

**ANALYSIS** As BHS looks likely to disappear from the high street, **Grace Bowden** looks at seven retailers that demonstrate great in-store experience

# Seven retailers that excel at in-store customer experience

**R**etail headlines this year, from administrations to falling footfall, might suggest a sector in crisis. But retail can be a leader in innovation and creativity, as shown by these brilliant examples of in-store theatre – an area where BHS fell well short of consumer expectations.

It has never been easier for shoppers to get what they need from retailers without setting foot in a shop, so in-store experience needs to be exceptional to drive a profit that justifies rising rents, business rates and living wage costs.

Here are seven retailers that combine innovation with expertise to draw in shoppers – and keep them coming back.

## 1 WARBY PARKER

This spectacles retailer began as a pure-play but now operates stores across North America and has strived to adapt its online format for its physical branches. Warby Parker sells the majority of its glasses at one price point – \$95 (£65.38) – and donates a pair to someone in need for each one bought. It takes an equally disruptive approach to its in-store experience and design.

Stepping away from the traditional, clinical optician's layout, Warby Parker's Chicago store more resembles a library or a museum with display cases featuring books and stone busts.

The retailer also has in-store photo booths where customers can take pictures while trying on new frames. Optometrists are available in-store to carry out eye exams for customers.

## 2 LEROY MERLIN

The French home improvement retailer's 100,000 sq ft store in Le Havre, Normandy gives a new meaning to 'do it yourself'. The out-of-town shop features a deconstructed house and garden and is designed to give customers the expertise, as well as the products, to fulfil their DIY ambitions.

In an effort to appeal to all DIY shoppers, from beginners to enthusiasts, the retailer runs a variety of in-store initiatives to help people learn new skills and take advantage of staff knowledge.

Shoppers are encouraged to try out products before they buy in a series of in-store workshops run by 'artisan' staff. The store also runs a 'School of DIY' initiative where shoppers are taught skills from plastering walls to installing decks.

## 3 PAPERCHASE

The specialist stationery retailer has put unique store design at the heart of its strategy.

Chief executive Timothy Melgund told *Retail Week*: "Every Paperchase store is different. When fitting out stores, we've found a fresco, stained glass, a fireplace – and we love bringing these original features out." He added that an engaging store design is key to boosting customer loyalty.

As a means of engaging shoppers, Paperchase has started running crafting workshops in its London, Manchester and Glasgow flagships as part of its 'Treat Me' loyalty programme. The 14 workshops are run by trained crafters and include pom-pom making and scrapbooking events during lunch breaks and after work.

The initiative, which Paperchase plans to roll out to other stores this year, also includes content online. However, Melgund stresses that it is part of a drive to put in-store at the heart of its proposition. He says such classes provide an "antidote" to people's obsession with technology. "Technology does not provide the whole answer," he says.

## 4 DECATHLON

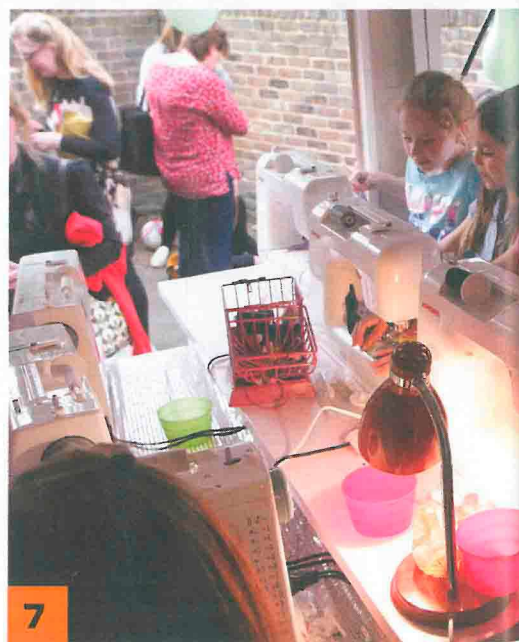
The sports retailer's out-of-town megastore and headquarters in Lille, France, is a masterclass in creating a specialist customer experience. The estate, called the Decathlon Campus, comprises 54 acres and boasts a test lab for new products.

However, the Campus store is the jewel in the crown. The 10,000 sq ft shop has cavernous aisles and customers are encouraged to test products, from basketballs to bikes, throughout the space. The in-store staff are also sports enthusiasts, meaning customers benefit from the knowledge of sales assistants before they make a purchase.

"The store employs athletes, so you get genuine expertise alongside a chance to test products," says *Retail Week's* stores editor John Ryan.

The set-up has paid dividends for Decathlon as it rolled out a smaller format of the Campus store, called Connect, in Munich this year. The store features iPads, which shoppers can use to browse stock, but the in-store offer is restricted to urban sports items such as scooters and skateboards.

"Decathlon has found a format that customers enjoy and is running with it as a way to expand its franchise," says Ryan.





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## 5 STEW LEONARD'S

The US grocer has taken a decidedly old-school approach to customer experience across its store estate.

Described by TCC Global insights director Bryan Roberts as “something of a cross between Whole Foods and a retro theme park”, its Connecticut store features animatronic produce characters and grocery items, as well as a miniature farm in the car park.

Such in-store antics are combined with extensive staff training, several specialist food counters and sweet customer perks – shoppers are offered a free cup of coffee or scoop of ice cream for every \$100 spent.

## 6 JOHN LEWIS

The department store group has combined cutting-edge technology with the bricks-and-mortar experience at its Oxford Street flagship.

The 1,000 sq ft Smart Home department was introduced in April after the retailer generated an 81% spike in online sales and an 18-fold increase in searches for connected devices from 2014 to last year.

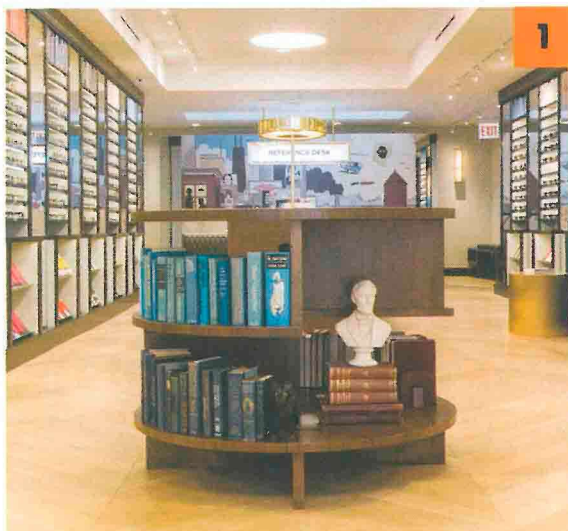
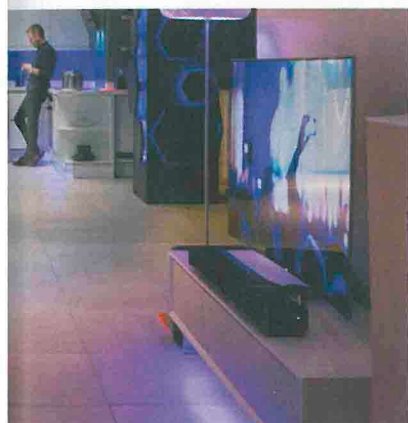
John Lewis buying director for electricals and home technology Johnathan Marsh said the department is intended “to demystify the latest smart technology” for shoppers and meet customer demand “for physical experiences before committing to a purchase”.

The technology on offer, which includes Samsung's connected refrigerator and a home security camera that uses facial recognition technology, can all be demonstrated by in-store staff that have been trained specifically to assist shoppers with such items.

John Lewis says its department is the largest retail offering of smart home devices in the UK. It has designed the area to demonstrate the technology in a real-life setting.

IT director Paul Coby told *Retail Week*: “Our shoppers are interested in these products but they want to know what they actually do and whether they will have a genuine benefit, so I'm confident our expertise will deliver.”

**Shoppers are encouraged to try out products before they buy in a series of workshops run by ‘artisan’ staff**



## 7 HOBBYCRAFT

The arts and crafts retailer launched its Sew Simple initiative last year to enhance the in-store experience for customers who bought a sewing machine. Hobbycraft invites those shoppers to classes where they can learn the basics of operating their new purchases.

The hour-and-a-half classes show shoppers how to set up their sewing machines and provide them with a series of tests to improve their skills.

The latest phase of the ongoing initiative involves Hobbycraft taking its sewing know-how on the road with its ‘Pink Bus Project’.

The retailer will run sewing lessons in locations including Bristol and Southampton and help shoppers to master more complex sewing techniques.