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# NEWS ANALYSIS

## How Darty uses robot tech to enhance stores

BY LUKE TUGBY

Humanoid robots are most often seen attempting to take over the world in sci-fi films and TV shows.

For French electricals specialist Darty, however, the use of such technology has flipped that image on its head and helped to make it and its robots a takeover target.

The UK-listed retailer, which is the market leader in its homeland, is at the centre of a tussle between rivals Fnac and Conforama as they bid to consolidate the congested sector – and their interest would have been piqued by the strides Darty has made in creating a unique and interactive store experience through its use of technology.

The impact of that drive was reflected in its latest trading update.

Despite recording a drop-off in footfall during the quarter ending January 31, Darty's like-for-like sales increased 4.4% as the growth of click-and-collect and the implementation of in-store initiatives combined to improve conversion rates.

Although he is leading the way in France when it comes to building a multichannel electricals business, Darty's boss Regis Schultz tells *Retail Week* that online and offline must remain unique.

"Seamless is useless," he insists. "Having the same prices, the same products – that's OK. But consumers don't want the same thing in store

as they have on the web." That mantra has underpinned the ingenuity across Darty's estate in its domestic market.

### Tech trials

Schultz takes pride in highlighting a number of schemes it is piloting to boost customer interaction and ensure shoppers are well informed about its product mix, with electronic price tags and humanoid robots spearheading that.

"You have to make the store feel better than the web," Schultz

**"Seamless is useless... consumers don't want the same thing in store as they have on the web"**

**Regis Schultz, Darty**

says. "One of the key things for the consumer about online shopping is comparison of price and information about the product – that's much better on the web than it is in store.

"We are testing electronic labels, where you put your smartphone in front of the label and all the rich content comes to you – all the



Darty's robots promote products to shoppers as part of the in-store experience

things you find on the web. You get a video and a price comparison."

If successful, Schultz aims to start rolling out that technology to all 223 of its stores and 59 franchises in France from the summer. There is also scope to launch it in Belgium and the Netherlands.

While that technology has the potential to be introduced within hundreds of stores, Darty's humanoid robots provide a less cost-effective method of enhancing the store experience.

At the moment the retailer has four of the machines, which it uses to 'present products' within its busier shopping centre locations.

"It's not about staff replacement – the robots are not able to replace staff – but they are able to promote products," Schultz explains.

"They are limited in what they can say, but the interaction is quite good. It makes a big difference compared with a video because it's far more interactive in creating contact with the consumer."

Darty charges suppliers to use the humanoid robots to promote products, but admits "the economic model is not working" at the moment because they are

expensive to run. Two staff are required to operate each one and ensure it is not being misused or damaged by customers.

### On the button

Beyond its stores, Darty has continued innovation with the launch of Le Bouton – a physical button located in a customer's home or stored as an app on their smartphone, which provides access to customer service experts 24/7.

In February, Darty added a video "experiment" to the scheme, allowing its experts to access the smartphones of Le Bouton's 500,000 customers, should they give them permission. The customer can film the faulty appliance using their smartphone and relaying it directly to Darty's customer service teams, helping them to better diagnose the issue.

Schultz thinks the technology will help Darty save costs by removing the "pain" associated with sending a repair man to consumers' homes.

Whether Darty ends up under the ownership of Fnac or Conforama, its technological nous could help either retailer to fix their own multichannel problems.