

TORONTO'S BIG BlackOut

COMMUNITY
RELATIONS

Dufferin Mall reinforces its position as a community anchor, garners positive media attention

The last time the City of Toronto suffered a major blackout, Dufferin Mall was plunged into darkness. It was August 14, 2003 when a massive power outage hit 50 million people along a corridor that stretched from Ontario, Canada to America's northeastern and mid-western regions. But things were different during the blackout that occurred downtown earlier this month.

That Friday morning, after spending the night in their frigid homes, some local residents and workers bundled up to face a temperature that felt like -29°C due to the windchill. With so many schools, offices and street shops still on standby for power, people headed over to the mall.

"We've learned since that province-wide

blackout in 2003. We've placed our exterior lighting on generator, so people see our sign and know to come to us," said Lana Vukelic, Dufferin Mall's general manager.

"It's like being in the middle of nowhere and then seeing the McDonald's arches or the Tim Horton's sign. You know it's going to be okay. People will say, 'The Duff has its lights on, so we can head over there.'"

Half of the stores were still closed, but the hydro was back on for 60 percent of the property and there was heat. And since the mall regularly opens its doors early anyway to accommodate a health clinic and a few other tenants, Vukelic and her staff decided to provide a temporary refuge for anyone who simply needed to come in from the cold, especially elderly citizens.

"The outage affected a broad area of the downtown sector's West side and the mall is right there in the middle of a residential area," Vukelic explained.

"I spoke with one older gentleman and he told me that the temperature in his home dropped to eight degrees overnight. When you're older, these things are tough. We were glad to open our doors for people like him. We've had a reputation for being there for the community for more than 30 years, so they know the mall to provide good things."

Young people also flocked to the mall. The schools were closed, so students who normally came in at lunch time were in the building earlier than usual.

Vukelic said she didn't attempt to corral people in a particular area of the mall because shoppers typically enter from different points. Unlike suburban center clientele, seventy percent of Dufferin Mall shoppers arrive on foot, with the bus or via the subway. So the mall let

them come in their usual way and roam wherever they wished. A fair number of them ended up at Boston Pizza.

The restaurant might not serve breakfast, but the mall worked with the retailer to make coffee available to shoppers, many of whom had no power at home and had been deprived of their morning jolt.

Meanwhile, the manager at Joe's No Frills grocery store got a generator so he could open as well—mall customers rely on his store for their daily staples and for its pharmacy.

"People spread out throughout the mall. Some shopped at the stores that were open, others sat in the food court and chatted among themselves," Vukelic recalled.

"We have really good media in Toronto, but without power there was no TV or radio. So people came here for news, information and warmth."

News reporters also went out to Dufferin Mall to cover the blackout story, including staff from FLOW 93.5 radio and two television stations, CP24 and CTV. They would not only get a chance to take the community's pulse, but they'd also find a good business story.

"I got customers like you wouldn't believe," Vukelic said.

"It's been a very good day for us. We were scheduled to close at nine, but were considering staying open later than that to accommodate our shoppers if needed."

In the end, the power was restored as planned, ending a hectic yet productive day for Dufferin Mall.

If anything, the blackout proved that, beyond fulfilling its CSR mandate, a mall can get a quantitative return on its community relations investment. ■

