing or pushing them. Your adrenalin pumps, your legs tremble, and the cables dance and sway.

Challenge courses such as this one have been useful tools for helping troubled adolescents, but they have also been frequented by the military, the police, business executives, athletes and even church groups to foster confidence, self-esteem and team work. Some have had good results with families doing the exercise together. When the adrenalin subsides there is camaraderie and the satisfaction of having faced fear in a controlled situation.

I saw many young children up on the ropes, and I saw even more parents firmly anchored on the concrete floor far below. Standing on a wobbling board four stories up helps to put other things into better perspective. As adults, are we at risk of forgetting how good it feels to step outside our comfort zone to learn and achieve?

### Swimming with the Sharks

The third thing I learned at the Mall of America is what a great learning experience the aquarium can be, especially for students and special events. The best part of the aquarium is the tunnel that runs through it, so the fish and sharks swim around and over you. Did you know that there are 2,000 species of jellyfish, and that even dead ones can sting? Have you ever wondered why lobsters have one really big claw and another small one? The big one is for crushing, and the small one is for slicing, sort of like a knife and fork. Did you know the horseshoe crab is a living fossil, and that it dates back 200 million years? During courtship, seahorses



Photos courtesy of Carolyn Ferguson

Guests at the Mall of America line up in front of the hundreds of different colors of Legos offered at the Lego store. Below, children ride the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles at a full-size amusement park at the mall.

dance until the mom lays her eggs in the dad's pouch. Gives a whole new meaning to "Save the last dance for me." The seahorse is the only animal where dad gives birth.

The aquarium is owned and operated by Merlin Entertainment, the No. 2 entertainment company after Disney. They own and operate forty aquariums around the world. They are involved in breeding, rescuing and protecting endangered species. What a great place for students to learn firsthand about conservation. Even more fun, you can book overnight parties inside the aquarium tunnel, where you can camp out with the fish around you. At 9 years and older, you can snorkel with the fish, and if you are SCUBA certified you can swim with the larger fish and the sharks. Harvey Mackey, author of *Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive*, would be proud of you, although he was being less literal than we're talking about here.

### Connecting Physics and the Real World

My fourth takeaway from Mall of America: Nickelodeon offers Group Physics courses based on the physics and engineering of the rides, designed for middle school and high school students, especially those preparing for AP classes. There is course material for students and for teachers including questions and reviews, and the program is teacher run, giving them all the flexibility. The course

begins in the classroom, with a follow-up trip to the mall to see, feel, and experience the science behind amusement park rides. Major benefits for the students are to be better prepared for science assessments and to make the connection between classroom science and the real world.

### Communication Matters

I asked Dan Jasper how someone from Rolla got to his position of responsibility with Mall of America, and his story leads me to the fifth and sixth things I learned from this weekend, without shopping. About 30 years ago, Dan was working in communications for nursing homes. There he met a new, young nurse who after only six months had decided she hated nursing. Her name was Julie. She asked if she could mentor under Dan in communications, which she did unpaid, because there was no money in the budget for anyone else. Eventually Julie moved on, got into television broadcasting, interned with Oprah and also became a founding producer for Dr. Phil.

Over a period of 25 years Dan and Julie stayed in touch, sharing a cup of coffee periodically. About nine years ago Dan got a phone call from Julie. By then she was the director of public relations for the Mall of America, but wanted to reduce her work life to make room for a growing family. She asked Dan if he would step into her job, and she would work for him two days a week.

What lessons did Dan have to share from his experience? One, never underestimate the value of networking. Two, never pigeon-hole yourself. Don't identify yourself as only one thing. You could be many things, and some day you might become something unexpected.

### How to Get There and Where to Stay

Nestled in Bloomington, a suburb of Minneapolis-St. Paul, the Mall of America is easily accessible by Amtrak, Jefferson bus line, highway and air. For transient oil and health care workers in North Dakota, it is an ideal place to meet up with friends and family who fly into a major airport (MSP) to visit. Depending on your circumstances, the cost of the extra leg of air travel into Minot may make it more economical to have your reunion at the Mall of America. There are lots of things to do and see for people of all ages.

The mall is 500 miles from Minot by car, or about an eight-hour drive. Bus fare is inexpensive. Amtrak offers you a sleeper car, or you can usually sprawl out on a half-empty train most nights. Amtrak offers onboard dinner and breakfast, and an open bar until



about 11 p.m. It has stops in Williston, Stanley, Minot, Rugby, Devils Lake, Grand Forks and Fargo. The bad news is no one can even hazard a reliable guess how long the Amtrak journey will last due to any number of delays. If you have the time, Amtrak can be cheap and fun.

Groups can travel economically by charter bus, school bus or Jefferson Lines. Airfare is fast and the most expensive, about \$500-plus roundtrip from Minot to Minneapolis-St. Paul.

There are about 40 hotels near the mall. I've only stayed at two of them, the RadissonBlu and Country Inn and Suites at Mall of America. RadissonBlu sports a unique and chic ultra-urban architecture, fine dining at their FireLake Grill House, room service, a bar, concierge service, and a direct indoor connection to the mall. Go there to feel pampered.

The Country Inn and Suites, directly across the street, is family friendly and offers a complimentary breakfast and free chocolate chip cookies. I saw troops of young girls with their adult

chaperones while I was there. Breakfast chatter was happy and full of excited anticipation. A TGI Friday's restaurant and International House of Pancakes are both half a block away. IHOP is open 24 hours a day and they provide room service to the hotel.

I appreciate amenities as much as anyone, but wherever I stay, how I am treated by the staff is by far the most memorable metric of the visit. At two different price points, both of these hotels provided impeccable service.

The Mall of America in collaboration with several of the hotels, including the two mentioned above, are eager to attract more visitors from North Dakota and they are promoting vacation getaway packages for oil personnel. The same is true for temporary and agency health care workers, or anyone else for that matter.

Here is a link to their North Dakota Getaway video. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=URDb05jHns&list=UUM31kmbXJnO8xKPue2-Ebcg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URDb05jHns&list=UUM31kmbXJnO8xKPue2-Ebcg)

There are six episodes of "The Intern," which are

funny. Dan Jasper, our home state guy, even makes a cameo appearance in #6 as the boss.

If budget matters, pre-planning is well worth the time. I would begin your research by contacting the Bloomington Convention and Visitors Bureau. A representative will be glad to help you crystallize what kind of trip you want, and how best to meet your goals. Going to the Mall of America is almost like planning a trip to New York City, for a lot less money. There is more to do and see than you can possibly imagine. Let the pros guide you. It's free. Call 800-346-4289 and tell them you read this article. They are looking for guests from North Dakota. Ask them about current discounts, coupon books and special deals.

When you get to the mall, just for fun, tweet them and ask them if they know the house fly has a life span of only 24 hours. Let me know what they say.

Oh, one more thing. I probably should mention the Mall of America does have over 520 stores, if you want to go shopping.



Photo courtesy of Carolyn Ferguson

Visiting the Mall of America is about much more than just shopping. After visiting some stores, guests can ride the log chute while enjoying a full-size amusement park inside the mall.

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