

# GETTING HUMAN

*Design Thinking trends have realigned to enable physical stores to define brands they represent by offering experiences that address human, social and personal needs of their core customers*

■ *By Surender Gnanaolivu*

**T**raditionally, a brand is defined as a 'mnemonic or an identity of a product and its services'. Today, this has been redefined as 'being essentially a container for a customer's 360 degree experience with the company's proposition'. Multiple studies on the behaviour of new-age connected customers in global markets has revealed that more than 90% purchases are still made in stores. A recent report by the IBM Institute for business value indicated that 98% of Gen Z shop instore with 67% saying that they shop in store 'most of the time', 50% want to buy online and pick-up instore and 38% of Millennials shop once a week in a shopping centre.

This clearly reveals the high importance of the physical store in defining what the brand stands for and hence has taken the role of being the 'Physical Brand'. My study and understanding of the different global trends in Physical Branding distinctly draws attention to three trends. Let's look at each of them through testimonies of successful environment design strategies conceptualized by differentiated global brands.

## HUMANIZATION

'Humanizing store design' is a route taken by many evolved brands globally to connect emotionally with their customers to demonstrate that the purpose of their business is more than just selling products and services. The focus is clearly on delivering experiences that are meaningful and memorable to their customers. One key route to humanizing a store is 'Sensory Branding' that involves engaging the five human senses — sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell — to define a complete brand experience. An important point to note is that engaging the latter three is possible only in a physical store!

British beauty brand Lush has revitalised its experience using a powerful humanized design strategy of 'touch, smell and play' in its largest flagship store located on Oxford Street in London. At the store front visitors are greeted by an oversized sink with a beauty consultant stirring up some fragrant foam using their famous 'bath bombs'. The brand's mission is to reinvent the bathing experience, reimagine classic cosmetics and fill the world with perfume and this



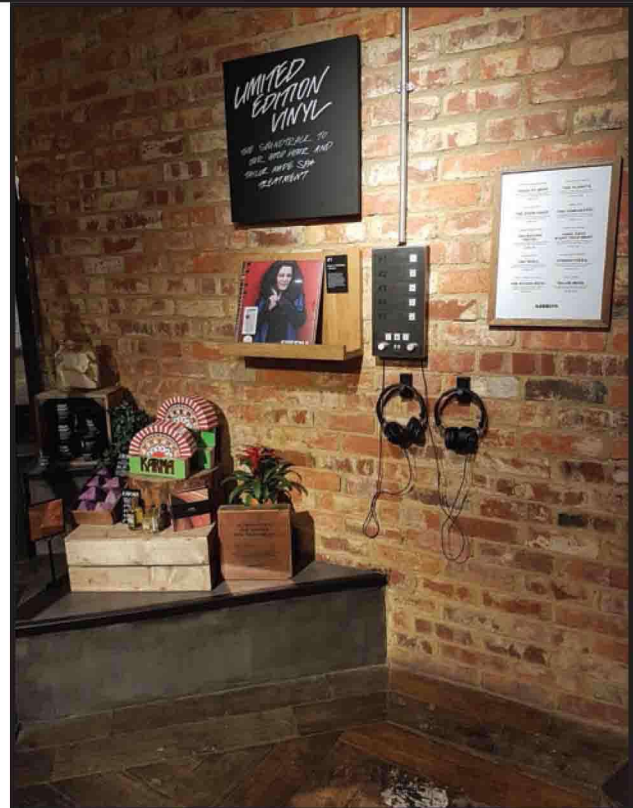
PHOTOS: SURENDER GNANAOLIVU

► **Humanizing store design**

has been brought to life in their 'physical brand'. The store interiors feature fabulous presentation of rainbow-coloured soaps, giant bottles of shower creams and tubes of bold-hued lipstick. A music station offers curated relaxing music to add to the overall brand experience. Strategically placed inviting tables, salon chairs and mid-floor treatment stations encourage customers to physically experience the products and creatively define their physical brand with great differentiation and panache.

**SOCIALIZATION**

The trend of 'Socializing' comes from the human nature of being a social animal. Brands have realized that the connected consumer tends to be part of like-minded social groups, real or virtual, and enjoys sharing information and interests. This is seen to be more meaningful and credible in the





► Canadian Lululemon's new concept in London

physical world and store design thinking has picked this up to add serious efforts to add elements of 'socialization' to store environments where physical brands can be more than sellers of products.

Canadian Lululemon's new flagship in London extends far beyond the athleisure offerings it sells, to offer fitness, nutrition and mindfulness in its store experience. The store environment design offers an experiential space where like-

minded folks can stretch, sweat, connect and enjoy the latest collections in a space that enables them to escape from the buzz of the city. The community space "curated to create a relaxed atmosphere and sense of belonging" provides free classes in yoga, balanced health, nutrition etc. where the lululemon 'community' congregates to share and socialize.

The socialized store has a huge like-minded fan following that

have developed a strong bond with this physical brand.

**PRIVACIZATION**

The use of personal data by social media and retailers for predictive analytics has increased the need for privacy. This has introduced the element of 'Privacization' in store design thinking. Here, the physical brand approaches customers' privacy with utmost sensitivity and respect.

Interactive screens used to make personal choices have become conveniently smaller and conducive to personal interaction in contrast to giant screens that allow passers-by to get a peek into personal choice making.

Perhaps, this is the reason magic mirrors and large public interactive screens have become unpopular and are now being used for featuring curated video content to add theatrics to the physical brand environment. Indian acquired brand Jaguar Land Rover store demonstrates the successful use of this trend in its new concept stores. A service table in the centre of the store enables customers to use an intelligent programme called Rockar to make informed financial and technical decisions privately when deciding to buy a car.

Swatches and samples of paint finishes and upholstery are displayed to complete the decision-making process. Lectern mounted screens help communicate specifications of key models displayed

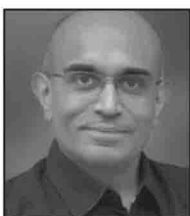


► Jaguar Land Rover store

in the store. Large screens feature brand communication that promote what the brand stands for. Once the customer decides on the model, they are led to the mall parking lot to test drive the car.

With these new trends being imbibed in the design of retail environments of today the success of the physical brand is there to stay. Although digitization of services and consumer engagement is on

the rise, the use of element of the physical brand – humanization, socialization and privacization are becoming key for brands to acquire and retain customers at all brand touch points. 😊



Surender Gnanaolivu has expertise in Retail Strategy, Store Design, Planning & Development, Retail Marketing, Visual Merchandising, Roll-out management, Retail Audits, Training, Teaching and Writing. This is built over an illustrious career spanning two decades holding senior positions in design, brand experience and marketing at leading retailers like Shoppers Stop, Reliance Retail and Mahindra Retail. As an independent Retail Experience Consultant, he has worked with leading retailers and brands in India. <http://surenderg-retail.blogspot.in/> | [https://www.instagram.com/surender\\_gnanaolivu/](https://www.instagram.com/surender_gnanaolivu/)