

TECHNOLOGY

Engaging the 21st-century shopper

An innovative laboratory in Paris is investigating new ways to make shopping centres appealing to 18 to 35-year-olds. **Matthew Chapman** reports

In the Clichy district of Paris there is a lab where 10 researchers are working on appealing to a new kind of shopper – the ‘shoppemista’, a different breed that likes to avoid the mainstream.

Clichy is akin to London’s Shoreditch of a decade ago – the Shoreditch before the rents started soaring and every multinational wanted a satellite office in the area. Working away in the airy and secluded lab is not the latest start-up but an outpost of Unibail-Rodamco, the largest commercial real estate company in Europe – and spearheading a transformation at the business is the lab’s managing director, Ludovic Flandin.

Flandin’s team is leaving no stone unturned in attempting to appeal to this new kind of shopper, who is aged between 18 and 35 and beginning to shun mainstream products.

What is the appeal of this new breed of consumer? “It is not only hipsters who want products from places other than Zara and there are more and more local brands emerging – the type you would find in Boxpark in Shoreditch,” says Flandin. “This is really a market that is growing and it is not just luxury products.”

The lab’s five researchers are supported by 30 ‘innovation champions’ from across the business, whose job it is to visit the lab regularly and feed ideas into the wider business as quickly as possible.

“We want to keep it very agile and small to keep it clear, explore new territory and introduce ideas as soon as possible,” says Flandin.

Unibail’s innovation strategy goes beyond experimenting with innovations such as Oculus Rift virtual reality technology and extends as far as revolutionising the humble sink in its shopping centres’ bathrooms – the lab is working on developing heavy-duty sinks with state-of-the-art materials for shopping centres.

Researchers at the lab are even working on integrating big data into the toilets. Flandin believes the ‘internet of things’ means a “revolution is coming to public spaces”. He says there is potential to record data on when bathrooms are used and the comfort of the experience in order to forecast behaviour and draw up more efficient cleaning rotas.

“A woman will not prolong the visit [to the shopping centre] for more than three hours if she knows the toilets are dirty,” says Flandin.

He argues that the information at Unibail’s fingertips is now the envy of data-hungry tech giants. Around 800 million people visit the group’s shopping centres each year and the lab is exploring how to collect more than just footfall data.

“Google and Amazon are dreaming of this data and we have it,” says Flandin. “There is potential for a loyalty programme and data about the quality of visits.”

Beyond the nitty gritty of toilet maintenance and new sinks, the lab is working on sexier projects, including local gastronomic experiences (see Fresh! box), an exclusive members’ club for fashion junkies (see Designer Gallery box) and a rooftop garden experience with France’s oldest garden centre, Les Fermes de Gally.

The lab has been developing the ideas since



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Ludovic Flandin, Unibail Rodamco



For more pictures see Retail-week.com/youngshopperlab



launching in December last year and the aim is to imbue a culture of innovation throughout the business.

The lab reports direct to chief executive Christophe Cuvillier because, in the words of Flandin, "we are a disruptive team which is hard to manage unless you have high support".

Cuvillier's background is in the luxury sector where he held executive roles at Kering and L'Oreal and Flandin credits him with breathing new life into Unibail.

"Before the new chief executive a lot of people were from banking, audit and consulting, but now we have a lot more people coming from retailing and entrepreneur backgrounds," he says.

Unibail is now seeking to compete with Google in hiring the best people and is attempting to appeal to them "by having more fun".

This sense of fun includes monthly speed-dating with start-up sessions where entrepreneurs have 20 minutes to pitch.

The sessions, attended by senior executives including Cuvillier and IT, purchasing and marketing directors, have resulted in Unibail collaborating with businesses including Keecker, the outfit behind robots that have a resemblance to R2-D2 from *Star Wars*.

Despite the laser focus on innovation, the lab is still pragmatic about jumping in too recklessly to every hyped new technology.

Flandin says the informal motto within Unibail is "sometimes it is better to be the second fastest rather than the fastest".

That is a philosophy shared by Apple, whose approach to innovation is impressive – if that is anything to go by, this Paris lab is one worth watching. ■



DESIGNER GALLERY

Part of Unibail's mission to offer non-mainstream products will be the Designer Gallery, a place for "aspirational and affordable" brands. The online version will launch in March 2015 and the content of the exclusive members-only club will emulate upmarket lifestyle magazine *Monocle*. The bricks-and-mortar version will launch in September 2015 in Stockholm and Cagnes sur Mer, France, and will sell the likes of La P'tite Bête, a brand for toddlers. Shoppers will have to pay to be a member of the online club, while Flandin claims the company is "breaking the mould in terms of the designs of the stores".

FRESH!

Fresh! is designed to provide a unique gastronomic experience and has launched in Les Glories shopping centre in Barcelona. The location features outlets of some of the best restaurants in Barcelona, including Can Culleretes, the second-oldest restaurant in Spain, which opened in 1786. Flandin says the company managed to lure quality restaurants by first landing the well-respected Barcelona restaurant Mary's Market. "If other restaurants knew Mary's Market was coming we knew other people would be interested as well," says Flandin.

