

# Shopping as art form

Retail stores need to offer a pleasurable, sociable customer experience, akin to an art gallery visit, to add something different to e-tail shopping online

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In my first book, *Brand Engagement*, I made the bold assertion that 'brands are 20% physical and 80% behavioural', implying that HR, communications and marketing departments really should collaborate more. Regardless of whether you're a designer, a behaviouralist, a comms specialist or so-called social media junkie, there is a very clear relationship between the purchasing environment and employee and customer behaviour. The impact the operating and shopping environment has on the ability of the brands to deliver on the range of promises made to customers and important stakeholders is often under-estimated.

Consider the retail experience. Store environments are the spaces we're all most familiar with, where the various manifestations of the physical brand deliberately stimulate certain emotions, responses and decisions from consumers. So, with retail shopping online increasing exponentially, bringing a brand to life in a comparatively expensive in-store context is increasingly under the microscope to deliver and make a difference.

The internet has polarised retail and the reasons for visiting and spending time in-store versus going online. For years,

traditional bricks and mortar retailers have talked about creating 'experience' and 'theatre' in their stores. Some of them have also grasped the importance of understanding the relationships their employees have with the brand. Now, with commodity and price the territory of online retailers, the physical experience needs to be re-envisioned and often re-engineered, both in the shop window and on the shop floor.

So, what can the physical store brand experience deliver for customers that the internet can't? Well, try these for starters: instant gratification; impulse, spur-of-the-moment purchase; and peer comparison and interaction. It feeds need states that have driven purchase behaviour since the year dot. In addition, the physical interaction is clearly a face-to-face opportunity for brand

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champions to shine at the front end rather than the design end of a process.

Even online, same-day delivery can't add value in the same way (delays aside), since the retailer effectively delegates a large proportion of the purchasing experience to a third-party supplier, the delivery company. And let's face it, delivery times and taking time off work to wait in for delivery are just not that convenient.

As we all know, if we're enticed into a shop, we can usually get our hands on the things there and then, and have at least the opportunity for a more enriching shopping experience. It's very hard to achieve the 'retail therapy' experience online in terms of total immersion in the brand and its products. There's nothing like being in a physical environment to satisfy the basic human need to hang out with other people who ideally inform, advise and (when they're doing their job well), provide valuable information and feedback. All the remote-user 'reviews' in the world can't replicate that.

In early 2012, even the online retail giant Amazon announced plans to open its first physical retail store in Seattle, selling tablets and e-readers. Its aim? To provide customers with a hands-on experience of its products in the context of a fully-branded experience facilitated by employees who are advocates and champions of the brand. Sound familiar?

Certain purchases will always involve road-testing or a more personal and expert, even reassuring, touch prior to commitment. And most people still look to a small group of people for advice and reassurance – friends and peers, family, doctors and sometimes trusted sales advisors. We're seeing a new generation of umbrella brands that act as impartial advisors, enabling other brands to coexist in one space – a kind of fragmented department store model projecting a clear set of values,

offering edited choice and more reasons to visit and engage.

The Nuffield group has combined gyms with hospitals and physios in pursuit of the relationship-based, holistic wellbeing market. While Lloyds Pharmacy is currently testing a concept in two UK locations called the Health Village that may very well revolutionise the same by teaming up with health and wellbeing brand partners to offer a wide range of healthcare services under one roof. They also offer the Lloyds Pharmacy Online Doctor service, an innovative and discreet in-store online service.

But there's little point corralling a set of brands under one brand umbrella, however aligned they may be on paper, unless the employees can role-model the approach in their everyday interactions with customers. Whether online or face to face, at the core of the brand proposition are people and they have a choice about how they interact with each other and with customers. Add up those exercised choices and you have the culture of the brand whether manifest online or in person.

The physical aspect of the internal culture or the space in which we do things is hugely important and often under-rated as, whether inadvertently or by design, it signifies what's important. It certainly needs to be factored into any customer brand engagement programme, and is just as important to an employee engagement drive.

Consider how all the talk about openness is undone by a closed office door; respect is undermined by unfair parking privileges or unjustifiably different standards of office furniture or an inappropriate front of house setup. Executives often fail to appreciate the importance of the physical, the visual, the use of space, colour and shapes in corporate communication. Yes, it's a cliché that a picture paints 1,000 words, but leaders often persist in using words devoid from their context. The real breakthrough in developing, launching and embedding the service and brand engagement programme for Nuffield only came when we threw away the slides and rooted the champions with training in the physical space.

Given the fact that the brand strategy offered a complete healthcare solution delivered through relationships rather than products, an off-the-shelf service training approach would have been counter-productive. Instead, we worked with a panel of champions and designed an ideal centre layout in 3D and, working with the centre



teams, tracked the journeys of different client types in real-time during the workshops.

By grounding the service standards in the environment for which they were designed, rather than drowning people in theory and lectures, the champions were able to raise and tackle very real situations and scenarios and share best practices with each other that they could apply straight away. This is giving the whole programme a much more practical feel, especially important as the participants are active people who spend their working lives leading by physical example. It was also an opportunity to explore the whole customer experience and the roles and responsibilities of the employees to maintain service standards whether the customer touchpoint was online, in-store or on the telephone.

Traditional retailers spend years in the equivalent of customer-service 'labs' trying to understand and dissect in-store customer journeys – shoppers' missions, mindsets, behaviours and, ultimately, their path-to-purchase. But there's no longer much time for navel-gazing and scenario planning. Different customer journeys are now taking place simultaneously across channels and technologies. This calls for a more enlightened, involving, innovative, open-eared, empathic and customer-focused approach to listening. It also means that the way retailers do things, online and offline, matters as much

as the goods they offer. Brand managers would do well to heed those words.

Traditional retailers often excel in terms of product newness, but lack originality in how that's presented. Etailors, on the other hand, excel at fresh and new ways at looking at content. This helps ensure that stores feel really different on a regular basis.

The real innovators will be those that harness the power of consumers through social media, creating and driving content with imagination and clear focus about their point of difference, as well as leveraging their supplier brands to do more and be more active. Humans are inherently social. While there are those for whom shopping is a chore to be done as quickly and painlessly as possible, for many others shopping is an art in itself – and stores are the galleries.

Innovative retail brands have the chance to embrace true multi-channel retailing in a way that most traditional high street retailers can only dream about. This will lead to a virtuous circle for the enlightened...great online and physical environments leading to more customers and, in turn, attracting and engaging more visionary employees who, if properly treated, will care enough to create more of those environments.



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