

INVOLVE ME AND I WILL LEARN: WHY RETAILERS MUST FOCUS ON IN-STORE ENGAGEMENT

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“The brands and stores that do that will be more successful. What we find is that even though shoppers may set out on a single mission, the stores that offer layers to that mission, or offer up new things to discover along the way, are much more successful, engaging and meaningful to people.”



RDE INTERVIEW WITH IAN JOHNSTON, FOUNDER, QUININE

There is an Ancient Chinese quote attributed to philosopher Xun Kuang, which when translated into English goes along the lines of “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn”.

According to Ian Johnston, founder and creative director of design agency Quinine, it’s a mantra that UK retailers would do well to consider as they shape their stores and customer propositions for the modern era.

Johnston says the quote neatly illustrates the challenge the retail world faces as it shifts from the solely store-based interactions of the last century to a generation where the shop is just one facet of the overall retail experience for digitally-influenced consumers. Many businesses are shaping their stores as much for service as they are for product, and the way this new approach is deployed is viewed as crucial to inducing customer loyalty and positive brand interaction.

“As soon as you get people involved it ticks so many boxes – it is what they are looking for; they’re looking for a deeper connection,” he explains.

APPLE OF RETAIL’S EYE

The Quinine founder was part of the speaker line-up at this year’s [Retail Design Expo](#) (RDE), where he advised on many techniques he feels retailers should be adopting as they navigate their way through a period of significant industry change and go about “restructuring themselves”.

Commenting in the aftermath of the event, he argues that good modern store design will have elements of learning, entertainment, and escapism, as well as helping create a “social connection”. He name-checks Apple as an ideal proponent of many of these features, with its new concept stores offering public meeting points, product demonstrations and an element of unexpected discovery.

“Apple does that so well and drives people into store around a learning offer,” Johnston states. “The company changed its whole store environment and is providing different reasons for people to come in store.”

He adds that the wider industry does seem to be moving in this direction, with more and more cafes and public spaces being attached to the traditional retail offerings. And the continued inclusion of the aforementioned immersive features is a positive sign for retail, Johnston says, bringing “good value” to the overall brand message and helping get customers involved in the brand’s story.

BASICS ARE KEY

However, Johnston warns retailers should not forget the fundamentals of design, layout and customer convenience.

“Some overlook the functional side of shopping – having that as a seamless and well-thought-out aspect of the shopping experience is so important to people,” he comments.

“The store needs to work for the customer, the business and the brands, and also the staff. It’s not simply the functional transactional part – obviously that has to work because the whole thing is set up to take people’s money – but it goes even further.”

It could be as simple as a designer coat shop not having the facilities for a customer to hang up the coat they are wearing when they enter the store, or the lack of space in a toy shop for people to try out products before buying them.

These are real-life examples, and so many retailers are still not thinking these fundamental things through. These friction points can have a major impact on customers’ perception of their brands, Johnston notes.

“Retailers jump over the basics first and want to get to the entertainment, and the social and escapism aspects, but they are only well received if you get the basics right.

“There’s a lot of work still there to make a frictionless environment. Everything needs to work and be considered for this to work, and the basics are key.”

A-GRADE RETAIL FROM EE

As part of his appearance at RDE, Johnston was on stage with Matthew Price, head of commercial and store design at telecoms business EE’s retail division. Quinine has helped EE evolve its stores into spaces where service is showcased



and staff are given multiple tools to serve shoppers in flexible and engaging ways. In some stores there are café tables, large bars, booths, and small seats, moving the retail experience away from what Johnston describes as the “focus for retail for 200 years” – the cash desk at the back of the shop.

“Let’s think about the store as an office for the staff – it’s their workplace, after all – and how do we create tools around the store to enable them to help the business achieve what it wants to achieve?” “We spent a lot of time working out different service touchpoints, different ways customers could interact and looking at the activities customers and staff want to do

– and enable them to do that better.” Johnston says EE is “looking to do less, better”, and wants to make its stores real service hubs for the communities it resides.

“Physical retail can connect customers to a brand that no algorithm will ever be able to do,” he argues. But, as his comments suggest, there are many layers to what good physical retail looks like today – and customer involvement and engagement seemingly remains key.