

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

