

# SMOOTH RIDE

The way we are buying cars is changing, as customers look for more accessible ways to purchase a car like they shop for fashion, food and gadgets.

Text: Lyndsey Dennis

A new, relaxed car buying experience has arrived. Car manufacturers are setting up interactive experiences in shopping malls and town centres in a bid to move away from conventional out-of-town showroom set ups, allowing them to reach a far wider demographic. They're even letting people test drive models unaccompanied.

Bentley has opened a personalisation studio at Westfield London, offering a glimpse behind the walls of the brand's factory in Crewe. A mix of traditional materials such as wood and leather sit alongside facial recognition technology to help customers specify their perfect car.

'Configuring a Bentley is an intensely personal experience: like fine tailoring and couture fashion, it is a reflection of your personality and taste, so a location next to other luxury brands in the Westfield Village is a natural fit for the Bentley brand,' says Sarah Simpson, regional director UK at Bentley Motors.

Using emotional recognition technology, shoppers are guided through an immersive film that is shaped, directed and inspired by their facial and emotional reactions. Based on their measures

of engagement - captured by their device's camera - a bespoke Bentaya or Mulsanne is recommended for them from a selection of exterior paint colours, wheels, leather hides and wood veneer.

At Westfield Stratford, Rockar has launched a new experience for Jaguar Land Rover. Designed by Dalziel & Pow, the digital store is inspired by its setting amongst well known fashion brands, with a store window featuring constantly changing displays and content to create engagement with visitors.

Rockar 'Angels' are on hand to guide customers, but without the pressure to make a purchase. The focus is on creating brand engagement, empowering the customer to purchase a car and putting them firmly in control. Customers can configure their new model, agree a value for their trade-in and arrange finance using in-store technology that makes the process seamless, fast and enjoyable. The 'Angels' will help customers use the 'create' space, which includes colour swatches, examples of interior trim and samples of interior choices, to design a car that reflects their personality.

'The store, together with the digital click-to-buy websites, creates an omnichannel offer in response to changes in consumer buying behavior as customers continue to look for more accessible ways to shop, and we look to find ways to empower our customer and create a more enjoyable car buying experience,' says Simon Dixon, founder of Rockar. 'The concept opens up new audiences for the brand and ultimately supports dealerships with a new >

Above : Saturn Communications provided signage and touch-screen technology for the SEAT Store at intu Lakeside, including 10 digital interactive customer hubs, five video walls and four large format display screens.





medium that can drive brand awareness and sales in a modern consumer society.'

Technology also plays a key role in SEAT's first 'store' retail concept, in association with franchise partner, Group I Automotive at intu Lakeside. Designed by Green Room, the store boasts several innovations to enhance the customer experience, along with seven-day car delivery from point of order (subject to finance). These relaxed, no pressure retail and 'experience centre' environments also offer no-haggle pricing and are staffed by SEAT experts. The 150 sq m store has three display cars, with a further 16 models at its outdoor Experience Centre.

The theme of these stores is 'spirited spaces and warm welcomes', using natural materials to give the feeling of a relaxed space, combined with Mediterranean-inspired colours. Topping off the Barcelona vibe, there's even an olive tree in the centre of the store with in-built Gaudi-style seating.

SEAT customers can choose to do as much, or as little, of the buying process as they wish. They can research models through digital info 'hubs' where they can explore financing options, arrange test drives immediately, and get their trade-in car valued.

'Digitalisation is enabling retailers of bulky goods to display more of their products in a smaller footprint so traditional retail units within shopping centres are now more accessible to these brands,' says Rebecca Ryman, regional director at intu. 'Traditional car showrooms might be found in industrial parks and areas you wouldn't ordinarily visit for any other reason than to buy a car or another big purchase, whereas these stores are right at the heart of a more leisurely kind of retail experience where the brands reach a different audience who will have a lot of control over their family's major purchasing decisions.'

Aston Martin's Dover Street Market store doesn't even sell cars; it purely sells a lifestyle collection. Designed by chief creative officer, Marek Reichman and his team, the luxury space includes



**Top left:** Bentley's luxury personalisation studio at Westfield London offers a glimpse behind the walls of the British brand's iconic factory in Crewe.

**Above:** In-store technology at Rockar's Jaguar Land Rover digital store at Westfield Stratford makes the car buying process seamless, fast and enjoyable.

**Below:** 'Aston Martin at No. 8 Dover Street' is purely a brand experience for fans to discover new trends in art and design and be inspired by the products on display.

tailor-made oak cabinets, an oak floor and brass plaque displaying the Aston Martin wings. 'Aston Martin at No. 8 Dover Street' is purely a brand experience for fans to discover new trends in art and design, and be inspired. The space will also host design master classes, art exhibitions and a dinner series.

'Dover Street mixes art, culture, shopping, luxury and elegance. It's the perfect place for Aston Martin. We are surrounded by art, design and beauty, and want to feature the ideas that inspire us and share them with a wider audience. No. 8 Dover Street is a place where existing customers, admirers of the brand and people new to the marque can understand our design philosophies and experience the spirit of Aston Martin,' says Reichman.

Staff in these new store formats are paid a salary rather than on commission, so the pushy sales person is eliminated. That, and giving the customer control of buying a car and customising it, help to create a much more relaxed, trusting and enjoyable experience. **RF**

