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M&M's Maker Taps Hunger for Retail Experiences

By Greg Isaacson January 24, 2020

Mars Retail Group is planning new interactive candy stores in Florida, Minnesota and Germany.



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The rise of online shopping has thrown the fate of many retail chains in doubt, but the maker of M&M's is boosting its brick-and-mortar presence after finding that a careful blend of technology and candy is enough to whet customers' appetites for in-store experiences.

Mars Retail Group will open three new "experiential" stores showcasing the signature chocolate candies in the U.S. and Germany over the next two years, the company announced, including one relocation and two stores in new markets. The brand worked with property brokerage CBRE to identify the future locations at the Disney Springs complex in Orange County, Fla.; Mall of America in suburban Minneapolis, Minn.; and Berlin's Kurfürstendamm shopping street.

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"Mars has never made a direct-to-consumer play in totality in the way that it is about to," Patrick McIntyre, the company's director of global retail, told Commercial Property Executive.

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Mt. Arlington, N.J.-based Mars Retail Group currently operates five stores in prominent locations in Manhattan, Las Vegas and Orlando, Fla., as well as London and Shanghai. The division of privately held Mars Inc. sees these retail locations both as marketing tools and places to move candy.

“All of our stores are performing very, very well, with the exception of where we are in Florida, which is why we’re moving this store. It used to be a good location, now it’s really not,” McIntyre added.

Making it personal



Mars draws confectionery-lovers to its M&M's stores through colorful features such as “walls of chocolate” made up of towering candy-filled tubes and

interactive experiences, such as the option to create personalized sweets. The company's first location, opened in Las Vegas in 1997, is equipped with a small movie theater.

"You can put your face on an M&M within two minutes' time. You can have a dance party. You have lots of Instagramable moments," McIntyre said. "If you come in and buy some of our merchandise, awesome. If you come in and just have a great time, even better."

Mars launched a remodeled Shanghai store in late 2018 that the company bills as its most technologically advanced, featuring a "mood analyzer" that scans customers' faces and a variety of mobile payment options with Alipay, WeChat and Apple Pay, among other offerings.

"Every three months we do something new in Shanghai," noted McIntyre. "We are always giving a new experience to our consumers, whether it's analog or digital, because you have to stay fresh. Otherwise you become stale very, very quickly."

New stores in Midwest, Europe

As part of its expansion plan, the company's existing store in the Florida Mall along Orange Blossom Trail in Orlando will be replaced by a new location on the west side of Disney Springs, a waterfront retail and dining destination within the Walt Disney World Resort. Construction of the store at 1486 Buena Vista Drive is expected to kick off immediately, with a grand opening slated for this year. The state-of-the-art shop will exceed 10,000 square feet.



Mall of America. Image courtesy of Farragutful via Wikimedia Commons

Mars will also venture into the Midwest by opening a more than 24,000-square-foot location in the Mall of America, one of the largest malls in the country. The brand will occupy a central location on the first and second floors of the property developed by Triple Five Group.

In addition to the U.S. moves, Mars is making its debut in Berlin, where it has partnered with developer Centrum Group to create a more than 30,000-square-foot destination in a standalone retail building in the city's premier shopping district. The new store, to open in early 2021, is located a block away from Apple and Nike outlets as well as the landmark Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church.

Bucking the trend

The confectionery brand's growth plans come amid a flurry of retail closures announced by some of the country's most visible chains. Audio equipment retailer Bose revealed last week it is closing its remaining 119 physical stores across four continents, shortly after Macy's said it would shutter 28 department stores and one Bloomingdale location.

Clothing retailer Express said this week it plans to shed roughly 100 of its more than 600 stores by 2022. Other big names that have recently joined the brick-and-mortar exodus include Pier 1 Imports, which may eliminate almost half its retail network, and Forever 21, which filed for bankruptcy last year.