

STORES

Sensory marketing is a bold new frontier for retailers seeking to stand out from the crowd. **John Ryan** investigates

Empire of the

What might make a visit to a supermarket more enjoyable? Could it be a shopping trolley that doesn't wobble or veer off in unwanted directions? Might it be food categories that aren't split up across the store? Or could it be a little added drama in the form of some appealing visual merchandising?

All those would certainly improve the in-store experience and all are tangible. But is there something else that might make things better?

Russ Jones, co-founder of Brixton-based sensory branding and design agency Condiment Junkie, believes so: "If you've designed a series of nice visuals [for a store] wouldn't it be nice to engage the other senses as well?"

Jones says "few retailers are good at doing this", adding that "sensory marketing" is still seen as "very new".

Yet Condiment Junkie has been up and running for a little over six years and, in the past three, Jones says there has been a steady stream of retail clients, all anxious to look at new ways of making their products and stores more appealing.

Added dimension

Sensory marketing turns out to be a very broad domain.

Given the heavy emphasis placed by retailers on visual stimuli, touch, taste and smell remain fields to be experimented with and possibly a relatively inexpensive means of adding a further dimension to visiting a shop.

It is, of course, already in place in a number of contexts. Most of the major supermarkets have long piped pleasant smells throughout their premises as shoppers make their way along the aisles.

Visiting a large grocer frequently involves smells generated in the bakery being wafted around a selected area in order to create a feeling both of authenticity and well-being.



Lush

Sensory marketing

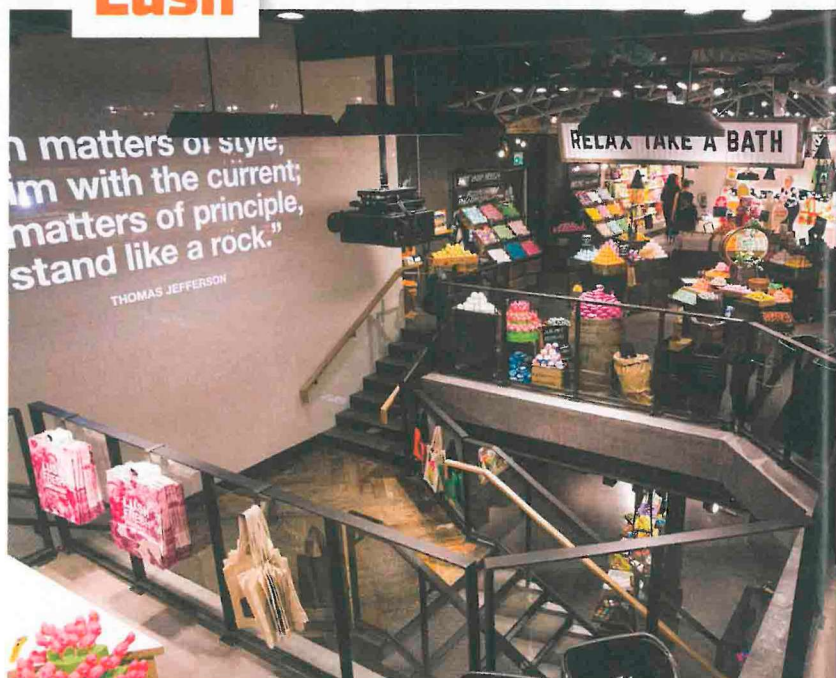
What is it? Sight, sound, touch, smell and taste in any combination

Does it work? It is dependent on context and the shoppers who are targeted

Initial cost? Generally lower than visual stimuli

Why do it? It offers a real point of difference

What are the pitfalls? Get it wrong and you may actually turn shoppers away



For more stores features and analysis, visit
Retail-week.com/Stores



senses



Toys R Us

So by combining the visual element that forms part of any retail interior with touch, taste and sound experiences, is it simply a case of job done?

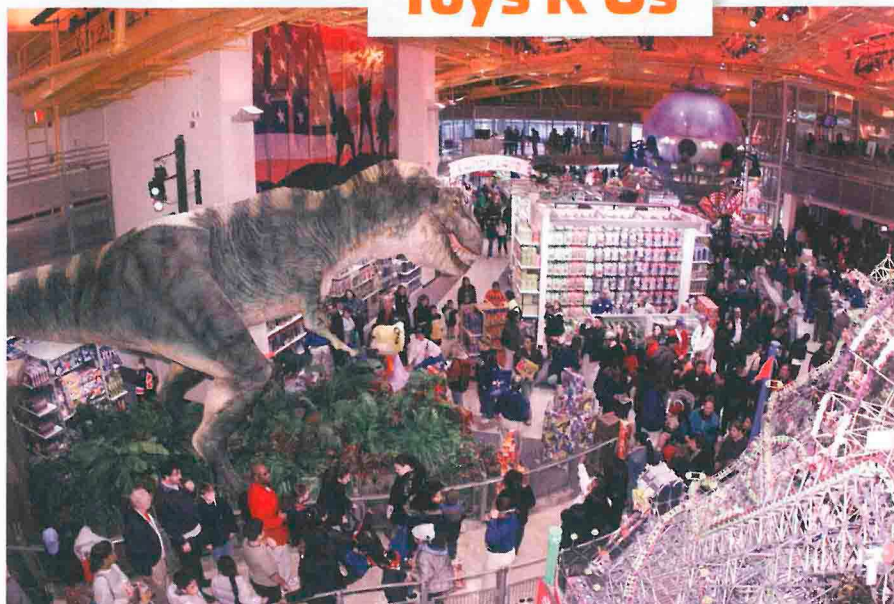
In-store experience

Possibly, but probably not, according to Professor Charles Spence, who holds the chair of experimental psychology at Oxford University.

Talking of "experience-based" shop environments, he says: "There's a real danger that people go in for an experience and leave without actually buying anything."

There are in fact any number of stores at which this accusation might be levelled.

The Toys R Us flagship in New York's Times Square is perhaps a case in point. Tourists flocked to visit the



STORES



Pets at Home

► shop for the in-store experience it offered, including music, smell and a functional ferris wheel. But a combination of high rents, low margins and shoppers who were engaged for the wrong reasons, has led to its disappearance – the store closed shortly after Christmas.

Spence says that what matters is “congruence” between the various sensory constituents that may be put into a store and when that is missing, things can go awry.

Citing toiletries retailer Lush as an example of what can be done with smell, he says: “It certainly divides opinion, but it is clearly very successful.

“Lush is not for everybody, but there are enough shoppers who like it to make it work.”

In Lush, the bundling of smell, sound and sight is felicitous, but striking the right balance can be precarious.

Spence gives the example of one clothing store in which fragrance was tried alongside the visual merchandising and revenues improved. Yet when music was added to the mix, sales declined – clearly, there is a fine line to be trod when creating a retail empire of the senses.

“The more you earn, the more likely you are to be influenced by touch and smell”

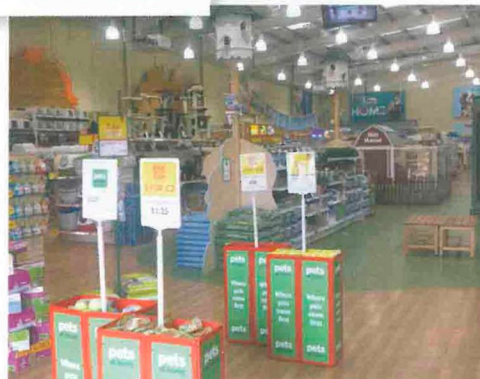
Aleksandra Szymanska, The Future Laboratory

Demographic mix

Given the potential difficulties therefore, is it worth retailers’ while to head off into this largely uncharted marketing territory?

The answer may be that it depends on who you are. Aleksandra Szymanska, visual trends analyst at The Future Laboratory, says sensory marketing relies, to some extent, on age and income: “Spending power is important. The more you earn, the more likely you are to be influenced by touch and smell when you go to the shops.”

She adds that millennials are also more likely to be influenced



by additional sensory stimuli, while baby-boomers may not be.

If retailers are interested in adding smell and touch to the interior mix, as well as the effect of the individual elements, the demographics associated with a store or retail brand have to be examined.

There is also the mildly counter-intuitive phenomenon that stimulating a specific sense may have an effect on a seemingly unrelated sense.

Spence says that a goat’s cheese cheesecake can be made to taste bitter or sweet according to the type of music that is played when a tasting is carried out.

A ‘sonic signature’ can have unexpected results and it’s just another thing to be mindful of when considering how sensory marketing might be used. But is the risk worth the pay off?

Enticing shoppers

Jones says one of his favourite retailers as far as sensory marketing is concerned is Pets at Home: “They play the sound of birdsong in their store. It’s simple and relates to the offer and makes you feel good.”

It also has the benefit of being low-cost to execute and can readily be put into all stores, rather than just a few flagships.

Jones says that although most sensory marketing is “100% grounded in science” for retailers the reality is “less about understanding the science and more about doing things intuitively”.

He cautions, however, that anything that is done has to be as “genuine” as possible.

Standing out

All of which makes this an area

that sounds worthy of investigation – first mover advantage waits for those who jump on the appropriate sonic, gustatory or olfactory bandwagon.

There are a lot of caveats, however, and retailers need to tread lightly when opting for a specific course of action.

Spence sums up the current state of play: “Retailers are slowly, very slowly, changing their approach. You can spend an awful lot of money for some nice layered lighting, whereas a signature scent doesn’t cost much at all.”

For Spence, the holy grail is to put together an enticing interior that will make “people willing to pay to come into your store”.

That outcome does seem a long way off on current reckoning, but sensory marketing of whatever form does appear to offer new ways for retailers to separate themselves from the herd. 