

SHOPPER ENGAGEMENT

The New Face of Retail?

When the Best Face is the Human One

By David Polinchock



In many retailers today you'll have a hard time finding staff that can tell you where things are. But recently I've been visiting stores in our SoHo neighborhood where the employees can not only tell you where things are, but they can also tell you where they came from, how they were made, and anything else you could think to ask. Is this the new face of retail?

For years retail pundits have discussed the impact of online shopping on the physical retail space. And while many have debated the "will we shop online or in-store" issue, what they've often missed is how the online shopping experience impacts the offline shopping experience, not how it eliminates it. One thing that it really changes is the information available to us as consumers. The result: there's nothing worse than going into a store and knowing more about the products than the people working there. The online shopping experience impacts the retail experience by tipping the balance of what we know as shoppers vs. the sophistication of the retail sales staff.

That brings me to the stores in New York City's SoHo. We stopped at Napapijri (www.napapijri.it/index_en.html), where the salesperson there could tell us everything about the store and the brand. She knew when it started, its history, where the materials came from, and

just about anything else you could think to ask. She took us from item to item. Not trying to sell, but educating us about their products. And they do have cool stuff! But it wasn't just a one-time fluke. We've been there now three or four times, and each visit has been the same, but with different salespeople. They showed us the product books that they use to study from — and they were proud to show us these books. Have your employees ever been proud to show off their training materials? I mean, think about that. Employees proud to show off their product knowledge!

Later, we went to a jeans store called Adriano Goldschmied AG (www.agjeans.com). Now granted, they were \$150+ jeans (which just shows you how old I am — I'm not used to jeans that sell for above \$45), but the level of service there was equally as high. They seemed to really take the time to look at you and to see which jeans would fit you the best. But the coolest thing was the little cappuccino bar where you can wait as the tailor — who sits in the window with what seems to be a gold-plated sewing machine — hems your pants for you.

Also in SoHo is a store called Operations (www.operationswear.com), created by three MBA students from NYU. While researching the manufacturing of work clothes across Europe for their final paper, they hit on the idea to turn some of the work clothes that they found into fashion items and sell them in

SoHo. The store was decorated using materials they found at manufacturing plants throughout the New York metro area, including the walk-in freezers they use as dressing rooms. But, like the folks in the other stores around us, they can tell you everything about the clothes and where they came from. Yes, they are also the owners, but even the employees we've met there know their stuff. And one thing that they've done so that everyone can know the story is to use the hangtag as a storytelling tool. So it doesn't just tell you how much it costs; it tells you the story of where it came from and what it was originally used for. It's a very cost-effective way to share your story with your customers.

Le Labo (www.llelabofragrances.com) is a playground for your nose. Look what they say about themselves:

Le Labo aims to have perfume enthusiasts better understand the time-honored art of perfume making, to hone their sense of smell and develop their olfactory "palette" so that they, too, can distinguish what makes up a fine perfume. Knowledge, in perfumery as in everything else, is essential to free choice. Otherwise, we're condemned to remain in the herd of consumers manipulated by the latest in advertising, fashion trends, and gadgetry...Le Labo believes that it is about time that we open our eyes, breathe in deeply, and take in all that life has to offer.

While they don't custom-make fragrances there, they do spend a



great deal of time helping you understand about fragrances and teaching you how they're made. And while I was there, someone was asking about a specific fragrance and the staff sure knew their smells. Once you've picked a fragrance, the labels themselves are customized with your name and a "good until date."

In a very different vein there's Kiki de Montparnasse (www.kikidm.com), which has worked very hard to create a very different experience for the products they sell. If you think Victoria's Secret, then Agent Provocateur, well Kiki carries it even further. They describe themselves as a luxury fashion and lifestyle brand that celebrates intimacy and inspires the romantic imagination. They actually have a salon on Wednesdays and Thursdays, with programming that runs from bondage to gourmet, romantic cooking. The store is really well done, and they've elevated the products that they sell from seedy environments to a beautiful store. And, although I was a little embarrassed to ask, they do go through a full training program so that they really know all about the products and clothing they're selling.

We visit the Burton (<http://burton.com/Company/CompanyFactoryStoresNY.aspx>) store a lot, and here the employees are actually boarders who come from snow country to work at the Burton store. They have an incredible amount of knowledge about Burton products and snowboarding in general, as you'd guess. And the store changes quite frequently. But, no matter how clear it is that I don't snowboard, they've never hesitated to take the time to answer any questions that I may have. And they have one of the coolest features — pun intended — of the stores here. If you want to know if that jacket will keep you warm, just step into the walk-in freezer, kept at a balmy 22 degrees, and check it out yourself. That's faith in your product.

The Diesel Denim Gallery (<http://www.diesel.com/-denim->

THE ONLINE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE IMPACTS THE RETAIL EXPERIENCE BY TIPPING THE BALANCE OF WHAT WE KNOW AS SHOPPERS VS. THE SOPHISTICATION OF THE RETAIL SALES STAFF.

gallery/ny/) is another intriguing store in our neighborhood. Here, they not only can tell you how to wash their one-of-a-kind jeans, but they can wash them for you, too. And the store is treated like an art gallery, with its own curator, who redoes the store every few months so that it seems like it's always different when you go there.

Now, to be fair, our neighborhood has a fair amount of clunkers, too. You know, the traditional retail place where it appears like you have completely intruded in their world and you couldn't possibly be as important as anything they've got going for themselves. I've even — gasp — had some not-as-good-as-they-should-be experiences at the Apple store (www.apple.com).

Unfortunately too many retailers forget that no matter what else they have in the store, their staff is their best selling tool. I recently wrote this on my blog about my experience as a performer at Walt Disney World:

"...And although it's been 25 years or so since I did the parade, just hearing that music and the crowd brought all of those feelings back to me again. Sitting on my couch in West Orange, New Jersey, I felt the energy that I used to feel waiting to go out the gate at step-off. That performer's high you get when you know you're about to bring something special to the audience that's been lining up for probably an hour just to see you. That my friends, is the hallmark of a great experience."

So take a look at the experiences you're delivering right now and ask yourself this: Twenty-five years from

now will one of your employees see something that brings back those memories and feel elated and excited knowing that they were part of it? Or will they be thinking, "I can't believe I used to do that. What a waste." We spend so much time trying to figure out how to create great experiences for our guests, but many times we don't even think about the employees. And if they're not feeling elated and excited first, your guests never will.

My guess is that many of the people I've encountered during my jaunts around SoHo will remember these gigs for a long time to come.

David Polinchock is Chief Experience Officer, Brand Experience Lab. Polinchock has a degree in theater with a specialization in children's theater, and his first job was as a Disney character and performer at Disney World in Orlando. In 1990, he was introduced to virtual reality and his inner geek was unleashed. He worked on almost all of the early VR events and won awards for his Immersive Animation Theatre and the Cutty Sark Virtual Voyage. Today, he continues to work with a variety of emerging technologies, in partnership with leading university research labs including the Entertainment Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University, the Media Convergence Lab at the University of Central Florida, and others, exploring new technologies to help companies more effectively tell their story.