

EXPERIENCE

Much has been done to enhance the in-store supermarket experience, but is that effort squandered in the final five minutes of a shopping trip? asks **John Ryan**



A Waitrose store in King's Cross, London. The grocer has invested in making its stores feel less formulaic

SUPERMARKETS:

The final five minutes

Visiting a supermarket in the UK can be a reasonably positive experience these days. Head for one of the big four and as well as the usual aisles of foods, there will be a large area that is meant to imitate a market; counters intended to remind the onlooker of high street stalwarts such as bakers and butchers; and an impressive wine department. The latter is likely to be wood-clad – the idea being to imitate a French *cave* – even if the products purchased originate in Australia, or perhaps Argentina or Chile.

All this in addition to aisles that are wider, a greater variety of products and 'exotics' that are fast becoming everyday. And, of course, the

non-food elements that have become an integral element of the big supermarket experience. Given all of this, there is a passing chance that browsing may become as enjoyable in a supermarket as it is in, say, a bookshop. That said, there is always something that will upset the appletart and in a supermarket this usually happens in the last five minutes of a shopper's visit.

This is the point at which the shopping mission draws to a conclusion and the moment arrives to join the queue at the checkout. In fairness, things aren't always like this. There may be a wet Wednesday afternoon in March when there might even be a manned checkout that doesn't have a shopper troubling the cashier, but this will be the exception. For the

most part, visiting a supermarket checkout in the UK means standing in line and staring wistfully across at the checkout next to you where things seem to be being dealt with rather more quickly than in your queue.

Alternatively, basket size permitting, the shopper may opt for a self-service checkout where all is rosy until the inevitable 'Please wait for assistance' message appears on the screen that is issuing instructions.

In short, the last five minutes have the capacity to undo all of the positives that a retailer has endeavoured to generate in terms of service and experience. All is forgotten and instead, the enduring memory is one of frustration and a pressing desire to get to the exit as soon as possible.

EXPERIENCE



The questions therefore are: does it have to be this way? And is there anything that can be done that will in some way mitigate the effects of queuing, waiting and generally becoming impatient? TCC Global insights director Bryan Roberts says that sometimes it's a matter of price overcoming all: "At Aldi they are KPIed [key performance indicator] on items through the checkout per minute, not smiles. Aldi has introduced stores with basket-only checkouts in London. Some shoppers are in a supermarket for speed and they would welcome tunnel-style checkouts and more tech and they have no desire whatsoever to interact with human beings."

Maybe so, but the flipside of this argument is that fewer staff at the checkouts means more staff on hand to improve levels of service in the

store prior to checking out. The point is not lost on Itab Shop Products UK managing director Nick Hughes, whose company manufactures, among other things, tunnel-style tills that recognise products without the need for a barcode: "The pressure to improve in-store service has never been greater and yet the pressure to reduce costs has also never been greater."

This perhaps is the point as far as store design and supermarkets are concerned. Supermarkets are trying to reconcile intrinsically opposed impulses – shoppers demand more engaging environments, but they also cast a keen eye on the price of almost every item that passes through the checkouts.

Supermarkets may be about making the shopper feel better when trawling the aisles,

but they also need to offer prices that are attractive and competitive.

Hughes highlights the human side to the supermarket service equation: "All supermarkets have tried to become discounters and have forgotten their core proposition [serving the customer]. Morrisons are getting back on track and that's all about the shopper feeling they're valued." This is certainly the case at the recently opened Morrisons store in Colindale, north London, where wider aisles and a greater product assortment, particularly in the 'fresh' area, as well as a less overtly promotional environment, combine to offer a more restful shopping experience.

Nonetheless, when the time comes to pay, although the level of service and the displays are better than elsewhere in the Morrisons





A Morrisons store in Colindale, north London, which has been designed to provide a restful shopping experience



fiefdom, the usual frustrations may make themselves felt. As Hughes puts it: "When you look at checkouts, it's a neglected area. To maximise efficiency, you need to work at the whole piece."

Technology and service in combination then may be an answer, but Roberts warns that caution may need to be exercised: "From all perspectives, people are growing up as far as technology is concerned, but there still are people who prefer to interact with the cashier. There is a large split between shoppers in terms of the interactivity they need," he says.

A schism is evident therefore not only between the profit and design elements of a store, but also between shoppers, particularly those of more mature years, who may want a chat with a cashier, and those whose only desire is to complete the shopping journey with the minimum of fuss. In the medium and long term, it seems probable that technology

will come to the rescue not just of those whose only criterion is speed of exit, but those for whom shopping is a social occasion.

Waitrose comes close to this in its King's Cross and Worcester branches. Slimline self-checkouts are a feature and have rather less of the feeling of being corralled in a dedicated payment area while at the same time, cafes and a bar-cum-eaterie show what is possible with thought and, yes, money.

Like so many areas of retail, supermarkets seem to be heading towards a split that has price at one end and experience at the other, with middle-market operators increasingly feeling the squeeze.

It's a phenomenon that has plagued much of the fashion sector for a while now and perhaps something of the same nature is developing in food retailing. The final five minutes of the supermarket shopping journey will determine much over the next few years.

The final five minutes

THE PROBLEM

Price or in-store experience?

PRICE

The discounters and Asda and elements of the big four

EXPERIENCE

Waitrose, Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Tesco in selected locations

THE POLARITIES

Technology or social?

THE SOLUTION

Technology and social being made to work in tandem