



WOMEN'S SELECTION

SECTION

Automated Shopping



One part
online,

one part
bricks and mortar,

Hointer
transforms the
shopping
experience
as we know it

By JENNY SCHRANK

Photos by DAN BELLIA/HOINTER

How

can the advantages of online shopping integrate with the benefits of bricks and mortar to

elevate the shopping experience? Nadia Shouraboura's answer to this question is—Hointer.

While a few physical Hointer destinations do exist on the West Coast, this is not a new retail store that will be sweeping the nation or taking the world by storm. However, it is a shopping platform that has the ability to be embraced and integrated by any retailer, and as such, Hointer is actually a collection of retail technology solutions that already has, and will continue to have, global impact on shopping.

Due to her years of experience with Amazon, Shouraboura, Hointer's founder and CEO, was no stranger to the supply-chain, fulfillment process, warehousing strategies and advantages of online shopping. But, after a retail excursion with her Millennial daughter, and feeling disheartened by the lack of product information available, it became clear to her what was lacking in both the online and bricks-and-mortar shopping experiences. With Hointer, she has reinvented and enriched the shopping experience by integrating technology into retail spaces with an approach that allows retailers to connect with customers in a new way.

In order to revolutionize how the world shops, Shouraboura was committed to testing the concept. In the fall of 2012, she opened the first Hointer destination store, a 2,500-sq.-ft. space in close proximity to the University of Washington in Seattle. Since then, she has set up pop-up stores ranging in size from 800 sq. ft. to 4,000 sq. ft., in locations such as Pacific Place in Seattle and Palo Alto, Calif. The location selection is critical in order to gather important data to help improve the Hointer experience. The pop-up stores are located on main arteries of a mall or within proximity to other key retailers, and test various shopping periods, such as summer and holidays.

The selected spaces offer a clean, simple and well-lit environment in order to suit the minimalist design of the Hointer destinations and the need for flexibility. The key design element of the Hointer stores is a cabling system of aircraft-grade cable that is tied into boards attached to existing wall studs. An arrangement of three cables allows the team to hang bars, mannequins and other display units, and even position some displays at 45- and 90-degree angles.

"We can set the store up and take it down in a day, and we can change the layout in minutes," Shouraboura says. "Everything hangs from the ceiling, slides and is easily movable. The apparel is flying in front of you."

The Hointer concept keeps displays simple—it is all about the products. "We don't want to distract from the product itself," says Dan Bellia, designer for Hointer.

And therein lies the beauty of the concept. There is one of every item on display, rather than every possible size and color of every piece of apparel. This eliminates clutter and allows customers to see every detail and stitch. Then add the technology, which begins to take this experience to a new level.

Customers move around the showroom with handheld devices, their own phones or tablets provided by the store, and shop with an "Omni-Cart." They can use this app to tap merchandise and access a variety of information about the product. The benefits of online shopping are



← WHOOSH fitting rooms in Hointer feature chutes where selected merchandise comes out.

→ Only one of each item is displayed in the store, eliminating clutter.



Designer Denim
Sale!
WINTER

TOP
LERS

COLORS

COMFY &
RELAXED

WASHED

TOP

WASHED

TOP

The selected merchandise arrives via the in-chute, in 30 seconds, with a “whoosh” sound. (It’s pretty fascinating, really.)

now in the palm of their hand. They can access product highlights, customer reviews and media clips, as well as receive personalized recommendations, style ideas and fit suggestions. Then, with the click of a button, they can add an item to their fitting room.

While customers are shopping, scanning and sending items to the fitting room, the Hointer team can monitor shopper activity and use the technology to help them shop, offer suggestions and send additional items to the fitting room. This “Try-On Multiplier” capability takes the shopper/sales associate relationship to a new level. The sales associate is now more of a stylist and improves sales potential by increasing the number of items customers try on. The technology allows the sales associate to learn about customers and even review their shopping history, likes and dislikes.

When the customer is ready and a room is available, she heads to her designated “WHOOSH Fitting Room.” These spaces are constructed of thick corrugated plastic walls that come in 4-ft.-by-8-ft. sheets. The sheets attach to poles that extend floor to ceiling with brackets that tie the pieces together. Portable track lights provide the proper light level for each unit and easy-to-cut holes created in each room accommodate the “in-chute” and “return chute.” Why WHOOSH? Because the selected merchandise arrives via the in-chute, in 30 seconds, with a “whoosh” sound. (It’s pretty fascinating, really.)

Shoppers continue to use technology behind closed doors with their handheld device or the

conveniently located touchscreen to request different sizes and colors, or review more product information. Anything they don’t like is simply dropped down the return chute, while new items can arrive instantaneously. The merchandise comes from the in-store micro-warehouse, fully automated and efficiently located to properly service the fitting rooms.

At the Hointer stores, 90 percent of the floorplan is dedicated to showroom displays with 10 percent dedicated to the micro-warehouse. “Everything is packed tightly in the warehouse,” Shouraboura says. “It is very organized; items are numbered and can be accessed quickly.”

The success of the fitting room for Shouraboura is all about conversion. At Hointer, most customers end up in the fitting room, and due to the technologically enhanced process, they end up trying on more products. “It is so easy to try more on,” Shouraboura describes. “And as you try, try, try, you end up falling in love with something. It is rare for a customer to say no to trying on more items while they are already in the fitting room.”

For that reason, the fitting room is an important aspect of the Hointer shopping experience, but Shouraboura is finding that even in high-volume stores a limited number of fitting rooms are preferred. Technology is used to help manage the fitting rooms and create efficiencies. “It allows people to keep shopping. They are buzzed when a room is ready for them. Instead of people standing in line, they are shopping continuously,” Shouraboura says.

The Hointer team members continue to monitor the shopper, offer suggestions and interact face-to-face as desired by the customer. When decisions are made, customers can swipe their card at a kiosk and walk out the door. Or, when they are still thinking about “those” jeans two hours later, they can use their app to complete the purchase and arrange delivery.

The Hointer stores or “retail incubators” have allowed the team to test and tweak the technology to ensure customer satisfaction. “It is a very fast way for us to develop the technology. We see what works, what doesn’t, and what changes need to be made,” Shouraboura explains.

The company goal is to help other retailers integrate the technology to reinvent their own brand and shopping experiences. So far, Levi’s has been one such retailer to explore this technology in a pop-up store in Manhattan. Lifestyle elements, such as a lounge, coffee bar and barber area, were integrated into the store with the Levi’s products surrounding customers at every turn.

Over in Singapore, Hointer partnered with MDS Collections, a women’s fashion retailer that introduces 20 new items every day, according to Shouraboura. The Hointer technology was integrated into an existing space, which allowed MDS to introduce a new way of shopping.

“The goal is to work with our retailer partners,” Shouraboura says. “They have a strong brand vision and know the unique look and feel they want for their store. The Hointer technology works to support this vision.”



↑ A clean, simple design allows for flexibility.

← Shoppers can order different sizes or more products from their smartphone, or from wall-mounted tablets.