

The hybrid consumers who see stores as their playground

Interview

**RETAIL DESIGN EXPO Interview:
Sophie Corcut, Senior Consultant at GDR
Creative Intelligence**

Tech titan Samsung described the opening of its Samsung 837 product and events showcase location in New York at the start of 2016 as a “digital playground” where the company can engage with customers and inspire shoppers - and that term now has growing momentum behind it in retail.

“Create stores that are influenced by the online world’ is the mantra, alongside giving consumers experiences in physical spaces that they then want to share with their digital social communities.”

An increasing number of retailers are adopting this mentality as they revamp existing store portfolios or extend their presence in new territories, with the approach proven to work well in fashion, technology and luxury, and with the potential to improve other sectors too.

The subject was a common talking point at the Retail Design Expo (RDE) conference in May, none more so than in the session presented by Sophie Corcut, senior consultant at innovation consultancy GDR Creative Intelligence. She used the phrase “the hybrid consumer” to explain the characteristics of many of today’s in-store shoppers. In creating a newsletter, first determine the audience. This could be anyone who might benefit from it, such as people interested in purchasing a product or service.

Corcut explains that the hybrid consumer comes from people’s growing use of mobile, social media and the internet in the shopping process balanced with what she describes as a desire to visit places that complement their view of their world before sharing those experiences digitally. It is a trend that is having - and, in the case of many retailers, should be having - more of an impact on how businesses design their stores, especially as it is a common trait among the core 16-35 shopper demographic.

The reason this presents an opportunity for retailers is, while we focus so much on the fact people are using their mobiles and everything is happening in the online world, young people are looking for real physical places that can define them, tell people who they are, reinforce their values, and capture that before turning it into something digital,” Corcut says.

She adds: “Transactionally speaking, we know eCommerce is where the growth is, but you can attract a new generation of shoppers by creating playground spaces and physical environments they want to go to.”

Corcut’s thinking neatly supports the “physical retail’s not dead - boring retail is” soundbite that - rightly so - keeps cropping up in retail circles of late, but she offers some compelling examples of organisations that are not just playing lip service to this approach.

“It’s about physical assets becoming digital assets – it’s one really fertile area for physical retailers to win in a world where they may be thinking that everything is happening online.”

The digital-first fashion retailer Missguided, which has recently opened two stores and grown its concession/wholesale arm, appears to have had the hybrid consumer ingrained in its psyche when opening its inaugural physical spaces in London’s Westfield Stratford City and Bluewater shopping centres. So much so that Corcut suggests, to get this right, the store could only be designed by people that understood deeply the culture of Generation Z.

“It’s a brilliant example of a playground space for people who shop with the brand. It’s a wonderfully successful online retailer but they have created a physical environment that drives their target audience in because it is a space littered with icons and symbols that the consumer group relate to.”

Corcut, who was consumer trends insight manager at Tesco for three years before joining GDR, lists the “Press for Champagne” button at luxury Russian restaurant Bob Ricard and the Joos Fitting Room concept in China as other notable frameable consumer moments. The latter only permits entrance to this particular “playground” to those who are already part of the Joos online community and have the relevant mobile app, before encouraging visitors to share their experiences digitally.

It appears to be a growing trend, with the likes of John Lewis - in its new Westfield White City London store - and Oliver Bonas talking about inputting ‘Instagrammable’ areas in their stores and changing rooms, respectively. These would seem like moves in the right direction but, as Corcut alludes to, the route to strong brand engagement with hybrid shoppers is much more nuanced.

She says: “The key focus for retailers [when opening new stores or choosing a new location] is to create something that is unique to their audience. They must think about a target group and think what is unique, rather than ‘what is the gap in the local market?’

“They also have to keep the proposition fresh - within that consistent appeal they have to keep changing in some way. Keep it fresh and keep people coming back to see what’s new. It’s the basics of retail, maintaining that curiosity - but they’ve got to keep learning from digital too.”