



SuperValu Knocklyon

The trends redefining customer connection

PAUL LOWRY, design director at brand experience, strategy, and design agency TapCreative, looks at the retail design trends that have taken hold over the past year and at what is likely to define our retail spaces in 2024



'RETAIL IS FAST PACED' IS A PHRASE FAMILIAR TO ANYONE involved in the dynamic world of retail. From the bustling shop floor to intricate planning processes, the industry's rapid tempo is undeniable. However, amidst this perpetual motion, one area often takes time to evolve: the exploration of retail trends. While the sector may be swift in its operations, it exhibits a strategic and considered approach to embracing new initiatives.

Careful curation of retail trends reflects the industry's commitment to providing customers with the best possible experience. The right strategic approach ensures

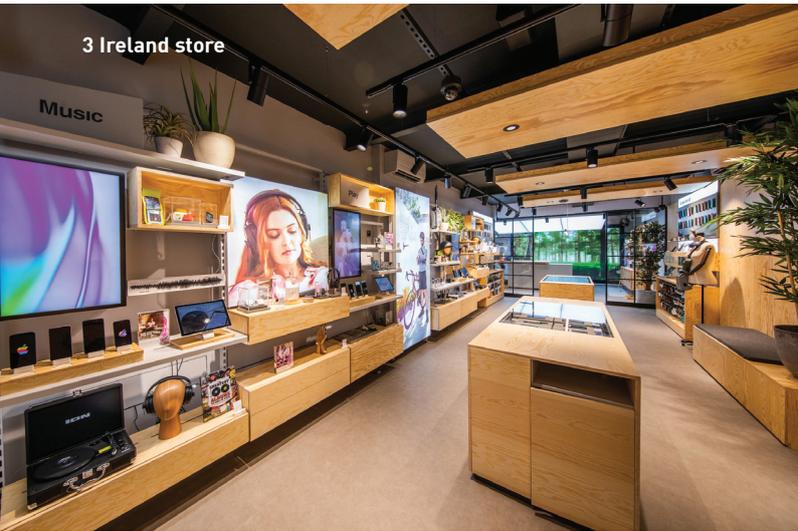
that initiatives are thoroughly examined before implementation, allowing ample time for their seamless integration and adaptation by customers. This deliberate approach strengthens the trend's impact and ensures longevity in the ever-evolving retail landscape.

The trends adopted in retail are far from fleeting. As we do our year-in-review recap, several retail trends highlighted in our feature in *Checkout's Top 100 Brands 2022* edition still ring true and look set to remain with us into next year. These include the culinary grocery experience, the food hall influence, sustainable retail, and digital meeting physical.

And as these trends take hold, we notice their natural evolution as retailers are trialling and testing to ascertain what's best for customers and their businesses. Several retailers are doing some great things in these areas. These include:

- Deposit Return Scheme trials by SuperValu, Dunnes Stores and Aldi
- Free water refills and cup washing are becoming the norm
- Brand partnerships that aim to help the consumer
- Carbon-neutral, and more sustainably built, sites
- Retro Spar pop-up store from Thomas Ennis Group that reuses and refurbishes old equipment and displays to open a trial concept in a new area.
- Different levels of experience-led store reinventions across the board, with newer store formats aiding consumers in their journey

All in all, the past 12 months has been exciting for retail design, exploration, and experimentation. As new retail trends surface, one thing remains certain: the retail industry is on an upward trajectory of continual transformation.



3 Ireland store



Deliveroo Hop outlet

Sustainable experience

We know sustainability is, and will continue to be, on the agenda. Moreover, we are moving away from the now almost expected high-level ESG goals to a more direct on-the-ground approach. Brands are now looking to aid consumers in making the right decisions, allowing them to make more sustainable choices and empowering the consumer to make these choices themselves.

The initiatives, as mentioned earlier, including deposit return schemes, complimentary water bottle refills, and cup wash stations, empower consumers to take charge of their own level of engagement with sustainability. They exemplify retailers' commitment to supporting the sustainable customer journey, fostering stronger brand loyalty. This transition reflects a shift from a self-focused approach of 'look what we are doing' to a customer-centric perspective of 'look how we are helping you,' recognising that enhancing sustainability is a shared and collective responsibility.

Building on the surging popularity and influence of the food hall experience, we observe a further refinement of this concept, adapting to the specific needs of shoppers' missions. The trend manifests itself through well-established offerings focused on 'food for now' and 'food for later'. Grocery retailers are responding well to the rise of food subscription services like HelloFresh, DropChef, and Eatto by tailoring their solutions to address the same customer needs with more purpose and effectiveness. This strategic approach not only alleviates the stress of meal planning for customers, but also holds the potential to reduce food waste.

Food waste management has emerged as a pressing concern in the industry. Having succeeded on the continent, apps like 'Too Good To Go' have entered the market. These apps enable customers to take advantage of surplus or leftover products, fostering a more sustainable approach. Furthermore, there is a renewed

emphasis on in-store sections dedicated to products nearing their expiration dates. These sections are becoming more prominent and are now considered in the early-stage store design to create a space that will positively highlight the area. This proactive design showcases the retailer's commitment to tackling food waste, which goes beyond a mere afterthought in the store layout.

The sustainability conversation, overall, is changing from waste recycling to waste reduction. Recycling is a last resort. Many of the initiatives in the sector aim to give consumers the tools needed to reduce their waste, aiming to fit seamlessly into their lifestyles.

Frictionless experience

The integration of frictionless technology has prompted a shift towards catering to the evolving needs of consumers, and in certain instances, this has led to changes in store formats.

In the pursuit of offering a more seamless and convenient shopping experience, there has been a notable rise in store formats optimised for hyper-convenience. Rather than attempting to cater to every possible customer preference, some stores have streamlined their approach, efficiently handling larger volumes of quicker transactions. As a result, certain layouts are carefully developed to create almost fully-fledged convenience stores, complete with queuing systems that effectively guide and funnel the customer journey.

We have observed a shift among larger premium retailers towards a convenience-led approach. For instance, M&S, which has long been renowned for its ready meals, has recently taken a more pronounced stance on this in-store. They have placed a substantial emphasis on frictionless convenience, reduced the number of grocery aisles, and significantly increased the presence of self-serve tills.



Centra Junction 13



Too Good to Go



This strategic move reflects a recognition of their Irish customers' preferences, catering to the desire for 'a few nice bits for tonight.' These format changes have undoubtedly contributed to a much more seamless shopping experience.

M&S has also branched out into providing great 'on-the-go' snacks through a partnership with Applegreen — just one example of brands creating partnerships to give the customer more of what they want. In recent years, we have witnessed a trend of retailers forming alliances to cater to customers' diverse needs. Examples include Dunnes Stores teaming up with Nourish, Tesco collaborating with Holland & Barrett to create a store within a store, and Musgrave using their SuperValu and Centra network to offer customers solutions in both premium and plant-based segments through Donnybrook Fair and The Happy Pear. These innovative solutions provide customers with access to specialised niche products under the same roof as their everyday grocery or convenience store.

Another notable evolution in the frictionless experience is the increasing prevalence of solutions focused on service optimisation. Among these solutions are dark/ghost kitchens, contactless ordering, and click & collect services, to name just a few. While the dark store or kitchen format is not entirely new, it has steadily evolved over the past few years, gaining significant traction in the UK and on the continent. In particular, the Quick-Service Restaurant (QSR) sector has embraced dark kitchens and contactless ordering in various forms, with Deliveroo establishing dark store formats in London. As a natural progression, we are now witnessing signs of similar developments in Ireland, both within the grocery and convenience sectors.

If there is one point of caution, a contactless experience only sometimes results in a frictionless one. The more we integrate digital into the customer journey, the more cautious we must be of its role. How and where contactless or digital elements fit into a customer journey should feel second nature, not forced. Creating a seamless journey that crosses the void between the physical and digital realms, where customers are not burdened with the need to figure out what to do, is no simple task. It requires a consideration of the design of both the physical space and the digital UX process.

Discovery experience

While the integration of digital into every aspect of life is something we must accept at this stage, it does not mean the death of analogue or 'bricks and mortar'. It just means mean a new era, where merely having a physical presence is no longer enough. The physical space should go beyond simple branding and embody the brand's essence. It should be a living expression that customers can feel genuinely connected to.

Fashion retail has been an exemplar of this approach for years, employing various strategies to create engaging and immersive experiences. Event spaces are a prime example of how fashion retailers have brought their brands to life. Hosting workshops and exclusive gatherings showcase the brand's latest collections and allows customers to experience brand connection first-hand. Areas dedicated to clothing repair and customisation also contribute to the living expression of the brand. By offering such services, fashion retailers show their commitment to values while fostering a deeper bond with customers who appreciate these initiatives.

Tapping into a deeper, meaningful connection between your brand and customers is a key differentiator for any retailer. Artfully conveying this story within the space requires a fine balance to ensure that it resonates without overwhelming customers or the environment. The utmost priority is to stay true to the brand's authenticity and purpose.

Customers respond to and engage with brand stories that align with their beliefs and values, prompting active participation. Brands like Patagonia have cultivated a loyal following through a clear mission and a cohesive brand experience. Customers seek assurance that brands follow through on their promises and represent values they can genuinely support and rally behind.

Closer to the grocery sector, consumer brands have started creating experiences rather than stores. Brands like Johnnie Walker and Twining's have used their spaces to tell their story, connect with consumers, and seamlessly sell their products. Twining's have created a unique experience in their London store that brings its story alive throughout the purchasing journey with interactive pieces that mix digital and tactile elements — to discover the origin, the blends, and the blender's recommendation.

Similarly, and more locally, the 3 Ireland stores have shifted from a commodity-led proposition to a more lifestyle-led experience, with one of them allowing the customer to reimagine their own connected home and purchase all the pieces they need to make that visual a reality.

Shaping future success

In conclusion, retail is witnessing a remarkable transformation, transitioning consumers from mere customers to passionate brand fans. Loyalty is now deeply rooted in beliefs and values, prompting a surge in online-first brands with devoted followings. Standout success stories include flagship stores established by brands like Sculpted by Aimee, Gymshark, and Gym + Coffee. At the same time, influencers have leveraged their massive followings to create instant hits like Prime energy drink and MrBeast Burger.

At TapCreative, we recognise the significance of this shift, embracing the interplay between brand, digital, personal, and physical realms. Using tools such as our Brand Experience Audit Tool (BEAT) ensures a comprehensive assessment of the entire brand experience, identifying opportunities to enhance customer connection. As we navigate the future, understanding and nurturing these deep connections between brands and their devoted fan base will undoubtedly be a pivotal factor in shaping success for retailers in the ever-evolving landscape of retail trends. ■

Image sources

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