

www.theguardian.com 27th October, 2017



'Shoppertainment': How department stores are becoming 'theatres of dreams'

It's not Wonderland – the huge John Lewis in front of you confirms that. Rather, you have entered the realm of “shoppertainment”, a brave new world where retailers aren't just in the business of trying to sell stuff – they are also in showbusiness.

The more than 300 staff at Westgate's John Lewis have been [trained] by the 5 Oxford Playhouse theatre. The acting lessons, which included voice coaching and body language skills, are part of new John Lewis boss Paula Nickolds' bold plan to “reinvent the department store for the 21st century”.

Simon Tavener, secretary of the Oxford Theatre Guild, says it's useful for retail staff to find their “character”, adding: “You need to put on a face and adjust your performance to 10 suit [the customers'] needs and wants.

“Selling requires you to have a sort of script in your head,” Tavener says. “Not one you recite, but one you tailor to your own voice ... a form of improv, if you like.”

John Lewis's new Oxford shop is “more than a route to selling things”, according to Nickolds, who has turned over a fifth of the 120,000 sq ft selling space to 21 “services and 15 experiences”, ranging from style advice to personalised Christmas baubles.

The retail theatre is stage-managed via an “experience desk” where shoppers can plan their itinerary. One option packs personal shopping, a manicure, a light lunch at Benugo and a Charlotte Tilbury makeover into a five-hour spree¹. Given the store's £18m cost, the last entry on the agenda is, of course, “Head to customer collections to collect 20 your purchases”.

Shoppers hungry for experiences have plenty of other options. In the nearby Nespresso store, fans of its pod coffee machines are invited to sit down and literally smell the coffee. Staff are coffee specialists who deliver the “ultimate coffee experience”, and the store's props include an atelier table where shoppers can take masterclasses.

25 Westgate Oxford took nearly 20 years and three sets of developers to complete, despite the fact that major retailers were desperate for modern units rather than the more traditional style of shop the historic centre of Oxford is famous for. The 800,000 sq ft mall, a joint venture between Landsec and the Crown Estate, is now 93% let.

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(372 words)

¹To go on a spree = *faire des folies*