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Articles

Customer in Control

Giving people more choice over the way they shop
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Giving people more choice over the way they shop



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The internet has changed the way we shop. As well as offering greater freedom over where and how we buy, it empowers us to make more informed purchase decisions – it puts us firmly in control. In response, brands are adopting a more flexible approach to retail that offers customers more choice and involvement over both their in-store and online journeys.

Can you imagine life without the internet? Without email, instant answers, music downloads, catch-up TV, access to friends 24/7 from all over the world, direct from the comfort of your sofa? With a third of the world's population now online (Worldometers, 2011), we're increasingly able to quantify the profound impact the web is having on our lives on and off screen, and as a result we're keen to understand more about how our changing behaviour is affecting the way we shop.

So what do we do on the internet that we can't do elsewhere? What is it that people love about being online, giving this channel more and more 'share of our time'? We took ourselves to the street to talk to people, and their responses were highly emotive:

'The internet is everything. It gives me complete and quick access to what's important in my life.'

'Using Twitter and Facebook has made me feel more confident.'
'Google is my best friend.'

Shopping with a 'friend'

Being online seems to give people a sense of power and freedom, with the ability to do more and take control making it so appealing. We don't just take photos any more – we publish an album on Flickr and send out passwords to the chosen few. We upload the images we really like to Facebook

and share them with our friends, tagging them in so they're a part of it too. We don't just go out, we 'check in', giving our friends an ongoing insight into our varied lives. We are actively celebrating each moment and this is giving us a growing sense of importance. We count, and what we think matters.

So what does this mean for shopping? We're not just buying products on face value – we investigate and interrogate them. Eight out of 10 of us now research online before we shop (*Internet Retailer*, 2010) – we learn more about what items do and how they are made, we compare them, we hunt down the best price, we ask what the rest of the world thinks about them and then, once all this has been considered, we might buy. We can then rate our purchases and pass on our opinion, so that the process can start all over again. What 'real people' think is an important part of our shopping experience, a seal of approval from someone 'just like me'. We've become so used to sharing and reading the opinions of others that we're now twice as likely to buy an item we're unsure about if it has been reviewed by our peers (Sanctuary Media Group, 2010). We rely on each other to help us make decisions and a brand's role in this transaction is becoming less prescriptive than it might once have been.

“Online does not mean the end of stores, it just means the shape of them has to change to give people the right choices at the right time. Look at the ‘four-screen generation’– they are used to watching TV, browsing the web on laptops and tablet devices, and texting on their smartphones all at the same time.”

At Household we design retail experiences and for us the customers themselves hold the answers, so understanding how brands need to respond now and tomorrow to people’s changing needs is crucial. We read in a recent social media study (University of Texas, Austin) that a staggering 73% of people who regularly go online are more likely to talk to strangers in the real world than those who don’t.

Customer confidence

This fact gave us the insight that the online and the real world are really one and the same, they are not mutually exclusive, and they should work together more seamlessly to respond to particular needs or moods. Online does not mean the end of stores, it just means the shape of them has to change to give people the right choices at the right time. Look at the ‘four-screen generation’ – they are used to watching TV, browsing the web on laptops and tablet devices, and texting on their smartphones all at the same time. This is not just something they are doing at home, they are behaving this way when they’re out and about, when they’re shopping. Thanks to the increase of in-store digital technology we can touch and try on a pair of trainers in-store, find out about customisable options on the website via a digital kiosk, and check if the same pair is cheaper at the sports shop down the road on our phones. We want to do several things at the same time because we’re used to doing this, and it puts us back in control.

This means a need to re-evaluate the customer journey and its touchpoints, how the journey enhances the shopper experience and drives the all-important purchase. Our retail brand communication work with Dorothy Perkins has addressed this, ensuring the experience through all channels centres on understanding what she (the customer) wants from day to day. For example, on Friday and Saturday the physical store plays a key ‘going out’ role for her, bringing to life the energy

of everything the weekend promises. Whereas Monday lunchtime at her desk, when she’s feeling a bit flat and needs a ‘pick me up’, is the perfect time for her to receive a ‘fashion bonus’ email alert driving her to the website, where she can cash in on two hours of 50% off select items. This is a perfect example of how the bricks-and-mortar store and online can work with the customer.

Customer communities

As economic hardships grow, many people are adopting thrifty new buying strategies that allow them to spend on the things they want. We’ve read about a growing trend for people grouping together to bulk-buy discounted items online, and then splitting the bounty and savings with families and friends. And they often only need to pay one delivery charge. Made.com is an online retailer for designer furniture built around this same idea. Users register interest in the items they want, and only this amount is put into production. By only manufacturing what has been ordered, the company is able to reduce costs and pass the savings on to customers in the form of discounted prices. People are working together to do things their way. The ‘professional’ shopper is advancing.

At Household, we’re calling this touchpoint approach to retail design Shared Space Retail: where people are placed genuinely at the heart of highly interactive and personalised experiences, where the focus is on more ‘freedom’ and ‘control’ for the customer.

Our work with BLACK by Dixons Retail Group has explored the tenets of this approach. Chosen as Store of the Year in Retail Week’s Interiors Awards 2011, BLACK is an innovative new store format for Dixons, focused on serving and engaging customers, not just selling to them. It targets a segment passionate about design aesthetic and therefore products and brands



BLACK offers an 'experience oriented' shopping experience.

associated with this driver. There are three 'experience-oriented' destinations: the changing Collection Zone of new product ranges in the front of the store; the Studio Workshop, a sociable space for discovery that includes the Know How area, where staff host daily workshops; and the Virtual Shop comprising digital kiosks around the store. These options give customers ever more choice and information to help them make decisions. We believe this more open approach involving customers can create stronger relationships, commercial payback and loyalty.

We are also seeing signs of other retailers taking the steps needed to satisfy their customers with this kind of Shared Space Retail experience. In the homewares sector Bodum has made the leap and launched Bodum-Lab in Paris, based on the key words 'experience' and 'involvement'. The store engages customers by giving them the opportunity to get hands-on and test products. Shoppers are provided with ingredients and tools to cut tomatoes or make their own juice before they decide which knife or blender they like best – a simple but effective solution that makes the move from demonstration to participation. If shoppers find the perfect product, they can order it directly online while in-store and have it home-delivered.



Moss Bespoke's tailoring service brings together online and offline platforms.

In the fashion industry, Moss Bros Group offers a personalised service through Moss Bespoke that gives customers greater participation in the tailoring of their suit, by combining the roles played by the store and online elements. We worked with the brand to create the bespoke 'tailored by you' journey, which involves the customer booking an appointment online with their personal tailor, and having a fitting appointment in-store where they choose from a menu of detailing such as cut, fabric, buttons, reveals and linings. Their choice is recorded on iPads and each customer is given a takeaway pack of their personal fitting details, swatches of chosen fabrics and a personal business card. They can then log in online, email the tailor with any queries and track the progress of their suit throughout the process. Their personal tailor will contact them a week before the suit is ready to arrange a second fitting appointment in-store. At the final pick-up from the store, the customer receives personal styling advice on accessories, shirts and suit care.

As ways to shop continue to diversify, it will become even more essential for retail brands to secure that holy grail of customer loyalty. At Household we believe a democratic approach that allows the customer easy and rewarding access to the retail brand experience will be fundamental to ensuring this happens. ■