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Does design have a role in sports retail?

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David Anderson, founder director of CADA Design Group, gives his opinion

Dichotomies exist in sports retail. Some of the obvious ones are the huge investments made by the brands in product development and design, and the invariably poor quality multi-brand environments in which the products are retailed.

A further dichotomy is the investment that the mono brands make in their retail environments. Niketown New York and Adidas Paris being two examples. One could argue that they are brand flagships - a physical embodiment of what the brand stands for. But it's more than that. It is a statement of intent to the market and to retailers. Strengthening the public perception of a brand strengthens its sell-in potential to retailers.

CHANGING MARKET
What about the dichotomies and challenges that are less obvious? These are far more interesting. The key issues are travelling from the future to the present at speed. Fundamentally, the market is changing.

"In heaven the police are British, the engineers German, the chefs Italian, the lovers French and everything is run by the Swiss. In hell the police are German, the engineers French, the chefs British, the lovers Swiss and the organisation is by the Italians."
(Source unknown.)

What does this say - nationalistic prejudice? No, it articulates in a humourous way how across Europe (and indeed the rest of the planet) we are different. Never more so than in sports retail. Next dichotomy: how do international retailers such as Zara and H&M achieve their universality and sports retailers cannot? The answer is national nuance, sports preference and geography.

National nuance first. Fun wheel (inline skates) was a huge hardware category in much of mainland Europe, but barely got on the radar in the UK.

Sports preference: in the Alpine territories outdoor and wintersports generally have more traction than football, for example.

Geography: sports sandals don't sell well in Helsinki in the winter. Fact.

However, much of this is changing. Ironically, the rest of Europe is currently moving towards the UK stock model - apparel (euphemistically referred to as sports leisure in the UK) and footwear. Trend forecasters, market recorders and brands are showing growth in apparel and footwear and a reduction in hardware across Europe.

The reason for this is not immediately apparent, which makes it all the more interesting.

It may or may not surprise you that the spotty 17-year-old male is becoming less relevant than the fortysomething mother of two. Audience groupings, motivations and classifications are changing. The gender bias in sports retail is swinging towards women.

The purchasing trends are towards activity, not simply product. As a consequence, multi-product and multi-brand stores need to review how they sell what they sell. It also infers a new shift in the market. In the early part of the millennium the market was dividing into price leader and expert authority. Tomorrow it is generic and speciality, with even generic retailers needing to express speciality.

So to answer the “Bloody hell, what do I do?” question, the first thing is to calm down. These are growing phenomenon rather than a seismic shift. Take time to address and plan change. If you are seeing year-on-year shrinkage in a product or activity sector, ask why. Is it increased competition, decreasing prices or simply that the activity sector is shrinking?

Central to the immediate future (the next five years), so the research tells us, is health and well-being. Competitive sport is becoming less significant to a greater or lesser degree across Europe. So, ask yourself the following questions: does my store and my product assortment reflect these changes, am I ahead of the trends or am I following them? Nobody wants to be the last blacksmith in town when the first Ford showroom opens. Stop shoeing horses and learn to change clutches.

INFLUENCE

Retail design excellence can reflect and influence the way that customers comprehend and respond to a retailer’s response to change. Crudely speaking, if the traditional audience grouping are changing, design the store accordingly. Little things count. A fitting room big enough for a mother with a baby may mean your store gets the sale. ‘Activity category’ merchandising means you may sell the shoes, the shirt and the shorts.

Acknowledge that mono-brand sports retail may be internationally universal, but generic sports retail will always exhibit national and local characteristics - albeit to a lesser degree.

Drive store design by activity. Tomorrow it is no longer ‘blood, sweat and beers’ it is more ‘commit to get fit’, or ‘have fun when you run’.

Build a business plan that can afford a proper store interior. This doesn’t mean luxury retail, but a retail environment that can hold its head up and compete for sports leisure expenditure in a head to head with fashion retailers - ask where else your customers spend their money.

Technology plays a huge part in sports product development and sports performance. It is playing an increasingly important part in sports retail, so embrace it.

To answer the question: yes, sports retail has an ever-increasing need for design. Mono-brand investment, national nuance, sports preference. The European shift towards apparel and footwear, audience and gender changes all suggest that sports retailers have to present their wares in less masculine activity worlds that at least compete environmentally with mid-market fashion retail.

So prepare for change, embrace design and be part of sports retail’s bright healthy future.

CADA Design Group is an international brand and retail design consultancy.