

BUSINESS

Shop and sweat? Lululemon offers yoga classes as well as clothes in new store at MOA

It is the second large experiential store for the athleisure brand.

By John Ewoldt (<http://www.startribune.com/john-ewoldt/10644811/>) Star Tribune |

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Not every retailer can make a space where shoppers sweat and eat sound appealing, but Lululemon thinks it can.

“The space to shop, sweat, eat, relax. Do it all in one place,” the company said.

The Vancouver-based seller of yoga and athletic apparel is opening its second-largest store in the country at Mall of America on Wednesday. The 19,700-square-foot space on first floor west marks another step in the mall’s drive toward experiences.

“We’re moving beyond retail,” said Maureen Erickson, vice president of experiential at Lululemon. “We’re blurring the lines between retail space and community space.”

The new Lululemon store replaces a smaller one that opened in the mall in 2010. The new store includes space for workout classes, a rentable event space for meditation or meetings, men’s and women’s locker rooms and showers, and a cafe to grab light refreshments and drinks. And men’s and women’s apparel too.

Mall of America shoppers may be shocked to see what looks like a fitness class in session, seeing bodies moving on the opposite side of a translucent privacy glass wall. (The glass is clear when class isn’t in session.)

Anyone can drop in on a class for \$25, complete with the brand’s own yoga mats and blocks. Not wearing fitness gear? Test men’s Commission shorts or a sports bra during the try-it-before-you-buy-it session, and shower afterward with Lulu’s branded soaps, shampoo and lotions, complete with handheld Dyson hair dryers.

Want a smoothie and a snack waiting for you after class? They arrange that too.

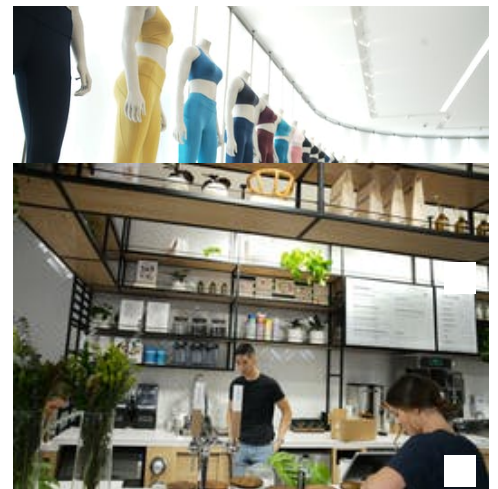
Lululemon will have 13 to 15 local ambassadors affiliated with the store to spread the word about the brand. They may teach fitness and wellness classes around the Twin Cities wearing the brand or have a leadership role in the community.

“They want to be seen as a fashionable brand that’s also an authentic community partner,” said Mary Van Note of Ginger Consulting in Minneapolis. “They don’t want to be like Ugg that was also functional but went out of fashion. Lululemon wants to be seen as an evergreen product.”

The company generated sales of \$3.3 billion last year, up 18% from the previous year.

Even so, brand awareness remains a challenge.

About half of Americans have never heard of Lululemon, according to a recent survey by Bernstein Research in New York.



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII, STAR TRIBUNE

The new Lululemon store, on the west side of the mall’s first floor, will have a smoothie bar near one of its entrances.

“At Mall of America you’ve got way more eyeballs walking by your store than at other malls,” Van Note said. “It’s an elevated, flagship store that you don’t see everywhere else. People expect more from it.”

With the new store, similar to a slightly larger store that opened in Chicago in July, Lululemon is raising its game as competitors as varied as Old Navy, Nike, Athleta, Fabletics and even Victoria’s Secret have joined the expanding \$55 billion athleisure market.

But proof of Lululemon’s dominance lies in the fact that it rarely resorts to discounts. Fans of the brand may recall a warehouse sale at the Minneapolis Convention Center five years ago; the line to get in snaked down 3rd Avenue.

Executives said not to expect another one in the Twin Cities, although an outlet store is open year-round at Premium Outlets of Albertville.

Besides Mall of America and the outlet, Lululemon has stores in Edina, Minneapolis, Minnetonka and St. Paul.

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