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Kristene Quan/MEDILL

Upon entering the new Walgreen store, customers find hand-rolled sushi.

Sushi at Walgreens: Will consumers buy it?

by KRISTENE A. QUAN

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A sushi bar, eyebrow grooming services and wine tastings. Sounds more like an expensive hotel than a drugstore. But Walgreen Co. plans to change your mind.

The Deerfield-based company unveiled a two-story Walgreens at 151 N. State St. Tuesday that boasts fresh hand-rolled sushi, a juice bar, and a wine selection of more than 700 labels, some costing more than \$400 a bottle. In a release, Walgreen says the store “brings together our most innovative, forward-thinking initiatives under one stunning roof.”

The store also will be a prime example of Walgreen’s new strategy of increasing personal contact between pharmacists and customers. Pharmacists in the store will be encouraged to come out from behind the counter to speak with patients.

But some customers who stopped by to have a look are wondering whether the company’s rebranding and return to State Street will be successful. It’s a far cry from the candy bars, nail polish and envelopes Walgreen is known for. And the location, across from Macy’s downtown department store, is not exactly tony Michigan Avenue.

“There are a lot of homeless people around here,” noted Angela Howard, a resident of the south suburbs who works in the area. But she was impressed with what she encountered inside the store.

“When you walk in, people are really friendly,” said Howard. “I hope they keep it that way.”

The corner has a long association with Walgreen. The company operated a store at the northeast corner of State and Randolph streets from 1926 to 2005 but it closed as part of a major renovation of the block. After a new building went up, discount fashion retailer Loehmann's Holdings Inc. took over the space. The Loehmann's store shut in January 2011 after the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization.

Walgreen signed a lease on the space in July and renovations began in the fall, said Walgreen spokeswoman Tiffany Washington.

John Hausaman and Maggie Jones stopped by the new store Monday evening to peer inside the window at a private party thrown by Walgreen to introduce the concept.

“There's a lot of competition downtown,” noted Hausaman when asked whether he thought the new store would be a hit with locals. But he had no doubt that the store would be a draw for out-of-towners. “I think it would be a tourist trap.”

Sondra Brunke, a Wrigleyville resident, arrived 30 minutes before the store opened Tuesday at 6:30 a.m. after hearing about the services the new flagship will provide.

“I'm surprised more people aren't here. It's an event,” she said. “It doesn't happen often.”

The 79-year-old said attending the store's opening was part of a “bucket-list” for her.

“I'm pleased to see Walgreens return here. I hope they do better than Loehmann's,” Brunke said. “The corner has a lot of traffic.”

Walgreen executives are sure to tout the new retail concept at the company's annual shareholding meeting Wednesday afternoon. Walgreen shares rose 89 cents, or almost 3 percent, to close at \$34.39 Tuesday.



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Walgreen's new flagship store on State Street has more than 700 labels of wine some priced as much as \$450 a bottle.

