

COMMENT

The diverse mix of staff and shoppers that makes this industry so exciting is worth protecting, says **Peter Williams**

Retail's unique vitality is due to its diversity

“ We are very fortunate to be able to work in one of the most diverse and inclusive industries.

Even the transport sector, which everyone uses, segregates first from second class and economy within the train or plane – an old-fashioned concept you might think in this modern age.

In retail we endeavour to keep both customers and our employees as diverse as possible in terms of ethnic origin, gender, age and where possible disability.

Our customers, particularly those in the big cities such as London, Manchester and Birmingham, clearly display this diversity.

Although each individual retailer defines its proposition towards a target market and establishes traction with that particular group, they are often agnostic about other consumers venturing into the store and purchasing.

Years ago as a customer you felt that many of the luxury brands almost tried to exclude you from their shops: the man at the door of the store who looked you up and down to check, “are you wealthy enough to be in this store?”; the sales associate who then looks at you with the question, “are you fashionable enough to be wearing these clothes?”.

The luxury brands found that the market for their products beyond just the obviously wealthy is huge.

Another factor is that fashion, at least in the UK, is eclectic and jumbled up. So it is perfectly acceptable to wear a Topshop dress with a Gucci handbag or Christian Louboutin shoes.

In terms of customers, the arrival of



the internet gave brands and retailers the opportunity to sell to the whole world. All of a sudden if you didn't think you had diverse customers before, you do now.

The retail workforce is generally diverse too. Walk through the ground floor of any of the large London stores and you see a melting pot of people working there. This adds to the excitement and vitality of the shopping experience.

We should respect the diversity of both these people's background and, for that matter, their opinions. The recent letter from business leaders published in *The Daily Telegraph* in support of the Conservative Party was a step too far.

There is little doubt, based on historical evidence, that a Conservative government is better for the economy and the business community as a whole.

However, not everyone votes on the basis of these being the most important issues to them as individuals, and we should acknowledge that.

It is perfectly fine for an individual to publicise his or her opinion if they so choose, but to inveigle or imply that this is in the best interest of customers and employees is perhaps not right.

As Gordon Selfridge said when he opened his eponymous store on Oxford Street, “This is not a department store – it is a community centre and everyone is welcome”.

Everyone that is, except shoplifters.

Peter Williams is chairman of Boohoo.com, Jaeger and Mister Spex