

STORES

Visual merchandising teams across the capital have been busy trying to put shoppers in the mood for summer, but have their efforts paid off? **John Ryan** investigates

Summer in the

At what point did mannequins lose their facial features and frequently their heads, and who decided that it would be a good idea if they were all white?

Walking around London's West End, with very few exceptions the stores that have mannequins in their windows have opted for ghost-like figures that force the viewer to look at the merchandise because the distraction that is the face is signally absent.

Yet in spite of the excising of character from these immobile, featureless mannequins, there are a number of trends that are apparent at present, ranging from army-like groupings to sports action poses and even torsos where the backdrops, rather than the bodies, are the thing.

Visual merchandising is about conjuring up vistas and vignettes that will cause the onlooker to pause, take a second look and maybe pay closer scrutiny to a retailer's offer. Or put another way, it should be about being different – something that every retailer, everywhere, should strive to achieve as a matter of course, but relatively few actually do.

Summer and the summer Sales have been with us for some time now. While many remain content to slap a red sign with a percentage-off message in the window, there are a few that really do stand out, even with something as mundane as a markdown. Others, like Harvey Nichols, aim to tell a story.

Harvey Nichols, Knightsbridge

What must surely be the most idiosyncratic window scheme in the capital at the moment has been unveiled at the Harvey Nichols Knightsbridge flagship.

Here shoppers are treated to the sight of mannequin shoplifters being nicked by grey-suited security staff – something that probably happens every day but which is rarely seen first hand.

That means female figures laden with merchandise that has not been paid for are being cuffed by male mannequins. The stock that is being stolen in some way reflects the scene that is about to follow – witness the unhappy 'smiley' flight bag.

The visual merchandising ties in with the launch of the department store group's loyalty app that enables 'freebies' to be legally earned, rather than simply taken from the shelves.



The campaign is backed by a video that can be viewed on the retailer's site and on YouTube. It shows footage of shoplifting in progress at Harvey Nichols and the culprits being apprehended and put in a 'holding room'.

Harvey Nichols has adopted a distinctly non-standard approach to a loyalty scheme launch, but it is hard not to look at a bit of summer fun.

& Other Stories, Regent Street

H&M offshoot & Other Stories has few branches, but it is not above picking up on what is currently one of the most dominant themes in store display: the mannequin group.

Time was when single mannequins displayed clothing or a number of them were artfully arranged in order to convey the idea of fashion, movement and perhaps a story. Now, many retail visual merchandising teams have

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city



Austin Reed



& Other Stories

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abandoned any such pretence, opting instead to create armies of faceless figures or even torsos where the pose adopted is almost incidental and the focus is instead wholly on the garments displayed.

In theory, this should be simple stuff, but garment selection and the accessories that are used to liven up the whole picture are at the heart of success or failure.

At & Other Stories that means four low, plain plywood plinths with tailor's dummies have

been dressed and turned into in-store 'fascination' points where pot plants and pictures from fashion shoots are used to foster the appropriate mood. The execution is slick and brings the various elements of the offer together.

Austin Reed, Regent Street

Men in summer suits doing summer things was probably the initial thinking when it came to putting together a brief for the windows at Austin Reed on Regent Street.

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Translated, that means a line of male mannequins in snappy suits standing on surfboards or a figure astride a retro motorcycle with a back-drop that looks like somewhere in the western US deserts. The message seems to be that wearing a suit does not preclude being interesting and that Austin Reed is worth more than a second thought.

Considerable attention to detail is the hallmark of this summer window. The ties worn by the mannequins are arranged to look as if they are blowing in the wind and a cheeky hip flask pokes out of the leather man-bag that the motorcyclist has strapped to the back of his machine.

Much stress in VM these days is placed on 'storytelling' and this is one of the better examples in central London at the moment.



Oasis, Argyll Street

It is hard to miss the fact that there is a Sale at Oasis, mainly because of a large window banner that states: "Up to 70% off".

It is the sort of message normally accompanied by a substantial 'Sale' sign and Oasis is no exception to that generalisation.

The difference is that there are four mannequins in the window, each sporting a towel with a letter that collectively spells the word. Each one is in a shower cubicle and the letters displayed on towels that are wrapped around the torso.

It is imaginative stuff and considerably better than the normal *modus operandi* of similar displays that involve mannequins in white T-shirts with the word 'Sale' on them. The final touch is the elaborate patterned wallpaper that is used as a backdrop for the figures.

When it comes to Sale time many retailers merely throw a few signs at the windows. Oasis shows that seasonality and a sense of humour need not be excluded from consideration.

Making food interesting is a difficult task but M&S appears to have risen to the challenge



Marks & Spencer



Marks & Spencer, Kensington High Street

While its clothing sales have struggled in recent years, food at M&S appears to be going from strength to strength.

The retailer has opted to move away from traditional supermarket retailing and to add what might almost be considered a lifestyle element with installations dotted around the floor of its large food hall at the Kensington High Street branch.

The strapline "100s of new ideas from the British Isles" is applied to VM pause points that range from a map of the UK made out of bottle tops with British craft beers on the display

beneath it, to a graphic of what is presumably a Scottish loch accompanied by new seafood products.

Making food interesting other than by arranging the merchandise in winsome ways is a difficult task but M&S appears to have risen to the challenge with this series of displays that take the idea of fashion display and apply it to food to make shoppers stop and look.

But unlike fashion the displays are not static and the product can be removed and taken to the checkout.