By David Gester RIBA,
RTKL Vice President

Scripting Today's Retail Experience

How to capture the imaginations of today's smart shoppers — and keep them coming back again and again

These days, retail is about so much more than merchandise. It's about casting customers in a story, reflecting their desires and aspirations, and forging long-lasting relationships. Sound daunting? It doesn't have to be, but it does take a thorough understanding of today's customers, shopping trends and the implications of your brand.
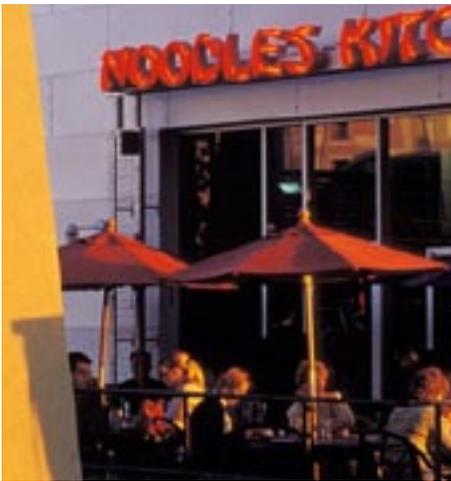
From Top:

Community is a major draw to shoppers at Pentagon Row in Arlington, Virginia. Here, a central common space becomes an ice skating rink in the winter, and residents who occupy over-the-shop apartments provide vitality around the clock.

At Mockingbird Station in Dallas, easily accessible transit makes shopping and eating out more convenient than ever.

Psychographics: The New Demographics

Scale a wall. Swing a golf club. Get warm in front of the fire. Read a good book. Play video games. Have afternoon tea. What do these things have to do with shopping? They are all activities consumers can participate in at various retail environments around the country — before, after, or even while they shop. Retailers and retail developers are banking on the fact that given a more three-dimensional shopping experience replete with sights, colors, sounds, textures and movement, consumers will stay longer, shop more, and leave with lasting memories. They are even reaching out to the untraditional shoppers, building in leisure options for men accompanying their wives as they shop for clothes or home furnishings.

This movement toward lifestyle-oriented, experiential shopping reflects a major shift in the way that retailers are now targeting shoppers. For decades, particularly with malls as the engines of the shopping experience, demographics reigned supreme. Factors like household income, population and age drove retail — where it was clustered, how it was designed and its merchandise mix. In this modern era of information at our fingertips, demographics are no longer enough to understand consumer preferences. Today's savvy shoppers know they have options, and they make decisions not based on their social standing, but on their likes and dislikes, who they are, and who they want to be. To truly understand their behavior and purchasing habits, retailers must examine psychographics, the measure of their attitudes, values and lifestyles, and integrate them into their brand strategies, and ultimately their retail environments.

The "Real" Deal

With the heyday of heavily themed and entertainment-loaded regional shopping malls rapidly drawing to a close, the retail industry has discovered an important lesson about today's shoppers: They seek authenticity — even if it's manufactured authenticity. No longer willing to sit in traffic, battle for a parking spot and walk miles from one end of a shopping mall to the other,

RTKL

shoppers are now favoring convenience and accessibility—retail environments that function as natural extensions of their everyday lives. More than that, they seek real community where they shop — active public spaces; connections to where they live, work or play; and places to see and be seen.

For retailers, this translates to creating a sense of authenticity in their messages to their consumers and shopping environments. Today's customers are smart, and by the time the members of the technologically savvy and diverse Generation Y reach consumer age, they will have been bombarded by
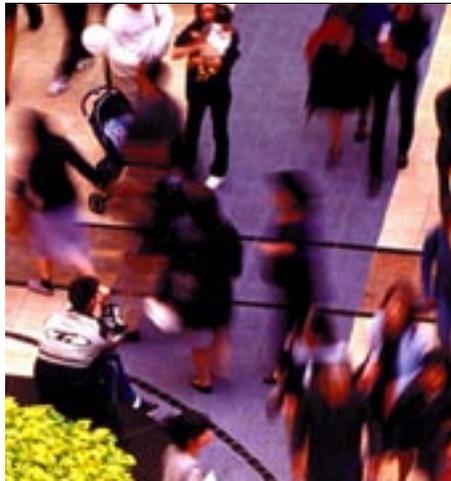
Left:

"Seeing and being seen" is an attractive quality for today's shoppers.

Top:

Retail environments with the authentic feel of a Main Street are increasingly popular among today's shoppers.

Yankee Candle's prototype store features comfortable chairs surrounding a fireplace —consistent with the brand's warm and inviting brand.

competing brands since birth. Standing apart from this fray of clamoring brands means finding a balance between what's new and exciting, and what's real. These customers want to know the why behind the products, and they aren't fooled by hyped-up image. Using design to create a clear voice above the fray will foster a loyal community of followers to your brand.

(Multi)Channeling Your Inner Brand

With the Internet gaining ground as today's medium of choice, retailers have caught onto the importance of web presence. But at the same time, many companies are reinventing themselves in other channels as well. These days, it's not enough to merely have presence online, in stores and in catalogs. Instead, a successful brand must work across these channels, both linking them together and designating each its independent role.

The most common channels for retailers today are brix, clix and pix. Multi-channel retailing has gone from bricks-and-mortar storefronts to online enterprises. It has gone from "pix"-heavy catalogs to physical stores and web

RTKL

From Left:

Multi-channel retailing means extending the brand from its "bricks and mortar" channel to the web and beyond.

Shinsei Bank utilizes a retail approach to customer service, creating touchpoints for their customers within their branches.

sites. It even goes form the web to the land; eBay is looking to expand its successful web presence to a physical store. Multi-channel retailing has the power to boost sales and grow a customer base substantially, by leveraging customer relationships and reinterpreting the brand across planes. The danger, of course, is jeopardizing the integrity of the brand. The key is to achieve an appropriate symbiosis of channels with the right mix of products and customer relationship management. All three channels have their limitations; finding the right balance, integration and seamless service experience can make the transition easier.

Buying Into It All

So what does it all mean? Understanding how your customers and how they respond to your brand is critical. Creating a strategy to remain fresh and personal means stretching that brand across and within your channels. One crucial means toward achieving that goal is through dynamic, brand-driven design: what your customers see and feel whenever they enter your store, open your web site or flip through your catalog. Design that enables the best, most consistent customer service from your employees. Design that meets and surpasses customer expectations. And ultimately, design that makes a lasting impression, scripting your customers in a larger experience and allowing them to make it their own.

David Gester is a Vice President at RTKL, an international, full-service design firm. With retail and leisure work all over the world, Mr. Gester has been instrumental in growing the firm's international portfolio of exciting, urban-style leisure destinations.

RTKL