

THEATRE

From mattresses to storage boxes, buying even the most basic commodity items can be turned into an experience for customers. **John Ryan** checks out some all-singing, all-dancing stores across the globe

At Ichiba Westfield, customers get a taste of Japan that goes beyond buying groceries



The new retail

THEATRE

There is a reason why 'great customer experience' is the key phrase being bandied around boardrooms right now; without it, retailers are dead in the water.

Particularly so when it comes to stores. In light of the switch to online shopping, physical shops must prove their worth more than ever, whether that's through sales, branding or engagement.

Here we examine some of the most inventive and exciting store formats from across the globe, from an underground Parisian DIY workshop to a Melrose Avenue services haven.

Nordstrom Local, Los Angeles

Located on Los Angeles' fashionable Melrose Avenue, Nordstrom Local is billed by the

eponymous Seattle-based department store operator as the "store without inventory". On the face of it, this does not sound like the formula for any kind of experience, at least not a positive one, as surely the point about any store in a town or city is that it has things in it that you may care to buy.

There are, in fact, certainly things that shoppers might wish to part with their cash for in Nordstrom Local; it's just that they are not physical. What is on offer is a store that is a click-and-collect centre, an order point and a place where a range of services are available. Practically, this means a laundry service, a cobbler, a nail bar, a tailor and a cafe, among other things.

The other point about the store is that it is a department store operator's response to

the challenge that is Amazon. By creating a proposition through which merchandise can be ordered, but which also offers a range of services, it is doing something that the online giant, at the moment, cannot.

At 3,000 sq ft, this is not a big space, but since it opened, towards the end of 2017, it has proved popular with shoppers in the City of Angels and Nordstrom has just announced that it will open two more Nordstrom Locals, in the Brentwood and Downtown districts of LA, before the end of this year.

On this reckoning, 'experience' might be defined in opposition to online and, while it uses several elements that internet merchants might regard as ground zero, Nordstrom Local does quite a lot that neither terrestrial nor digital retailers currently provide.

PROPERTY THEATRE



A series of roomsets plus a customer workshop at Leroy Merlin enhance the shopping experience



Leroy Merlin, Place de La Madeleine, Paris

Imagine heading underground to get your DIY tools and essentials and, while doing so, undertaking one of those nagging projects that you've been meaning to do for ages.

To an extent, French DIY giant Leroy Merlin's new store in Paris' Place de La Madeleine, is about making a virtue of necessity – space in this part of the city is limited. But in so doing, it has created something that is an experience and is a sharp contrast with DIY norms.

The store is housed in a former underground car park a short distance from the *grands magasins* of Boulevard Haussmann. Covering three floors and with a 53,820 sq ft selling area, this may be small in the Leroy Merlin pantheon, but it is a large retail space for central Paris.

Yet it feels manageable, thanks to the retailer's efforts to carve the interior into a series of DIY roomsets, with the intention of making a more appealing

experience than might otherwise be the case. And then there is the workshop, the 'Atelier des Bricoleurs'. This is a discrete space equipped with tools, where those with a project in mind can pay €5 (£4.51) an hour and use the workbenches to do the job. And for an additional €5 an hour, they can also benefit from expert advice, in case there is uncertainty about what to do next.

This is certainly an experience – and the very idea of a colonnaded entrance that dives down into the depths, in the same manner as cars used to disappear from street level at La Madeleine, is exciting in its own right. Leroy Merlin is pushing the boundaries of what would normally be viewed as high street DIY retailing and in so doing is creating in-store experiences.

Ichiba, Westfield London

"Europe's largest Japanese food hall" opened in July and, for shoppers standing outside this one, at one end of the new extension to the Westfield London shopping centre, it really is like looking at a little slice of Tokyo.

Composed predominantly of plain wood with louvred screens, a composite floor and very large graphics picked out in white neon, Ichiba makes you feel as if you have left the confines of a very big mall and

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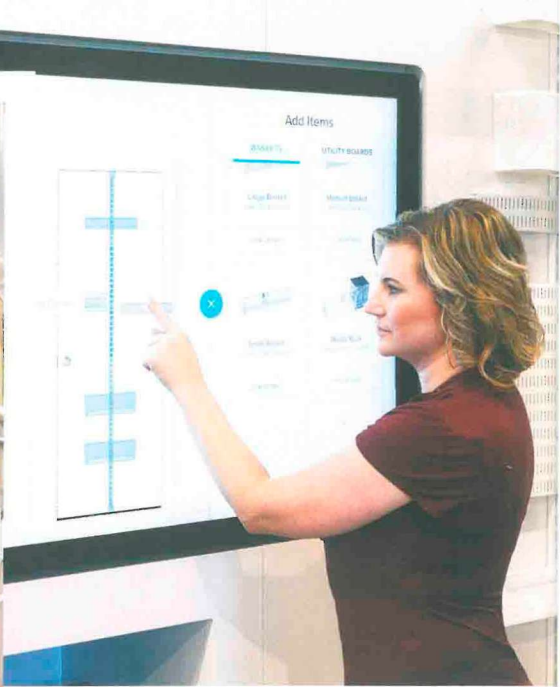
strayed into a place where modernity and tradition work side by side.

Visitors can treat this as a straightforward Japanese supermarket, with all the usual variants on soy sauce, noodles, rice wine and pre-packaged sushi being in place. There is also a fish counter and a bakery. It is unlikely, however, that shoppers will stop at the simple acquisition of oriental provisions. Instead, like many food halls, this is about in-store eating as much as shopping.

Everything is fresh and, to add to the theatre of the interior, the kitchen and those working in it are visible through a glass screen along one of the perimeter walls. When it comes to ordering, customers choose from an overhead menu and are given a bleeper that vibrates and flashes when the food is ready.



A lounge area provides breathing space at The Container Store, where design specialists (right) are on hand



Ichiba has been designed by Cada Design and is a joint venture between the Japan Centre Group and Cool Japan Fund, with the latter being a body that aims to promote Japanese food and culture overseas.

This is about experiencing a different culture as well as visiting a food hall.

The Container Store, Dallas

On the face of it, it would be quite hard to see how a store selling containers could really constitute any kind of experience, let alone one that might be described as being in the vanguard of the new retail theatre.

Yet the Dallas-based Container Store opened a shop in July that aims to turn buying items into an experience that will be remembered.

It is worth noting that The Container Store, which has branches across the US, is generally characterised by stores that are sheds. This means high ceilings and a strictly utilitarian feel to the interiors. In the new Dallas store, in order to avoid this, the ceiling height has been lowered and there is more space between aisles and display units in order to allow a relaxed shop.

There is also a lounge area, allowing shoppers to take a break from the rigours of browsing a very large space and to have a discussion with one of the store's design specialists prior to heading off to the Custom Closet Studio.

This may not be the most radical experience in retail, but when it is set against the general look and feel of the great majority of those operating from shed portfolios, it is a sparkling exception to the mundane rule.

Le Chalet Casper, Montreal

Online mattress and associated merchandise retailer Casper has branched out into the world of physical retail over the past 12 months with stores in the US and this one, in Montreal.

Dubbed, in deference to the Francophone population, Le Chalet Casper, like upscale speaker retailer Sonos and the UK's Nationwide Building Society, this store uses frames to create the outline of houses, in order to foster a sense of the domestic for shoppers.

At Le Chalet, again owing to its Quebec location, this means log cabins housing beds bearing Casper mattresses and a decking area outside the cabins with deckchairs, a camping table and lighting. A strip of astroturf with a faux log fire has been installed between the two cabins, and on the

walls there are graphics of a leaf that may, or may not, be a maple.

In terms of being appropriate to the location, Casper has made considerable efforts. And, as a means of making more of mattresses and giving shoppers the chance to test-drive the merchandise in something approximating to a bedroom, this is considerably ahead of any Ikea roomset.

This being Canada, a canoe has been added to the storescape. Positioned in the main body of the shop, it has been painted white, in keeping with the colour of the mattresses, and there are pillows in the craft, in place of cushions.

Casper understands that selling a commodity does not mean that an interior has to be stripped back to the basics. A story can be told via a series of stage sets and an experience is created.



Nordstrom Local in LA offers a laundry service, a cobbler, a nail bar, a tailor and a cafe

