

TOUCH 'N' FEEL TAKES ON TOUCH SCREEN

Leading fashion retailers across the world are mimicking the online experience at their stores. No, they aren't using tablets or screens to do that...

■ By Surender Gnanaolivu

The success of democratized and fast fashion online, has changed customer expectations about the shopping experience for this category. What matters here for attracting a customer and closing a sale is the speed and clarity in presenting a brand and its offerings. Retailers in this category with dominant offline presence are rising to the challenge to address the 'user experience' need of the new-age shopper inside their physical stores. They are responding by disrupting the traditional way of balancing the use of 'art' and 'science' in visual merchandising like never before.

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

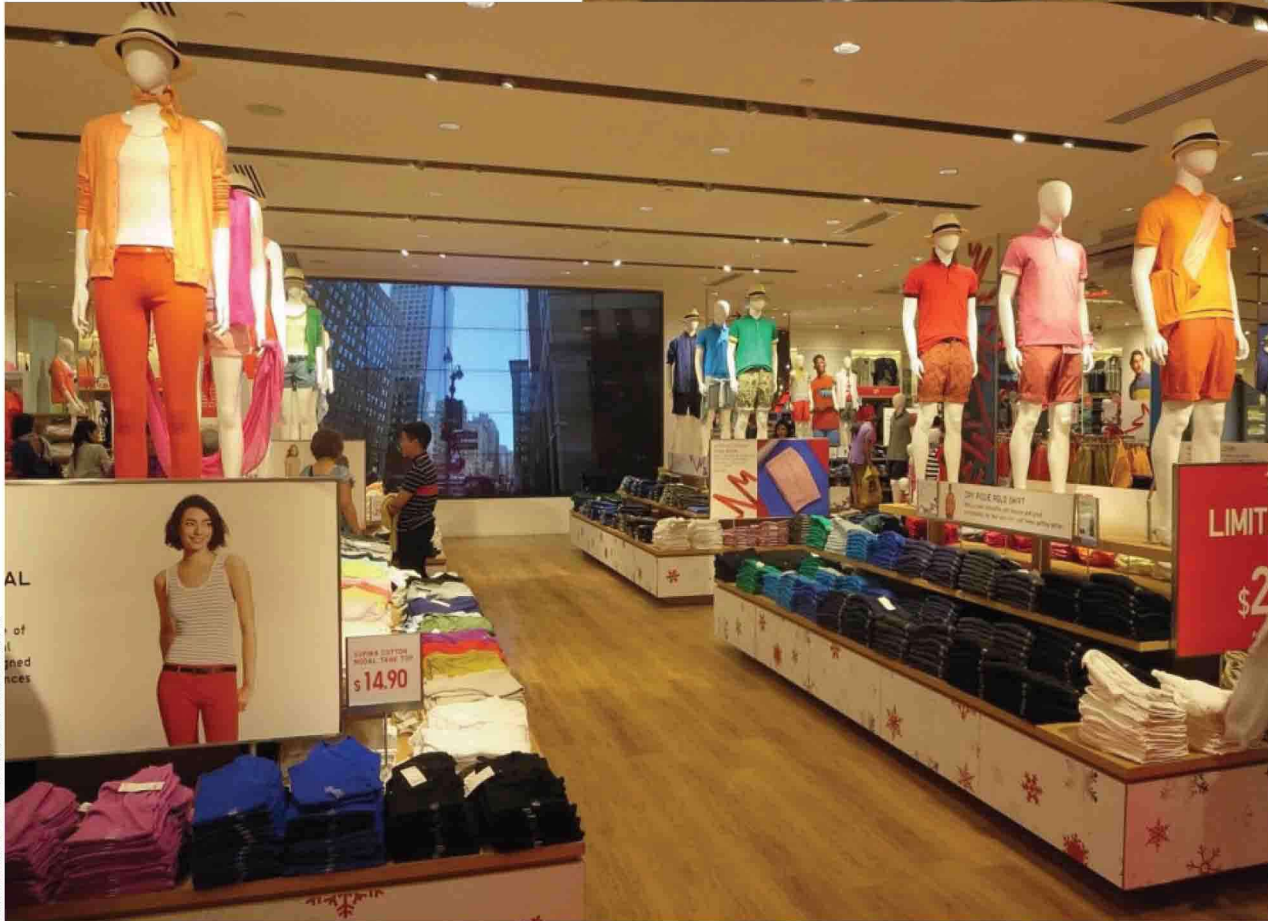
Studies have shown that the fundamental advantages of an online fashion store are convenience, range and price and that of an offline retailer are Touch'n'feel, Instant Gratification and Customer Service. Many offline democratized and fast fashion players have reimaged their store presentation and visual merchandising strategies to capitalize on the advantages of both channels to grow customer acquisition and

conversion in their physical stores.

With the surge in the acceptance of online shopping, one would speculate that display tables and browsers at the store entrance would be replaced by fancy digital touch screens that allow customers to browse the endless aisles in the brand's online store, but then new age visual merchandising implementations demonstrate otherwise. A close look at the visual merchandising strategy of top brands and retailers in the democratized and fast fashion category will reveal that they are using a 'home-page' presentation technique to clearly and quickly communicate the concept and choice they have to offer at their 'landing page'— the store entrance, using loud displays placed in great lines-of-sight (uninterrupted visibility). This is in bold disruption of the traditional principle of attracting customers with the use of 'art' and selling to them with the use of 'science'. The new age 'home-page' visual merchandising technique uses a pragmatic disproportionate use of 'science' in the presentation! Let's explore some successful implementations of this technique by some of global iconic brands...

UNIQLO

Japanese Brand Uniqlo, after extensive research, consciously steers away from creating fast fashion collections and sharply focuses on well-designed basics based on a belief that the mix-and-match concept is the new way to personalise fashion. Step into the brand's store and you get to visually experience its 'home-page' presented on arrays of powerfully merchandised runways through very-well styled mannequins. The first look from the store entrance gives a glimpse of different possible coordinated looks, of Uniqlo's category killer range of basics, across different categories with compelling clarity. Island windows feature mannequins on motorized turn-tables mimicking online fashion home-page videos of fashion portals.



PHOTOS: SURENDER GNANAOLIVU

H&M

H&M, the global Swedish fashion brand, known for its young fast-fashion was one of the first to challenge the retail apparel sector with the concept of 'fashion and quality at the best price.' The brand deploys a visual merchandising strategy of a bold on-the-face presentation in its windows that shout out the VFM (value for money) fashion advantage with large fashion cluster displays and messaging. Customers are welcomed at the store entrances with a dramatic stepped runway display of H&M's hot fashion styles in a large clusters of style coordinated mannequins that act as a powerful signature landing 'home-page' for the brand.



MRP

MRP, South Africa's most popular low-priced fashion retailer, is a strong competitor of the likes of Zara, H&M and TopShop offering affordable, relevant trend-led assortment to its customers. The stores are beautifully organized to present different categories clearly visible from the store entrance in a home-page display clearly visible in one sweeping glance. Clusters of coloured mannequins placed in great line-of-sights across the store flaunt the fashion statements offered by the store making it easy for customers to appreciate what they stand for and offer.



GAP

GAP has updated its brand presentation across different markets to address the new-age cross channel shopping trend with its own interpretation of the 'home-page' presentation technique at the store entrances and also in the departments. The new GAP store has arrays of mannequins that present coordinated fashion on top of densely merchandised fixtures across the store. This technique helps present many more fashion statements in the store and also allows for a significant increase in merchandise options offered in the store. Hopefully, with this change, customers walking into the store don't have to depend on their touch screens!

ZARA

Zara, the pioneers of fast-fashion that has used this technique ahead of competition with its signature 'runway display' using an array of highly styled mannequins that present latest collections at the store windows and entrances. This enables Zara's lean marketing model to use the store front and entrance as effective billboards to announce the arrival of new fashion at the stores.



These illustrations from global brands clearly demonstrate how the 'home-page' visual merchandising technique helps address the new-age needs of customers. It's also quite evident how it can help retailers and brands to respond with great clarity and im-

pact in drawing the attention of their customers away from the touch screens and enjoy the shopping experience inside the physical stores.

Considering the blistering pace of adoption of new developments

in retail, I am sure many retailers and brands in India will soon disrupt the traditional ways in visual merchandising and meaningfully interpret them in the context of their brand and retail businesses today. 😊



Surender Gnanaolivu is a senior consultant, retail experience. During his career that spans two decades, he has held senior positions as executive vice president and head marketing, brand experience, store design, planning & development at leading retailers like Mahindra Retail, Shoppers Stop and Reliance Retail and also as a senior retail consultant. His portfolio includes over two million square feet of retail space for various national and international JV brands in formats like malls, department stores, supermarkets, and specialty apparel and accessories stores. His passion for retail leads him to teach at design and management schools and contribute to retail books and magazines. He shares his views through the blog: <http://surenderg-retail.blogspot.in/>