

ANALYSIS

Following the anniversary of Harry Selfridge's death, **Luke Tugby** explores five key lessons from the magnate

Five enduring lessons from retail legend Harry Selfridge



1 Create experiential retailing

After opening his iconic department store to Londoners in 1909, Harry Selfridge was among the first retail leaders to promote the idea of shopping for pleasure rather than necessity.

The Oxford Street store contained restaurants, a library, reading and writing rooms, a silence room and special reception rooms for European and US customers – all of which were designed to radically reshape the store experience by combining retail with leisure to boost dwell times.

That is a target that remains uppermost in the minds of leaders across retail to this day, from shopping centre landlords attempting to make their malls a place where families can spend an entire day to grocery bosses seeking to bring more consumers back to their big sheds.

2 Put the customer first

In a world where retailers are obsessed by their target consumer – a trend that has sparked the rise of the chief customer officer – it is perhaps easy to forget that, more than a century ago, Selfridge was one of the pioneers when it came to putting the customer first.

He made heavy use of advertising to draw in target shoppers and allowed them to handle goods in store in a bid to drive the customer experience and improve conversion rates. Staff were also urged to be on hand to assist shoppers, rather than hard-sell stock.

It was actually Selfridge who first coined the phrase “the customer is always right”, a quote that is regularly repeated by retail chiefs 100 years on.

3 Be a leader, not a boss

The above is just one of Selfridge's famous phrases that have withstood the test of time. The American saw himself as a leader, rather than a boss, often emphasising the need for those at the top to lead by example as part of a team. In his 1918 book, *The Romance of Commerce*, Selfridge highlighted that point perfectly in a series of powerful quotes, including: “The boss knows how it is done; the leader shows how”, “The boss says ‘I’; the leader, ‘we’”, and “The boss drives his men; the leader coaches them”.

It is likely that boardrooms of retailers up and down the country will continue to have similar sentiments adorning their walls, almost a century after that book was published.

“The boss knows how it is done; the leader shows how”

Harry Selfridge



4 Treat your staff well

Selfridge was seen as a genius when it came to advertising flair, but one of the biggest marketing assets he had – and retailers continue to have today – was his employees.

Before Selfridges existed, retail workers were often treated no better than the domestic servants of the time, regularly working 12-hour days and living in small dorms on the same premises as their employer.

But Selfridge allowed his staff to live at home while ushering in a customer service culture, highlighting the importance of shopfloor staff when it came to building the brand experience and, in turn, making them feel both important and valued.

5 Promote equality

The subject of women in retail has been a topic of great debate in recent years and even sparked *Retail Week's* Be Inspired campaign to create more female leaders in the industry.

But Selfridge was among those who actively championed women's equality during his time in charge of the department store business.

He spent a lot of time pondering how to be inclusive of women from all social classes, and his Oxford Street store was the first shop in London to include women's toilets, therefore allowing them to stay in the shop as long as they wanted rather than having to return home.

Selfridge also flew the suffragettes' flag above his shop and sold items in their colours, even at a time when the movement resorted to targeting public buildings to gain attention.