

OPINION

Cash-strapped retailers need to focus on self-help

Stores with well-trained and knowledgeable staff that provide an experience or offer services that their online-only rivals can't match, should succeed despite difficult conditions. By **Fran Minogue**

So it's all doom and gloom on the high street, and unless you have gazillions to spend on cutting-edge tech, you might as well lie down and wait for Amazon to finish you off!

Maybe it's time for a little self-belief followed by a sustained programme of self-help?

Ian Cheshire first used this expression at Kingfisher after the economic crash of 2008/9, recognising that customer engagement and friendly service at store level by knowledgeable staff will always be the way to win in a challenged market.

Of course, if budgets allow, we should all be investing in personalisation and better analytics, but not at the expense of our most expensive assets.

Stores have been starved of investment in recent years, but self-help can be low-cost and local.

As someone put it recently, "sales assistants are not costs to be managed down, but cast members bringing the brand to life".

Store colleagues know their community and their customers – listen to them and empower them to drive sales at local level.

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Clearly there have to be some controls, but a well-orchestrated national/local campaign can drive footfall and loyalty and, importantly, really boost morale.

The focus on online at the expense of stores has left colleagues feeling undervalued and powerless to influence either sales or their careers.

A recent OC&C study shows that in apparel across Europe, 58% of customer journeys involve a digital touchpoint, but 79% include a visit to a store. And a third of web sales across all categories are store-enabled.

But staff must be given the tools to do the job. Websites are so content-rich these days that unless the proper training is put in place, customers will often know more about the product than the colleagues.

Point of difference

Outgoing Dixons Carphone chief executive Seb James has focused very successfully on doing what Amazon can't – installation,

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repairs, upgrades and, of course, the all-important in-store demonstration and explanation of increasingly sophisticated hi-tech brands.

Demonstration can be a very powerful way to engage customers and give them a reason to visit, and often suppliers are happy to provide both the manpower and the know-how.

In fashion, there are so many opportunities to create in-store events – new ranges, summer weddings, the holiday capsule collection, plus expert advice on make-up and hair-styling.

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Shopping is the favourite pastime of the great British public and a trip to the recently enlarged Westfield proves that 'if you build it, they will come'.

The new John Lewis is a great example of how to reinvent the shopping experience.

Last Saturday the concierge desk was buzzing, but the busiest area of the store was where a charismatic Vitamix salesman was demonstrating the product and handing out samples – and that didn't cost the retailer a bean! **RW**