

LESSONS IN digital TRANSFORMATION

Thomson's new digitally progressive stores give customers a personalised and interactive service from the moment they step inside. *Laura Heywood* asks what the retail industry can learn from the travel operators' innovative take on fully immersive shopping experiences

As winner of the Digital Store of the Year at this year's BT Retail Week Technology Awards, holiday operator Thomson is certainly breaking boundaries when it comes to new-generation digital stores.

Its new-format shops have everything from an external immersive wall to get shoppers in the holiday mood, to an interactive map that allows them to explore information about countries around the world. An interactive table helps customers choose hotels, and a 'mood-based' search allows customers to select their holiday based on images that inspire them (see boxes).

This is holiday shopping at its most inspiring – gone are the days of sitting in front of a travel agent's desk as they attempt to sell you one of your most expensive purchases of

the year, armed only with a dog-eared holiday brochure.

"Historically travel agents have been very sales orientated and the environment has been more office than shop," admits Doug Glenwright, Thomson's general manager of retail transformation. "We have relied on traditional brochures; taking a brief from customers has been functional and uninspiring as we have done little to bring holidays to life outside of the sales systems."

But all that has changed with the operator's Holiday Design Store format, which was rolled out to Bluewater in Kent, Liverpool and Bristol at the end of last year on a trial basis, before what Glenwright describes as "a sizeable roll-out of the concept" in the latter half of 2014.

For Glenwright, the number one driver for revamping Thomson stores "was to make buying a holiday as exciting as it should be". "To do this we needed to bring our products →

FEATURES OF THE THOMSON HOLIDAY DESIGN STORES

Exterior immersive wall: A large 10ft by 13ft screen, displaying inspirational content including a 10-minute "perfect holiday" designed to put customers in a holiday frame of mind.

Digital billboards: Two 55-inch digital screens in the entrance allow customers to approach from any direction and see the range of products and services offered via simple motion graphics.

Interior Interactive map: An 84-inch interactive map allows customers to explore useful information around the world with each level displaying further detail (broken down to world, country, destination, region, resort) to finally view more than 2,000 properties.

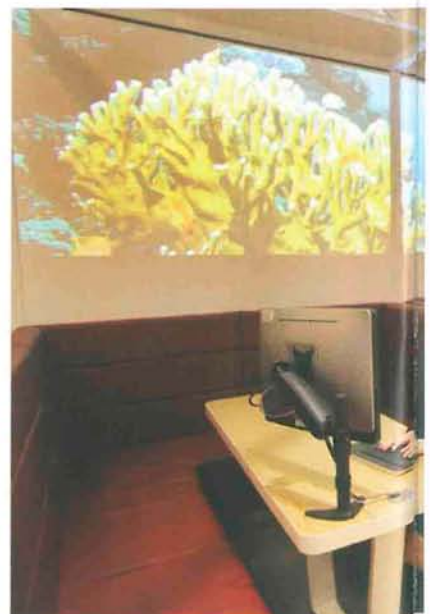
Interactive table: Two 42-inch touchscreens allow customers to explore maps, search hotels and narrow down their choice by selecting features that are important to them. Individual properties can be viewed and emailed at any time to look at later. A "mood-based" search allows customers to

select four photos from a range that best represents their ideal holiday. They can then access video and photos of three recommended products, and view individual properties to inspire them.

Community screen: A 75-inch screen is used to entertain and inspire customers with top 10 lists, staff tips, customer reviews, live weather updates, social and films. According to Glenwright "customers love tweeting their holiday booking and celebrate as they appear on screen".

Self-service PCs: Two self-service PCs demonstrate multichannel integration, allowing customers to print off e-tickets, check out TripAdvisor reviews or even book their own holiday.

Personalised projection walls: Large inspirational panoramic vistas project on the wall when booths are not used, or the content can be tailored to reflect the type of holiday discussed or to play a video of the actual holiday the customer is buying. The screens are visible around the shop to inspire other customers as well.





An interactive table helps customers select their holiday based on inspiring images



to life in an engaging and inspiring way, and put the customer in control of their in-store experience, allowing them to get as close to our products as possible and personalising their experience to make it memorable," he explains.

According to Glenwright, travel operators face the same major obstacle as online retailers – namely that customers cannot touch the products when they buy them. "It's a very considered purchase," he says, "meaning that customers tend to use multiple channels when researching".

It's certainly a challenge most, if not all, multichannel retailers are facing daily as consumers flit between mobile, online and physical shopping channels, comparing prices and offers as they go.

Therefore it's vital to "stay relevant by delivering highly personalised experiences and modernising our service to support an omnichannel distribution strategy," Glenwright believes.

Retailers looking to become digitally advanced must not underestimate the importance of integrating technology seamlessly into the experience, Glenwright cautions. "This was something we were very clear on from day one," he says. "Without integrating we would have delivered a beautiful shop without substance – so the experience would not have been significantly different from before."

The technology must also be intuitive with no need to extensively train staff, he adds.

All the investment has certainly paid off for Thomson, with customer and staff satisfaction at an all-time high. "From a customer perspective the comments we are getting suggest we have hit the spot in making the experience fun and exciting, but also ensuring our staff deliver the personal touch that customers want from a retail experience," Glenwright says. "From a staff perspective we focus significantly more time on talking about service and through this focus we continue to hit our sales targets. Staff also comment that this is a great place to work – they feed off each other's experiences, striving to deliver the best service possible."

To date, the Bluewater store is on course to be the biggest in Europe for sales, he adds, and all the revamped stores are "exceeding expectations in terms of both sales and service".

So how will the stores develop going forward and, perhaps even more importantly, how will advances in digital technology change what Thomson can offer its customers in the future?



It's vital to stay relevant by delivering highly personalised experiences and modernising our service to support an omnichannel distribution strategy”

Doug Glenwright, Thomson



B&Q CHINA INTEGRATES PHYSICAL RETAILING WITH STAFF INTERACTION AND DIGITAL TECH

A truly immersive experience for shoppers should integrate the physical bricks-and-mortar structure, with human interaction and digital technology through apps, devices and broadcast, claims Bernadette Morrison, associate strategy director at FITCH. "Digitally progressive stores will combine all of these elements," she says.

Morrison points to the work Fitch has undertaken with B&Q in China to create a concept – called Vivid Homes – that integrates the customer journey through the store, website and mobile applications, as well as the staff.

Customers start by gathering ideas and inspiration online for their dream home and sharing their mood board on a website and blog. In store, a Vivid coach helps collate and visualise the ideas on screen in a 3D test apartment, and helps measure the customer's home and fit their ideas to their actual space and budget.

Customers can then view their dream home in what Morrison describes as "an Immersive projection 'cube' at an exclusive VIP screening". "A multi-sensory 4D Visualiser creates their dream home complete with sight, sound and scent," she explains. Work then begins on site, and the customer is kept constantly updated by the Pocket Coach mobile phone app, which sends visual updates of the installation.

For Morrison, digital technology needs to be used in a way "that doesn't just add to the experience but enhances the journey" and makes it a more personalised, seamless retail experience for the shopper.

Mobile will be the biggest game-changer, Glenwright believes, and if Thomson can develop its technological capabilities to allow customers to interact with stores using their own mobile devices in the future "we can get our brand and products into their hands in ever more sophisticated and exciting ways", he says.

Any retailer looking to showcase its product range in engaging and inspiring ways would do well to take a leaf out of Thomson's book. ●

TOP 10 LESSONS FOR MAKING A DIGITALLY LED STORE WORK FOR YOU:

- From the moment a customer enters the shop make them feel comfortable and in control.
- Integrate technology into the experience seamlessly.
- Use technology that enables the customer to lead the interaction, not the other way round.
- Make sure any personalised services focus on positive validation rather than presumptive selling.
- Encourage customers to engage with you via social media at any point during the shopping experience.
- Don't intimidate customers with complicated-looking technology – keep it simple and user friendly.
- Bring products or services to life using touchscreens and interactive features.
- Don't underestimate the value of staff in helping to bring the technology to life and showing customers
- how to use it – make sure they're available to answer questions or provide reassurance.
- Showcase content that has previously only been available on the web in theatrical and eye-catching ways.
- Expensive and advanced technology is no substitute for quality service and first-class products in an inspirational environment.