

# STORES

## Automotive acceleration

Increasingly, the biggest car brands are opting to open car shops in regional malls, but is this a trend that is here to stay, asks **John Ryan**

**T**ime was when buying a car meant schlepping out to a light industrial unit on the edge of a big town or city and then selecting from the models on offer. For many car buyers, this is still the case, but increasingly there is an alternative option – head to a large shopping centre.

Tesla, Mercedes, Hyundai, Seat, Volkswagen and Jaguar are among the car brands making it entirely possible to explore and even buy their cars while in a shopping centre.

In place of a standard fashion store in a large regional mall, car ‘shops’ are appearing. These are showrooms but they don’t look or feel like the traditional places in which shiny automotive metal is acquired. Most of these stores don’t have many cars, a couple of models suffice, but this is about experiencing the brand as much as digging deep to buy into it.

And while some in-mall car showrooms are permanent, others are pop-ups, albeit they tend to be in place for weeks, rather than days.

It is also worth noting that the arrival of cars in malls is another way that shopping centre landlords can offer an enhanced mix for their shoppers, adding to their heft as destinations.

As Russell Loveland, portfolio director at Landsec, the owner of Bluewater, puts it: “They [car showrooms in shopping centres] add to the overall experience and create additional reasons to visit for guests.

“The appeal of permanent car stores to owners of malls is that they deliver incremental sales that do not cannibalise other elements of the offer.”

All well and good and as far as pop-ups are concerned, they add spice to an existing mall line-up.

### Rockar Hyundai, Bluewater

This was the first permanent car store in a mall, opened in November 2014. Designed by consultancy Dalziel & Pow, this is one of the car showrooms that aims almost at the impulse buyer. The headline purchase numbers are posited on the notion of monthly lease-hire payments, rather than the more onerous

down payment and bank loan, meaning that purchasing a car suddenly becomes just another household expense and therefore apparently more affordable.

The upshot is that buying a car is little different from buying a mobile handset and shoppers can specify colour, trim, finish and suchlike while in the store. Perhaps more to the point, this is a hi-tech offer and it has set the template for other car brands, as far as creating an environment from which a sale can be made with just a few models on the floor.

### Seat, Intu Lakeside

Located more or less in the middle of the linear mall that is Lakeside, this store has been trading since the autumn last year and offers, among other things, a central seating area with a tree and a circular light feature above it, around which the cars are positioned. It is a corner unit and as such can have two entrances and a car positioned just inside each.

The store makes much of high-resolution digital screens around the perimeter, which emphasise that visiting this showroom does not mean dealing with ‘pushy staff’. For those who are so minded, a test drive can be organised on a click and collect basis by specifying online the model to be driven, prior to arriving at the store.

### Mercedes, Westfield Stratford

This is a pop-up, one of two (the other is currently in The Centre, Milton Keynes), and it is about experiencing the Mercedes brand, rather than buying the car, although you can buy a Smart car from the store.

For the most part, visiting this store is about buying Mercedes-branded clothing made in collaboration with Hugo Boss or stepping into an F1 racing car that allows the shopper a spin around a virtual circuit.

The store environment, as might be expected, is a good deal more flash than either the Hyundai or Seat stores, but it will only be in this shopping centre until August 8, having had its time in the mall extended. The overriding interior colour is black and at the time of writing



a black Mercedes sports car (with a starting price of around £95,000) had pride of place, ahead of the rather more utilitarian Smart cars.

### Volkswagen, Bullring

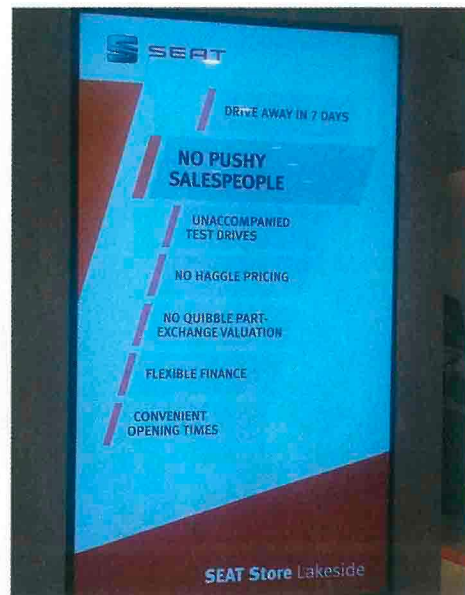
Volkswagen has just joined the car-shop-in-a-mall party with a store in Birmingham’s Bullring. Designed once again by Dalziel & Pow, this 2,150 sq ft store will have three cars on show that will be changed regularly – the plan being to give shoppers the chance to look at something different whenever they visit.

The store provides a physical link between the brand and what can be viewed online. As well as projections on the walls, a number of items have been placed on perimeter shelves that lend a domestic feel to the interior, which looks very distant from a standard car showroom.

Volkswagen Passenger Cars director, Alison Jones said: “The store allows us to try out new ways of bringing our cutting-edge products and technologies to the public in their usual retail environment.”

Hyperbole aside, this is a well-made point about one reason why car brands in our biggest shopping centres show little sign of decelerating, unlike many others in the retail sector. **RW**

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**Russell Loveland, Landsec**

