



## So what did we miss?

Lessons from the return  
of non-essential retail

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# Lessons from the return of non-essential retail



As the non-essential retail stores of Ireland reopened their doors on May 17<sup>th</sup>, after their third and most brutal lockdown, it was to a radically different retail climate than the one that had they initially closed to back in March 2020. In the intervening period, online retail had flourished across the country, with postmen and amazon delivery guys the cheery sights that lifted our dark lockdown days. By the time of lockdown number 3 it seemed that there was almost nothing we weren't prepared to buy online (aside from children's shoes, but that's another story).

The death of the high street, the bricks & mortar store experience has long been prophesied. The Covid crisis has a habit of hastening already evolving trends and you could be forgiven for thinking this is one of them. But the zeal among certain groups of consumers as they returned to the high street made it clear that all is not lost. Far from it.

The many months of locking down and opening up have helped clarify exactly what we get out of the physical store experience. There are some brands already nailing it (Penneys, Brown Thomas, TK Maxx were constantly at the top of the list of 'shops consumers can't wait to get back to' during lockdowns), but all brands intending to maintain a presence on the high street should pay attention to what consumers love about the bricks and mortar experience that online can't replicate.

*Research findings from a range of depth interviews with shoppers returning to the high street*



## Connection with the product

Let's start with the most obvious benefit real life shopping has over online. The actual product experience. Seeing, feeling, connecting with product in reality has many benefits over experiencing it through a screen. Clearly this is category dependent. It's much more important to see clothing in real life than to see a washing machine for example. But experiencing the product is about more than just appreciating it, it's about creating a personal connection with it.

Marketing campaigns show us how the product enhances the lives of beautiful models, but there's nothing like seeing it in person to understand how it will impact our own. Only in store can we truly understand if the feel and flow of the fabric is to our taste, if the colour suits us, if the cut flatters our body shape. As one of our shoppers put it *"I have to see it in real life to know if it's truly me"*. And this is much more consequential for high ticket luxury goods where emotional connections need to be strong to persuade us to open our wallets. It's no wonder we were desperate to get back to BT.



## Treasure seeking

We all know the adrenaline rush of the great 'find'. Whether that's an eye-popping bargain, or the perfect wine glasses you've been searching for all your life, taking that baby to the till is a dopamine hit like no other. This is of course, prime TK Maxx territory and the brand offers us a perfectly distilled 'treasure seeking' experience (it's even in their tagline).

Online just doesn't deliver the thrill of the chase in the same way. Online, we calmly search for what we want/need, we aren't blindsided by products that we weren't looking for but steal our heart in an instant. As a very seasoned older shopper told us, *"Online might be more efficient, but it's a lot less exciting"*.





## Glorious excess

One of the most pleasing aspects of shopping in store is display of bounty on offer. Rails of clothes, shelves of books, aisles of homewares. Being let loose among these riches is an exhilarating experience as anyone who's ever set foot in Penneys can attest to. The best shopping experiences trick us into thinking there's no need to hold back, we can have whatever we want, as we gaze like a child in a sweetshop at all on offer.

Penneys pulls off this sleight of hand better than any other brand. Tables piled high with desirable 'stuff', at prices that convince us to fill our boots. Note that the language of Penneys is always plural. We go to Penneys for socks, tops, pjs and we leave with bags (and bags and bags). Excess, while inspiring in store, doesn't work online. Online, the only way to encounter thousands of products is by scrolling and scrolling until we lose our collective minds. Asked what they missed most during lockdown: one young shopper told us it was *"filling baskets to the brim"* in Penneys. The digital equivalent just isn't the same.



## The wisdom of crowds

Who knew, but it turns out that we also missed shopping alongside other people. Online you shop in a vortex. In store we benefit in surprising ways from the wisdom of crowds. Other people inspire us in ways that can be hard to pin down. We like watching other people's style and presentation, this gives us ideas beyond what we're presented with in store.

We are also influenced by what others buy. Who doesn't amble over for a look at the display that has attracted a large crowd? The 'buzz' of other shoppers adds to the sense of occasion and reassures us that our desire to spend spend spend is, if not necessarily a worthy pursuit, at least one enjoyed by many others. As one shopper put it *"I never thought I'd miss the crowds in Penneys"*. But they contributed much more than we ever knew.

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## So, what are the learnings?



The revolution in online retail continues and the benefits of efficient, streamlined shopping without getting off the couch are obvious.

However, in store retail will always have something different and valuable to offer us. Trading conditions in the months ahead will be tough and not all brands will survive the immediate post-pandemic period. Creating a strongly product-focused, exhilarating and social shopping experience is how brands can keep themselves relevant and the shoppers coming back for more.