

# Reshaping Real-World Retail

Gareth Jordan, Director at ART Software Group, the technology company behind Retail Advantage explores steps to cultivate community and spark a cultural reboot ready for the new retail world.



The last 12 months saw much of the culture of retail as everybody knew it, fade into a dream. After such an unfortunate experience for the world, it is wonderful to think that we might soon welcome real-world retail back. Everyone understands that in the months ahead it will be crucial to take careful steps and get the strategy right.

Of course this applies to so much beyond the retail and leisure industry. But focussing thought and effort on what can help us as we move forward, actually presents us with a unique opportunity.

Destination teams, landlords and those trading in our city streets and shopping environments will have had time to reflect on what they need and want from their retail and leisure spaces. The same is true of the shopping public, who have also been evaluating what they need when visiting these places. Do both visions of what real-world retail should look like, align?

Bearing this in mind, future strategies should extend beyond a standard best-practice approach to reopening and then engaging consumers. In addition, we should seek to consider how the evolution of our culture as consumers might also be shaped. To meet the potential of this head-on, retail and retail real estate must successfully re-energise its culture to be able to adapt and deliver more. Not simply through plans that are reassessed and adjusted once every few months, but instead, taking an agile and fluid approach to fulfilling the expectations of consumers.

## TOUCH-LESS FEEL MORE

The pandemic put a new spin on what might once have been considered stuffy and unwelcoming store signage that read 'Please do not touch' - all retail spaces have been doing their best to be more touchless for obvious reasons. However, just because consumers are not touching, it does not mean that they are not feeling.

Customers are using their smartphones to interact and immerse themselves in brands simultaneously across channels. Technology is also being leveraged by retailers, restaurants, cafés, leasing, marketing and management teams. Data collected and utilised in-store is a vital part of the cultural shift and serves the expectations for modern retail. Consumers understand and share data that helps them shop better and feel more connected.

Whether at work or in our leisure time, everyone is glued to their companion devices and these ties are only getting stronger, so it is exciting and invaluable to arm real-world retail with insights through a familiar method that helps teams and individuals perform better and to be connected in smarter ways.

This is not only the age of the connected consumer, but connected working. A change that was seen as a giant leap before everyone needed to embrace digital and remote ways of connecting with colleagues.

Optimising the productivity and performance of any brand or retail site relies on efficient access to strategic detail, through analytics. This is essential in order to quickly reestablish a strong position in the new real-world retail. We must embrace uncertainty by putting ourselves in a mindset to measure, and learn with a reliable feel for what is or is not achieving results.

## SAFE AND ENGAGED

Cultivating cultural destinations for people to shop and dine in an efficient and enjoyable manner, whilst feeling safe requires innovators to overcome some very specific hurdles.

Owners and operators have understandably been focused on delivering measures such as changes to signage or capacity monitoring to enhance safety and protect customers, teams or tenants. For some destinations and

retail districts, this has been less about adapting and more about seeing the benefits of having a centralised community point of connection or "app" in place. Whilst for other retail brands and shopping destination operators, this past year has provided an opportunity to accelerate their ambition for digital innovation and be less conservative.

For some this has been an opportune time to make use of new, yet still proven technologies. And in this era of ubiquitous technology, taking the steps to deliver a connected environment is a much simpler process than you might think. With the right implementation and partnerships, bringing together and connecting data with other digital tools to serve and support trading becomes effortless.

For a time in the past year, a brief return to positive performance when trading was possible in the UK and Europe. This showed the retail industry's capacity to reboot, with consumers keen to experience glimmers of normality. However, re-energising retail requires a blend of good communications across all areas of business and an excellent understanding of outside influences to adapt early to things that may impact safety or performance.

Leveraging technology with real-time communications and reporting builds trust and better engagement. Post pandemic, this approach, combined with supporting systems can help create an engaged community that collaborates better to realise the new purpose of retail and leisure spaces.

## LOCAL AND GLOBAL

The new identity for real-world retail has been about convenience and as if to illustrate that, we have seen many sites transform temporarily into click and collection hubs. In a globalising world, it can be hard for mixed-use destinations to define their own distinct identity, but with travel and choice restricted, the chances are that local customers have come to appreciate the amenities in their community more now than ever. As restrictions ease further and consumers re-gain their freedom and choice, the challenge and opportunity will be to retain and attract shoppers by refining the mix of local and global offerings that suit each location. Where we choose to work, spend our leisure time, what we choose to wear and eat defines our sense of identity. The new retail must be properly equipped to delight and fulfil this need, reevaluating cultural and technical approaches to deliver on consumer expectations.

Physical spaces are valuable, but some consumers and members of the workforce may need to be enticed back in order to remember and realise the true value of face-to-face environments. Real-world retail will undoubtedly continue to be an important part of our culture, but the role that it plays is changing. How well retail adapts to this new landscape and evolving consumer demands will surely determine how we use these physical spaces for some years to come.

