

The psychology of shopping - Ajmal

While online shopping continues to grow in popularity having a strong physical presence will always be vital for retailers. The retail store acts as a brand promise, a statement of intent and an essential forum for interaction between the consumer and the product. This is particularly apparent in this part of the world, where shopping is still a key social activity, and the need to see and touch a product before buying remains strong "Without a doubt, online is a major influencer on the development of consumer markets," said Ian Caulder of London-based creative agency, Caulder Moore, which has been involved in a series of projects in the region, including Gina Shoes, Dubai Mall and Boutique 1 in Mirdif City Centre. Abdulla Ajmal, deputy general manager of Ajmal Perfumes, one of the regions leading manufacturers and retailers of perfumes and beauty products, has also seen the regions retail sector undergo massive change.

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHOPPING

The retail industry has evolved at a fast pace. What impact has this had on retail design in the Middle East?

By Selina Denman

While online shopping continues to grow in popularity, having a strong physical presence will always be vital for retailers.

The retail store acts as a brand promise, a statement of intent and an essential forum for interaction between the consumer and the product. This is particularly apparent in this part of the world, where shopping is still a key social activity, and the need to see and touch a product before buying remains strong. "Without a doubt, online is a major influencer on the development of consumer markets," said Ian Caulder of London-based creative agency, Caulder Moore, which has been involved in a series of projects in the region, including Gina Shoes, Dubai Mall and Boutique 1 in Mirdif City Centre.

"However, having an actual experience is also very important, and nowhere more so than in Dubai and the wider region. People want to go out and interact. Yes, you may get

the best deal online, but it does not engage all your senses. There is nothing better than touching and feeling the product."

WOING THE CONSUMER

Retail design becomes all the more important in times of recession. As customers become increasingly reticent about parting with their hard-earned cash, retailers need to make even more of an effort to woo them. Customers need to be convinced that they are being offered value for money, and an effectively-designed store can create that vital sense of reassurance.

"We have been in business for over 20 years and have seen a few recessions. Retail is like a barometer of the economic climate," said Caulder.

"At a hint of a recession, retailers always pull back, hold everything, cut back and reassess. The weakest businesses go, which allows new ones to fill the market," he noted.

"The best ones realise they have to keep moving forward by keeping focused on what they do well and by staying relevant to their consumers' needs by adding better value to the product and the experience. People also need reassurance in a recession to justify a purchase in their minds. It is all about the emotional mindset. There is always a market out there, it is just harder to compete," Caulder continued.

"You may get the best deal online, but it does not engage all your senses."

**Ian Caulder
Caulder Moore**

LEARNING CURVE

The retail landscape in this part of the world has developed quickly, as countries across the Middle East have worked hard to position themselves as shopping havens. Furthermore, the mega mall has emerged as a centre of social activity, providing welcomed sanctuary from the region's extreme temperatures. As such, shopping has become an integral part of the Gulf experience, for visitors and residents alike.

An increasingly well-travelled consumer is also driving the development of the industry, and is demanding better-crafted, more original retail spaces. "Retail design has evolved extensively over recent years. This could be attributed to the fact that designers are being given the freedom to elevate brands' interior identities, as well as the fact that the average consumer is more globally aware, leading to more well-designed spaces," said Alfred Johnson, managing partner of Dubai design firm, Imagination.

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Abdulla Ajmal, deputy general manager of Ajmal Perfumes, one of the region's leading manufacturers and retailers of perfumes and beauty products, has also seen the region's retail sector undergo massive change. "It used to be trading. The customer would come in wanting to buy something. There was purpose," he said.

"Over a period of time, better service and then better merchandising became important. But at that point, the idea behind merchandising was to create the impression that you had a lot of stuff. Finally, as we have come of age, it has become all about the experiential environment. The customer is not simply looking for goods," he said.

According to Ajmal, however, the industry's rapid growth trajectory has also brought problems in its wake. Dubai's retail industry has emulated many of the trends coming out of the west – but has tried to assimilate them over a much shorter time period, resulting in a very steep learning curve.

"Unfortunately, typically of Dubai, the infrastructure grows faster than all the support services. So, for example, you want good service but you don't have good training agencies. You have beautiful materials available but you don't have people that know how to implement them very well. And you also don't have many good commercial retail designers," Ajmal suggested.

"There are good designers around but retail design is not just about beauty; it is about psychology. You have to look at the movement of the customer, at how to break an environment down in order to subliminally communicate a message, at how to align your vision of the brand with the retail design. It could be the smallest of things. It could be lighting, it could be sound, it could be anything. All of this forms the psychology of retail."

"There are good designers here," countered John Rabone, managing director of R&R Design, "but the level of retail design is not sophisticated enough, probably due to the timescales. You tend to have a much longer development period in the UK. Here, it could



Gina Shoes at Debal Mall was designed by Caulder Moore.



be ten weeks from a blank piece of paper to an open store, and then we as the designers get into trouble when it goes wrong."

Designers are under pressure from clients, who are already paying rent and are keen to get their businesses off the ground. And retailers are under pressure from the malls, which want to minimise disruption and get all their components up and running as soon as possible.

"The mall insists, so you are under pressure," Ajmal explained. "And yes, we pressurise the contractor as well, because we don't want to lose the business. You are losing on the rent and you are losing out on the business. The average fit-out period for a store the size of our new Ajmal by Eternal store would be three months in London. You might even negotiate a six month fit-out period. Here, you are looking at 45 days."

LOCAL FEEL

Another issue is that the retail sector in this part of the world is dominated by large, inter-

national, franchised brands – which normally have a specific design identity that is reapplied whenever and wherever they open a new store. As such, it falls to local brands to drive the development of authentic, original retail design in this region.

"My feeling is the international brands are rolling out their standard formats, rather than focusing on understanding the local market and creating something special. There has been a noticeable growth in confidence amongst local brands to develop their own brands, or create new brands to compete with these international players," said Caulder.

Rabone also highlighted the importance of having strong local brands. R&R Design is currently working with a client in Kuwait that is developing three new retail brands. The overriding aim is to create locally-headquartered but internationally-viable brands that can go out and be successful in other markets around the world.

"The problem is that it is so tempting for people to just go out and get a franchise," said Rabone. "They've gotten into this habit but now is probably the time when they should be developing new, local brands."

KNOW YOUR BRAND

Key to any successful retail environment is a well-defined brand and a clear understanding of the target audience. All too often, there is confusion surrounding the basic brand identity. "You can go into a luxury store that is too densely merchandised and you can go into a low budget one that is sparsely merchandised," Rabone noted. "It comes back to the research, both from the designer and the client's point of view."

There is also a tendency for stores to try and do too much, Johnson pointed out. Retailers still have that old-fashion mentality of wanting to display as much merchandise as possible, with little thought for how that impacts the overall aesthetic of the store, or patterns of movement within it.

RETAIL NO-NOS

"Stores still try to do too much. They don't think about function or movement. The last thing a customer needs is a slalom course."

Abdulla Ajmal.

"There is a lack of understanding regarding the privacy and discretion of how the locals like to shop, and very little respect for the differences in taste created by cultural influences. And stores are often too literal with obvious local design statements."

Ian Caulder.

"Consumer interaction points are seemingly designed without any imagination. An average consumer spends between one and four minutes at a checkout counter and whilst the customer service agent is doing their bit, consumers are left absorbing the design language."

Alfred Johnson.

"A lot of people have kept that trading mentality. It is all about trying to push the product, rather than building the brand."

Abdulla Ajmal.

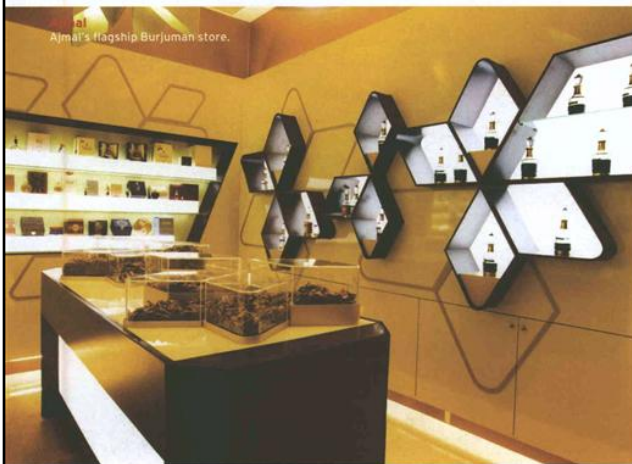
"You can have the best designed store in the world but if the lighting doesn't enhance the product, it will kill the interior. Unfortunately, that's one of the places where a lot of clients will try to save money."

John Rabone.

"A common mistake is to overcrowd an environment – this occurs when clients do not select the appropriate design firm and try to incorporate too many products into what ought to be a well informed and targeted space for their brand," Johnson noted.

In many cases, the retail experience has become too convoluted, particularly when it comes to some of Dubai's more elaborate malls. Mall operators have lost sight of the fact that what shoppers require above all else is ease and convenience. "A lot of times, they take the philosophy of the idea too literally, and they forget that this is supposed to be a retail environment, rather than Ibn Battuta's trail, for example," said Ajmal.

The aim, ultimately, is to elevate the product on display – rather than overshadow or draw attention away from it, Rabone concluded. "Your store has to represent the brand but it also has to be the backdrop to the product. At the same time, it needs to be striking and eye-catching and stand out from the crowd." ■



Ajmal's Hqship Burjuman store.