

Popping *for* Shoppers

It's the virtual opposite of Amazon and eBay, but "pop-up retail" has become a pop-culture shopping phenomenon as immediate, innovative and provocative as anything online.

Pop-up retail fits perfectly with the Entertainment Economy, the Experience Economy, the Surprise Economy, and other trendsetting labels defining 21st century shopping.

Nothing quite captures the fun of bargain hunting at Filene's Basement or treasure hunting at Costco the way the recent pop-up stores do. Surprising consumers — creatively and pleasantly — with temporary brand "performances" and exclusivity has made "pop-ups" a terrific platform for gutsy brands and adventuresome merchants.

The "pop-up" trend is driving retail innovation.

The essential ingredients of pop-up stores have been around since the *soukh*. International bazaars and urban markets filled to the brim with stalls selling or bartering assortments make even the poorest areas feel rich with goods. Farmer's markets or pop-up farm stands make roadside stops a must for the freshest tomatoes, corn and jams.

As if megamalls didn't offer enough choice, specialty carts lining the corridors with items truly differentiated from the big, retail chains surrounding them became a new norm. A generation ago, supermarkets "popped" into fuller service environments with flower shops, coffee shops and wine sellers. Desperate department stores refreshed their floors to draw a new generation of shoppers.

They did it by adding experiential areas and services: Make-up counters began to offer more makeovers and demonstrations, and brow-bars sprang up, as well as celebrity-branded product areas complete with videos to aid the imagination. The lifespan of such stores-within-the-store varied from temporary, to brief, to permanent fixture.

VH1's Pop-up Video is an important — and successful — metaphor here. The show cleverly drew new attention to the already familiar MTV music video. The visuals took the form of "bubbles" that popped up during a music video containing trivia and wry witticisms.

The format later inspired viewer input, with comments from the television audience, and truly made watching music videos an interactive, engaging experience. You couldn't look at music videos again without thinking of their "pop-up-ability." The combined sense of surprise, of inviting you to become a participant and seeing the familiar in a new way is at the heart of this powerful pop-up trend.

We have seen pop-up promotions show-up in city centers, train stations and parking lots of traditional stores. Essentially, they appear in any potentially high-traffic area with the hopes of disrupting normal routines with captivating offers, demonstrations or limited-time-only distribution.

Pop-ups may be one of the best ways to target a niche audience — college campuses or bringing urban brands to a rural area. These promotions are particularly useful to educate consumers and drive trial (e.g., the Alli pop-up); to hear from consumers before an idea solidifies into a brand (1969 Gap Jeans); and to cause a spectacle to drive buzz or publicity (Charmin's "Enjoy the Go").

When applied as part of the marketing mix, the

pop-up concept forces you to think through what creates an innovative, worthwhile investment. While there is potential to generate sales, the real value in this type of retail that occupies a location for a short duration (1-30 days) is promotional and creates hype, coolness factor and a sense of urgency or intrigue.

This delights consumers who are increasingly used to “massclusivity” and “planned spontaneity” behind so many viral and buzz campaigns. Brands from Gucci to Kidrobot — and even retailers like Target and Uniqlo — have used pop-up stores to launch new lines as well as generate buzz.

They’ve used pop-ups to integrate and align brand positioning and shopper-marketing efforts. Even Walmart — the global retailer that defines economy of branding scale — adopted this concept when it offered a two-day-only exposure of its new fashion line, Metro 7, in a Fashion Cabana in Miami’s South Beach district.

Like iPhones and Blackberries, pop-up retail can also have the power of mobility. In May and June 2009, Gap kicked off a ‘60s style tour, using a school bus as a traveling pop-up store. Instead of seats, the bus sported shelves filled with T-shirts, flip-flops, and beach hats that people bought and paid for at a cash register near the driver’s seat. The Gap’s pop-up tour helped rejuvenate a tired brand with energetic outreach.

Seasonal pop-up stores have become a cliché in many malls. But how about brands “owning” a season in an unseasonable way? Altoids’s “Curious and Original Chocolate Shop” opened for six days in February, 2007. The pop-up was promoted as an “anti-Valentine’s day shop” for those exhausted by the unrestrained sentimentality of Valentine’s Day. The tremendous online traffic compensated for the limited physical foot-traffic.

Seasonal pop-ups also keep traditional retailers competitively alert to how they will continuously innovate their holiday merchandise and merchandising. Pop-ups are as important to retailers as competitive threats as they are opportunities for merchandising innovation.

My favorite pop-up innovation practice is rooted in the bursting of the real-estate bubble. Many store fronts on popular streets and off-the-beaten trail neighborhoods are empty. Mayors across the country have jumped on the “when you’ve got a lemon, make lemonade” bandwagon by inviting artists, designers and entrepreneurs to inhabit these spaces. The overarching problem isn’t solved, of course, but giving life and economic dynamism to empty spaces during difficult times is significant.

The quintessentially British store — Liberty — refreshingly incorporated a pop-up Hermes shop, selling a collaborative range of traditional and updated designs. The space went beyond the merchandise to offer education: hosting workshops to show people how to loop, tie and knot the signature scarf in novel ways.

The vibrant environment emphasized an apparent strategy for making Liberty once more the chosen resort of the artistic shopper. This pop-up experience gave two old, established brands a chance to reinvent. It kept the customer’s curiosity alive and enticed new ones in a cost-effective collaboration for brand and retailer alike.

Personally, I’ve always been one to search for special items in small runs or one-of-a-kind pieces. For me, pop-ups feed that same desire for discovering things not everybody knows about. The idea of little surprises inserted into the shopping monoculture is exciting and important. Successful little surprises can translate into surprisingly large margins. Brands, retailers and their consumers can all win.

Make no mistake: Pulling together a successful pop-up is hard work. The payoffs are worth it, however. From individual designers teaming up, to real-estate agents making better use of vacant properties, to big brands looking to add a bit of agile ‘cool’ to their otherwise fixed locations and massive flagship stores: Pop-up retail can be platforms, not just one-off techniques.

Don’t ignore the dozens of online pure-plays dying to get a bit of offline visibility. Why not an Amazon.com or Zappos pop-up store? Even iTunes could pull off an interesting pop-up experience. Should that be in an Apple Store? A Best Buy? A Walmart? A 7-11? Or a college campus, airport, subway station...?

“Here today gone tomorrow” doesn’t have to be a term of derision. It can — and should — announce “innovation” and “profit” whether you are a retailer, a manufacturer or an agency. And, by the way, pop-ups also build brands. ■



BETH ANN KAMINKOW is president and chief operating officer of TracyLocke. A strong advocate of insights-inspired marketing programs, she is a pioneer in strategic-planning research methodologies. Contact: bethann.kaminkow@tracylocke.com or (203) 857-7616.