

# How store design can make storybook heroes of retail staff

*RDE interview with  
Tim Greenhalgh,  
Chief Creative Officer at Fitch*



Against the backdrop of an ever-changing consumer landscape, retailers are continually advised to empower their staff and give them the tools and opportunity to provide better customer experiences.

It is not a new concept, but very few retailers are putting the theory into practice. Things are changing but not at pace, as some of the problems and widespread store closures on the high street indicate.

Tim Greenhalgh, chief creative officer at design agency Fitch, says well-thought-out store design can provide a platform to make heroes of retailers' staff. There is clearly a bias in Greenhalgh's thinking, considering his profession, but he backs the theory up with some real-life examples of success.

*“Customers can indulge their excitement over how a particular type of coffee is made and have a conversation about it with a dedicated member of staff – that helps make that staff member look like a hero.”*

The work Fitch did in helping bring the Starbucks Reserve concept to life – the coffee chain opened its inaugural Reserve store in Seattle in February 2018 – has given staff their own stage on which to shine. In a typical coffee shop, he says, customers stand in the same queue and the staff, although good at making coffee, are not empowered or creative – but that doesn't have to be the case.

## **Howard and the coffee factory**

In line with the former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz's stated aim to be the Willy Wonka of coffee, Fitch helped design an entirely different store to the norm. Starbucks Reserve is a meeting place, a location for discovery, and a café, store and community hub rolled into one, but the role of the staff is key too.

“If you stand in a Reserve there are different coffee stations, so if there is someone particularly good at making cold brew or a nitro, for example, they have their own station so they can really show off their skills,” explains Greenhalgh, who spoke about the growing importance of service in retail at this year's Retail Design Expo in London.



“Customers can indulge their excitement over how a particular type of coffee is made and have a conversation about it with a dedicated member of staff – that helps make that staff member look like a hero and it places them on a stage where they can express their individuality and expertise.”

That is Greenhalgh’s definition of making store staff heroes, but he says there are elements of it happening in the flagship Lego Stores, where his company’s design means staff are encouraged to get down on their hands and knees, sit cross legged and allow customers to play with the products. In Tesla stores, which Fitch has not had a role in designing, digital interventions such as screens and tablet devices are all used by staff to great effect, he says.

“Apart from the fact Tesla has a great staff training programme – employees are fully armed with useful things that can help aid a discussion about a product that some customers find quite complicated,” he adds.

“They have lots of displays and graphics so they can walk someone through the journey of what it might be like to become a Tesla owner.”



## **The philosopher’s stone**

With many retailers’ profits being squeezed, it does not necessarily seem like an environment where major new investments can be made in store design, especially when retailers face rising business rates, larger staff wages and other costs associated to government-led measures, such as The Apprenticeship Levy.

However, as Greenhalgh identifies, retail is starting to separate into two distinct functions: the way people can make a transaction and the way people can achieve closer experiences with a brand. In this context, there appears to be a need for retailers to dream big – and that is something the designer encourages.

In conversations with clients and would-be clients, Greenhalgh calls on them to convey what they would like their stores to look like – or their brand message to be – if money was no object. It follows the mantra of the late British philosopher, Alan Watts, whose famed speeches and readings called on people to frame their lives in this way so that their actions weren’t dictated by financial ambition.

“It’s a means by which we can get to the real heart of what brand x is versus brand y versus brand z,” explains the designer.

“It has proven really useful in getting to some ideas that we may never reached if we were simply just worried about how many SKUs can you get on a shelf that is 4ft wide.”

Echoing Watts, whose speeches often encouraged people to forget about money and to focus on the things they loved doing instead, Greenhalgh adds: “If we start a workshop with the idea of ‘what do you really want to do with your customers?’ and then work back from that, it will be beneficial to customers and the brand.”

In summary, it would seem organisations looking to thrive and continue operating in what is an increasingly tough trading environment for many traditional high street players, need to build-in storytelling, elevate their staff into more influential roles, and open their minds.

Store design based on these principals would be a positive move for retailers and brands, according to Greenhalgh.