

The future of retail: Sales rooms not showrooms

 By [David Ross](#)

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If retailers want to continue to attract consumers to their bricks-and-mortar outlets - and convert them once they're there - they're going to have to start thinking of their outlets as sales rooms, rather than showrooms.

In other words, they're going to need to create sensory experiences instead of static displays of product and will need to focus on rewarding those consumers who make the effort to come to a physical store.



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Experiential retail

Physical retail is distinct from online retail primarily because it's experiential. For example, in a car showroom, putting a rope around your stock and keeping consumers at arm's length creates distance, discourages enquiries and, most importantly, stops people from actually sitting in - and thus, experiencing - the product you're hoping they'll buy. That's not to say retailers should relinquish all control, or that a sense of exclusivity doesn't have its place, but small changes can encourage engagement, which in turn has the power to create sales.

Compare, for example, a Porsche showroom to one for Toyota. While the former has a sense of elitism and is designed to convey a sense of detached opulence, the latter (where some high-end vehicles actually cost more than their sleek, German equivalents) encourages interaction and hands-on experience.

People love to touch and feel things, and it's the inability to do that when shopping online that remains the main obstacle for online retailers. There remains a disconnect between online and physical stores, with consumers either using the retail space to examine a product before buying it online at the cheapest reseller, or using online retailers to research products and read reviews before making a purchase in a physical retailer, particularly in the case of big-ticket items like appliances and high-end electronics.

Physical retailers bemoan the fact that some consumers have become browsers who then shop elsewhere, but these same retailers often do little to try and encourage in-store purchases. Considering the effort required to visit a store compared to browsing a website, shouldn't physical retailers be rewarding those consumers who actually show up in person?

Shaping a sale

Obviously, given their respective business models, online and physical retailers have different overheads, and it would be economically unfeasible for physical retailers to offer every product at a lower price than their online equivalents, but occasional specials, spot prizes or other mechanisms that encourage visiting a physical store can also result in incidental purchases. After all, there's a reason supermarkets put bread, milk and other essentials near the back of the store: you never know what a shopper might pick up along the way.

Physical retail also offers the opportunity to present potential customers with information. Consumers are increasingly reluctant to ask for assistance, but digital signage, brochures and the like can allow customers to answer their own questions. Of course, friendly, approachable and knowledgeable staff go a long way, too.

Another important consideration in an age when more and more things can be bought online is that many - if not most - people coming into a physical retail environment plan to buy something. By offering them samples, calculated specials and discounts, pertinent information, and a superior support experience - whether through sales staff or interactive displays that allow people to retrieve information on their own - you have the potential to not only make a sale, but to shape it.

Physical retail

Shaping a sale needn't always mean up-selling a customer. Instead, it may mean preventing them from buying the wrong, overpriced product, which in turn can lead to repeat visits or referrals. There's a reason word-of-mouth recommendations are the holy grail for marketers: they're more effective than any advertisement.

Online retail may have grown, and in many segments will continue to do so, but it cannot mimic the experience a physical environment offers. Using digital display technology - be it digital signage or full-blown interactive touch displays - physical retailers can also harness some of the attributes that make online shopping appealing by, for example, cataloguing more products than are available in store or offering information over and above that which the product offers itself.

Showrooms display things, much like online retailers do. Sales rooms, on the other hand, take advantage of their physicality by creating an environment conducive to on-the-spot purchases that offer an experience, rather than merely a selection of products in cabinets. Physical retail isn't dead by any measure, it just needs to recognise its strengths and play to them.

ABOUT DAVID ROSS

David Ross is the Director of the South African manufacturer of display technologies, PVision. Focussed on the commercial market, the group equips business with locally manufactured products which include commercial displays, lite commercial displays, nano displays, touchscreen technology, mounting solutions and back end architecture.

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