The changing role of retail stores

Despite the digitalisation of retail, the physical stores space remains important. If we take a leap forward in time, I believe this will remain so, though the role of the store as such might change. Maybe even more than it ever had before. In today's retail landscape, there seem to be two huge challenges for retailers: a digitalising world, and an economic crisis that has changed the mindset of the consumer. Retailers will have to adapt to this digital disruption and to the 'new consumer' in order to stay attractive to them. So, what role can we attribute to the store in this changing world? If we look at all the places we can buy stuff today, it no longer remains solely to physical store spaces and online stores. You can buy stuff on Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, etc. Communication channels have become buying channels. The opposite, though, is also true: buying channels are becoming communication channels. This is also what the latest concept of communicating with the consumer, called omni-channel, entails (as a next step following on single channel, multi-channel and cross-channel). Omni-channel starts with the consumer, his/her behaviour and need for information. The biggest challenge of omni-channel is probably getting the right information or product, on the right time, via the right channel (or multiple channels) to a specific consumer.

In this line of thought, the store will increase in importance as a point of communication and human interaction (look at Amazon and other online retailers opening physical stores where they can connect with the consumer). So, the store is becoming one of many (media) channels where a consumer can buy products and can communicate with the retailer. This fits perfectly in how we buy products today: we search online, we go to stores to see the product to interact with the retailer, we go back online to read some reviews, to finally buy the product (in the store, online, wherever…). Instead of a linear process – like in the old days from advert to the store – the process is much more complex, but with every step, every channel fulfilling its purpose. Only, at this point, the only winner is the one who sold the product. Dough Stevens (2013) proposed an interesting thought in his book, though a quite radical one: physical stores, being one of many media channels, should fulfill the role of a place where people can interact with the brand and the product, where they are offered an intense experience engaging the consumer to the brand. Stevens raises the idea that independently of where the consumer buys the product, stores should be rewarded for playing that connecting and engaging role (bringing shopping to a whole different level). Though the actual selling figure of stores will go down, they can remain profitable in another way, by getting rewarded by its amount of visitors for example (as some online stores already function).

But how does this idea impact store design? Stores will become the most important channel for retailers to communicate with their consumers. A store should be a place where passion is shared, a social hub facilitating the growth of communities. Stores should offer inspiration, tell a story, and offer an intense sensory experience with one main goal in mind: to trigger an emotional connection with the consumer. This is what stores make unique and different from any other channel. Though, the difficulty lies within the fact that the store's story and experience no longer starts at the front door, but more likely via another channel like a website of social media platform. Every aspect of each channel, but also each part of the story needs to be consistent of what the consumers expect of the (retail) brand. If the main purpose of stores should be no longer selling products, but selling a brand, more can be invested in creating engaging experiences. Though we are not at that point yet, and not every retailer is selling

brands, retail design today does find itself somewhere between designing spaces to sell products and places that sell experiences.

To create engaging experiences technology and big data comes in handy. Our digital enabled world can make the store experience personal. Technology enables the retailer to communicate on a one-to-one level with the consumer, making him/her feel important and valued. Having that personal connection is the key to success. And, technology can benefit the functionality of a store: the ability to provide detailed information anywhere in a store, payment on the spot with a smartphone, etc. the possibilities today are already endless – who knows what will be possible in the near future – to offer good service and to stay connected with the customer.

Un sum, the basics of designing a physical store space haven't changed, there has only occurred a shift towards increased intention for personalised sensory design, facilitating connecting emotionally with the customer. The design of an experience will become a critical factor in making stores relevant in a world of omnipresent access and abundant choice. And, not as simple as it might seem, the seamless integration of the still developing digital world is today's challenge.

Six rules of customer engagement:

- offer service and experience since online wins on convenience, orientation, offer and most likely price
- tell a story, your (brand) story and do this in a consistent, coherent and differentiating way
- know that a good retail design contributes to the wished for (buying) behavior
- be aware that a **store environment** is the ideal medium for **communicating** your brand values with great precision. The consumer has **chosen to be there** at that moment and is therefore highly **receptive to it**
- offer inspiration, inspiration, inspiration
- know that the expression 'one picture is worth a 1000 words' also applies to one look of any customer at any point in time has at your store
- the store is the perfect place to spoil your customer
- let the customer, see, smell, touch, hear and experience who you are
- create an emotional connection with your customer, use your store to elicit new feelings, happy feelings