



# Signs of the times

Store signage used to be about getting shoppers to where they needed to be, but today it's part of the store experience in its own right. John Ryan reports on the latest displays at Trinity Leeds shopping centre

**I**n days gone by shopping was simple. The shopper entered a store, looked around and decided, on the basis of a quick scan, where to head for. For the most part, that worked in a single-floor shop because most areas were likely to be visible in a 180-degree sweep. Problems began when the decision was taken to head up or down to any additional levels that the store might have and that was where the store signage directory came into play.

Shoppers would pause at the entrance to a flight of stairs or an escalator and assess where they needed to be – it was purely functional. Today however, signage, whether in the form of a store guide or just a department indicator, is about a lot more than telling cus-

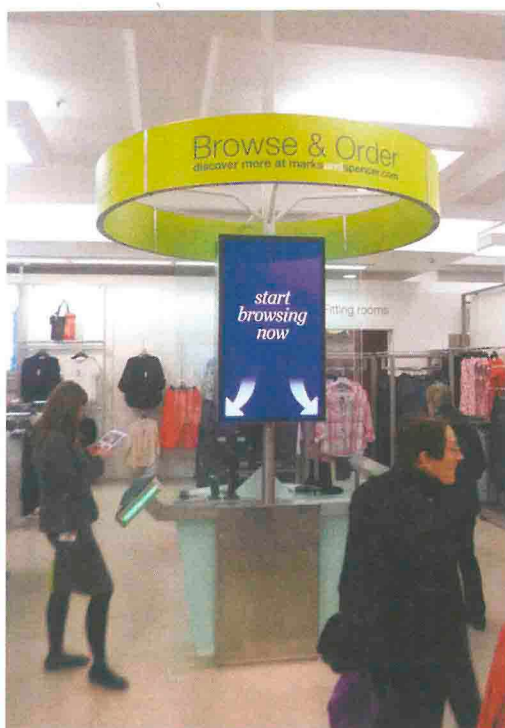
## SIGNAGE: THE NEW RULES

1. Signage is about helping shoppers
2. Signage is about contributing to the in-store ambience
3. Signage is about looking good in its own right
4. Not everything has to be digitally led in signage

tomers where things are – for many retailers signage is part of defining the in-store experience.

For some, signage means more than words. It can be images that the shopper will decode as icons for a specific merchandise area or it may be a combination of words, movement and graphics.

Overall the in-store experience is improving on an almost daily basis as a result of this rapid evolution. A brisk walk around the Trinity Leeds shopping centre sufficed to show what is happening, with retailers deploying an armoury of different kinds of signage to inform and enhance their interiors. The same was also true of the mall itself, which, since opening a little over a year ago, has become an advocate of the digital signage revolution.



## Marks & Spencer

The Marks & Spencer in Leeds has one foot in Trinity Leeds and the other outside it, facing onto the main pedestrianised shopping area.

In store there is certainly signage, but screen-based mood indicators serve to help shoppers find what they want as much as the very corporate looking printed signs that are scattered around the wide open spaces in the shop.

There is almost the sense that this is a store that is over-spaced, and the use of high-resolution digital screens bearing video clips of fashion models doing their thing helps to manage that by creating distinct areas. This is especially the case in the women's fashion departments on the ground floor.

In spite of this, it is fair to remark that the signage does not quite overcome the initial impression of having wandered into a barn where there is clothing.



## Primark

The value fashion retailer was a Trinity Leeds late-comer having opened in December after the scheme launched in March 2013. Nonetheless, this multi-floor anchor store plays every trick in the book when it comes to telling shoppers where things are.

Stand in front of the entrance to one of the lifts in the heart of the store and a digital screen, to the side of each of the doors, itemises what is to be found on the three floors. Near the escalators a freestanding digital light-box flashes up more or less the same, but alternates that with hand-drawn sketches of what is on each floor. The impulse is modern and technological, but that is softened by the use of the not over-slick floor plans.

This can be contrasted with the experience of riding the escalator. Look up and the signage is on-brand, but is given a fashion touch by using white lettering on a black background with each floor number detailed in Primark's corporate turquoise colour.

Elsewhere, hand-drawn-style graphics point shoppers to Primark.com with calls to "find your fashion" and "look online shop instore". This is a concession to the fact that Primark remains that high street rarity, a retailer that does not have a transactional website but which is still keen to direct shoppers to its stores via the internet.

Finally, at mid-floor display unit level, shoppers are offered a graphic of what's on each fixture with a price next to it for each type of merchandise. This tells the shopper all that is needed about the products and might just prevent the all-too-frequent Primark shopper behaviour that results in a T-shirt pulled from the bottom of a pile in such a manner as to ensure that everything is overturned... and left.

Primark understands that digital signage and the rough-and-ready faux hand-drawn are not mutually exclusive.

## Topshop/Topman

Neon signage is having a bit of a moment in store design circles. In the Topman/Topshop store in Trinity Leeds, where the two brands are found on separate floors, this is obvious from the outset.

It really is signage that works on the level of informing the shopper where items are to be found, but it is also about looking the part and supporting the brand and in-store experience.

In this store, the signage takes on the quality almost of a sculpture – shoppers look at it for what it is, instead of what it is telling them. Couple all of this with the fact that neon signage has a digital aura about it. It is, of course, nothing of the kind, but this does not detract from the impression that the shopper is in some kind of retro space-age store environment.

Worth noting too is the fact that at the top end of the ranges in this store the signage above the merchandise is very simple, following the same principle as Urban Outfitters.







### Apple

There is a sense that if digital signage isn't visible in an Apple store then everybody might as well go home. Yet glance through the door of this standard fit-out Apple store and there is nothing of the kind.

Instead, the walls are light-boxes that show, for the most part, brightly coloured but static images of the latest winsome iPhones. This tells the shopper all they really need to know. Apple is a store where tech products that are also about fashion are on display.

If digital signage and movement are required however, look no further than the window where a series of pictures, some urban, others of rural landscapes, each have an iPad positioned at their centre. The iPads in their turn complete the images that they form part of, except that they have movement.

A perfectly ordinary, albeit good-looking, image is thus altered in a manner that once more says, we may be about art but we also understand tech – perfectly on Apple brand.

### Urban Outfitters

As a rule of thumb and nowhere more so than at the mid-market end of retail, the higher the price the more rudimentary the signage. This is the same world in which jeans that are in tatters command a premium as far as the price tag is concerned and means that the only way for signage is handwritten.

In Urban Outfitters, digital has little part to play other than at the cash desks. If a sign is to work in the shop it has to have something of freshly sprayed graffiti about it.

There is a handmade quality about all of the fixtures, fittings and signage in this store that looks as if it has been realised on an ad hoc basis. The knowing shopper recognises this and shares both the joke and the feeling that they are part of a club.



### Next

The multi-floor Next in this shopping centre is remarkable for how little digital signage, or anything approaching it, there is. That said, the ground floor entrance makes up for everything with a 'look at me' digital screen showing non-stop videos of women wearing Next product.

This is a shrewd move because this entrance has nothing other than the screen and an escalator that takes customers up to where the shopping action is. It would have been relatively simple to install a smaller entrance and to glaze over the rest to create store windows, but in terms of mood creation and providing a taster of what is to come, this is a much stronger (and, in the long term, cheaper) option.