

STORES

Sports retailer Decathlon is embarking on an opening spree to treble its UK store tally in three years. **John Ryan** visits the new branch in Croydon

Decathlon ups

Here's an idea. Let's take a retail format to another country and see if it will work. This is a not uncommon thought that passes through the minds of those in retail boardrooms around the world as they realise that the home country may be close to capacity. And one such is French sports retailer Decathlon. At present it trades in 32 countries.

Slow out of the blocks

Decathlon has made slow progress in the UK. It pressed the 'open in *Grande Bretagne*' button in 1999 when it launched a massive three-building complex (since downsized to two) in London's Surrey Quays. It was well received and all looked set for rapid expansion.

A decade later the portfolio had grown to just nine branches however, albeit all of them were relatively large. At less than one store opening per year,



things had not gone quite as quickly as might have been anticipated.

Since 2009 things have speeded up. The retailer has doubled its UK store count thanks to a flurry of branches that opened their doors for the first time in 2014. Four Decathlon stores opened last year: in Braehead, Oxford, Harlow and, most recently, Croydon. The latter opened last month on a site that has proved to have something of a chequered history.

“We plan to open between 40 and 50 stores over the next three years”

Thibaut Peeters, Decathlon UK

Prior to the arrival of Decathlon, this 26,900 sq ft shed on the Trafalgar Way retail park was home to an outpost of the ill-fated Kiddicare and before that to a branch of Best Buy during the US retailer's equally ill-starred attempt to make it in Europe. But looked at objectively, this should be a good location. Croydon's Purley Way, off which the retail park is located, is one of the busiest arterial roads in the capital and Decathlon's blue-logoed store is

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the pace



situated across the road from a very large Sainsbury's that has recently been revamped.

The assumption could perhaps fairly be made therefore that the failure of the previous two tenants had rather more to do with their retail propositions than with the location itself. Certainly, Decathlon's UK chief executive Thibaut Peeters sees Croydon and Harlow, where the retailer opened a store a fortnight earlier, as

stepping stones on a road towards giving the retailer real coverage in this country. "I think we could have up to 100 stores in the UK and we plan to open between 40 and 50 over the next three years," he says.

On the fast track

Peeters' plan means opening a new store every month for the next three years, which given the size of the stores sounds a lot. Decathlon will need to

DECATHLON, CROYDON

Store Trafalgar Way retail park

Opened December 18

Project opening time

Seven weeks

UK stores 18

Target store openings

40 to 50 in the next

three years

Ambience Functional

move quickly, but if Croydon is anything to go by, that should be possible. The retailer signed on the dotted line for the store in October and welcomed its first shoppers on December 18. That is remarkable and Peeters says: "I'm really proud of my team, they did move incredibly fast."

Decathlon's Croydon store is perhaps the ultimate example of modularity. Almost no concession is made to the fact that it is located on the fringes

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► of the south London metropolis and every care has been taken to streamline the business of opening a store.

Decathlon has started from a good point with this branch. The space is a large square box and all traces of previous tenants, including the mezzanine floor installed by Kiddicare, have been expunged.

The floor has been stripped back to the concrete and almost nothing has been done to enhance the plain white walls. The starting point therefore is a wholly functional interior into which perimeter fixtures and mid-shop equipment have been put.

The great bulk of the high mid-shop gondolas are on wheels. Getting the store up and running therefore has simply been a matter of a large lorry arriving and the equipment being rolled into place.

Running the gamut

Peeters points to the central aisle, which runs from front to back and which he says is "quite unusual" in a Decathlon store. Maybe so, but there is a dogged concentration on maximising the use of space and on ensuring that the majority of sports are covered.

The perimeter fixturing, which looks grey and industrial, is pretty much identical throughout and is at the same height as that used in the mid-shop. Signage is kept low-key other than the bus stop-style yellow flags that announce 'quality at even lower prices', and which are used across the whole of the store.

There are elements in this branch, however, which are pretty new. Decathlon launched click-and-collect last year and overhead white banners ensure that shoppers are aware of the service. This

is coupled with a bank of large white Apple monitors at the front of the shop that enable customers to examine the whole of the Decathlon universe, although it is hard to see what might be missing amid the masses of bikes, skis and cycling helmets, among other things, that fill this space.

There is even a free gait analysis service that helps runners to buy the most appropriate trainers for their stride patterns. This kind of thing is frequently a paid-for service in more elaborate sports interiors.

The real point about this store is that it demonstrates how rapid roll-out of a format can be a reality.

Its layout also lets shoppers know what is going to be seen from the outset. There is no sense of crowding and the visual elements, such as displaying the green wellies on the perimeter with their soles facing the shopper (this is the most interest-

ing part of them), are about making the most of what could be a sterile environment.

Best foot forward

Nobody could ever accuse Decathlon of over-elaborate interiors, but its relative lack of sophistication does not appear to prevent it appealing to shoppers – on opening day the store was very busy.

If Peeters' expansion plans can be made a reality – and to judge by what has been done in Croydon, that should be possible – then the UK may, finally, be on the cusp of becoming a meaningful part of the Decathlon empire.

The only possible fly in the ointment will be site availability, but some edge-of-town retail parks, where the retailer tends to open shops, remain conspicuous for the number of vacant units and most would probably welcome a Decathlon. ■

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