

The in-store experience: Still the most powerful differentiator in the competitive retail space



By [Leanne Freeman](#), issued by [BMi Research](#)

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Despite the emergence and steadily increasing popularity of mobile and online commerce, the retail store remains the strongest customer touchpoint. But these days, in a tough economic climate where competitors fight for control of consumers' hard-earned rands, the retail environment has to work that much harder to keep its customers, and keep them happy.

Data from PWC's Total Retail 2015 global consumer survey of more than 19,000 respondents on six continents supports the ever-present, although evolving, role of the traditional store. It says that as shopkeepers and shops have been around for centuries, it's a safe bet that, mobile apps or not, stores will still be around in very familiar forms for at least the next few decades.

However, the premium in the future, the survey says, will be on creating unique, brand-defining experiences that keep customers coming back.

In recent years we've seen retail brands taking this sentiment to heart, and looking for innovative ways to create these stand-out retail experiences. Signature sounds and scents, for example, are increasingly being used by stores to enhance their retail experience.

It's not unusual to find South African purveyors of, say imported French linen and clothes, playing an Edith Piaf album and burning scented lavender candles in an attempt to create a shopping experience that reflects the very essence of their brand. Some extend this experience by personally wrapping sales items or using distinctive packaging, as their authentic French counterparts do. The result is a definitive shopping experience to which the customer forms an emotional connection.

But a positive retail experience comprises more than just pleasant music and a pleasing store aroma; the journey the customer undergoes from the time they step into the store to the time they check out, is critical in defining the retail experience and differentiating it.

At BMi Research, we conduct accompanied shopping immersions that allow researchers to physically experience this journey with shoppers. They observe shoppers' interactions with the retail environment at every level, gaining invaluable insight into the store elements that customers love, and the ones they don't.

Interestingly, aside from exploring this conscious awareness of likes and dislikes, researchers are also able to tap into the unconscious experience; what shoppers say they do or like before they go into a store is often very different to how they behave when they are in the moment, and what they perceive they did when you speak to them afterwards.

This offers retailers a rare glimpse into the minds of their customers, and allows them to truly see their store from the shopper's perspective. It effectively builds on the demographic intelligence captured from loyalty card programmes, and extends retailers' genuine understanding of their customers and their in-store needs.

It also highlights those areas within the retail experience that need improvement. In our experience, the most common areas consumers complain about are poor layout and in-store clutter, which make store navigation difficult; an inconsistent look and feel within the store not aligned with core customers' interests, which can feel alienating; and inefficient checkout processes, which - as the last stop on their in-store retail journey - can see shoppers abandoning their baskets and leaving empty handed.

These qualitative insights, which go beyond static data and numbers, are essential in delivering a compelling experience that not only meets shoppers' expectations but seemingly intuitively, exceeds them, because no amount of lavender candles or French crooning can make up for a lacklustre in-store experience. Not in today's competitive environment.

ABOUT LEANNE FREEMAN

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