

BIG STORY

Debenhams gets Bucher beauty treatment

The department store chain's new Watford store focuses on beauty within boss Sergio Bucher's new-format strategy. **George MacDonald** pays it a visit

Debenhams last week opened the doors to its store at the Intu Watford extension, representing its latest thinking as it seeks to reignite the department store format's appeal to contemporary shoppers.

The Watford branch is the freshest iteration of Debenhams chief executive Sergio Bucher's vision of 'social shopping' in which differentiation and destination status are complemented by digital innovation.

Debenhams' Watford store develops some of the initiatives previously seen at the Stevenage store and comes as department store groups in general battle to reinvent themselves as profitability comes under pressure.

The beauty proposition has been one of the main areas of focus as Debenhams seeks to expand its share of the £3bn premium end of the market.

Changes in Watford include a multibrand offer through the Beauty Clubhouse and Lab areas of the shop, allowing Debenhams to better reflect how customers shop as well as take greater control of the space and range.

Approximately 20% of the beauty space is "owned and controlled" by Debenhams, compared with zero in typical stores, said beauty and marketing managing director Richard Cristofoli. That allows greater newness as more brands are brought into the store which can be built up if successful and rotated in or out as appropriate.

Debenhams has also just launched an online beauty club, which is reflected in-store through product recommendations by members and free treatments for them every Tuesday, designed to drive repeat footfall.

Highly curated

Emphasis on newness and repeat footfall are evident in other initiatives in the store, such as 'new this week' areas throughout, which feature own-brand and concessionaire product.

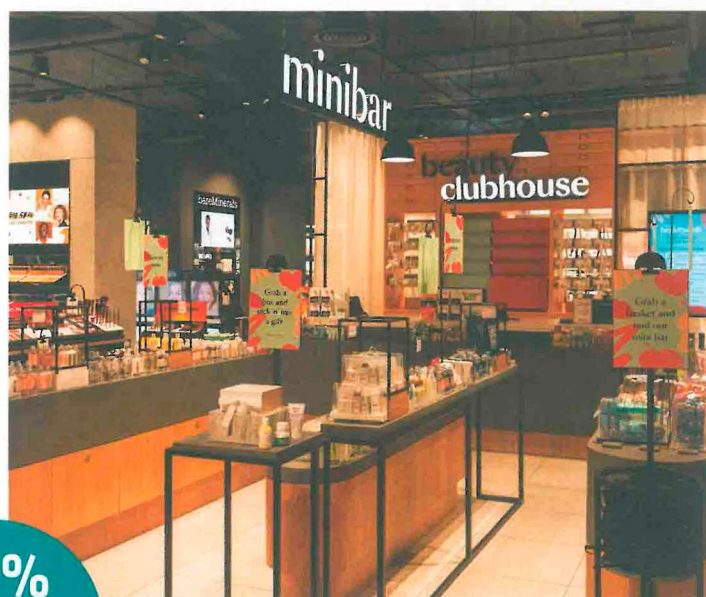
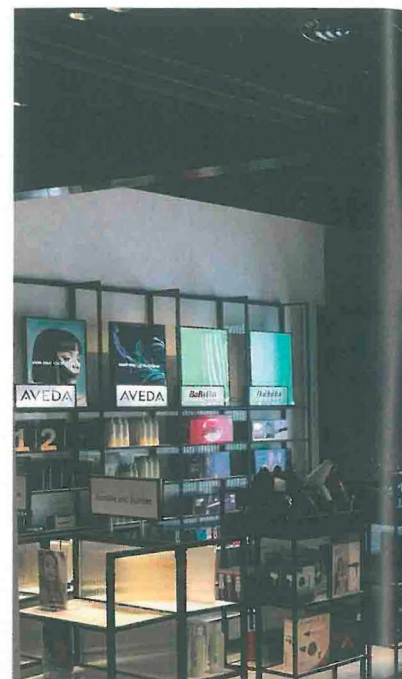
Customer data is being deployed to inform ranging decisions generally and the offer is highly curated.

Like Stevenage, the Watford shop carries about 25% less stock than a traditional Debenhams store, allowing product to be more effectively showcased to shoppers who consequently feel they are being offered better choice than in the past.

The suite of fitting and changing rooms is seen as one of the store's great differentiators, facilitating smooth click-and-collect for shoppers and enabling the retailer to offer a personal shopping service that justifies the name, Bucher said.

In Debenhams' best-performing stores, personal shopping accounts for about 15% of womenswear sales.

Elements of the store design will be rolled out to other Debenhams shops, Bucher said. **RW**



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To view more pictures of
Debenhams' Watford store
Retail-Week.com/7029963.article



It's innovative, but problematic

By Becky Waller-Davies

Intended to showcase emerging brands, the Beauty Hall is divided into zoned areas such as its hair lab, a men's lab and a mini bar, which is essentially a pick'n'mix of travel-size premium beauty products for customers to select and pack in a giftbox as a present.

One fifth of the space is given over to its Beauty Club House, which is brand-agnostic but, interestingly, is funded by Estée Lauder.

The club house features a range of brands – Ouai, La Bruket and Sand & Sky – which are smaller and more under-the-radar than the bigger department store usual suspects such as Clinique, Clarins or Lancome.

The other four fifths is more traditional but is definitely more aesthetically pleasing than the standard Debenhams offer with the perfume department, or perfumery, decked out in soft wood and artisanal-looking lighting rather than languishing under strip lighting.

The more 'experiential' – to use the parlance of the department store – offer includes a Benefit brow bar, a beauty bar powered by Debenhams' strategic partner Blow and a lab from French aesthetics firm Filorga.

Join the Club

Accompanying the Beauty Club House is Debenhams' online Beauty Club, which launched last month and has already garnered 6,000 members. The concept is not new – Sephora already runs its Beauty Insider community – but Debenhams is the first major UK retailer to cotton on to it in such a way.

The boom in beauty has boosted the always dedicated following of the category, resulting in an authentic community developing around brands and products.

Anyone who doubts that the search for the HG (Holy Grail) foundation can form a community should take a look at the reams of threads on sites such as makeupalley or intothegloss, the website which spawned millennial favourite make-up brand Glossier.

Debenhams has created its beauty club along much the same lines as makeupalley but with added bonuses such as masterclasses. Cleverly, it also reels in users by giving them points to spend on

products if they start conversations or reply to others' posts.

The more active a Beauty Club member is in the online community, the more discounts they get on the product they want. Beauty Club reviews are also displayed on selected products.

The problem

Initiatives such as these should help Debenhams' fight for relevance and win it younger consumers. The nub of the problem is this, however: it's innovative – for Debenhams. That's a big qualifier.

The department store group is looking in the right places for inspiration and making it work for it. But the ideas are arguably less impressive in themselves and more impressive because it's Debenhams and we have come to not expect much from the retailer, which has issued three profit warnings this year.

The rest of Debenhams' new store is not so innovative. This is also a problem.

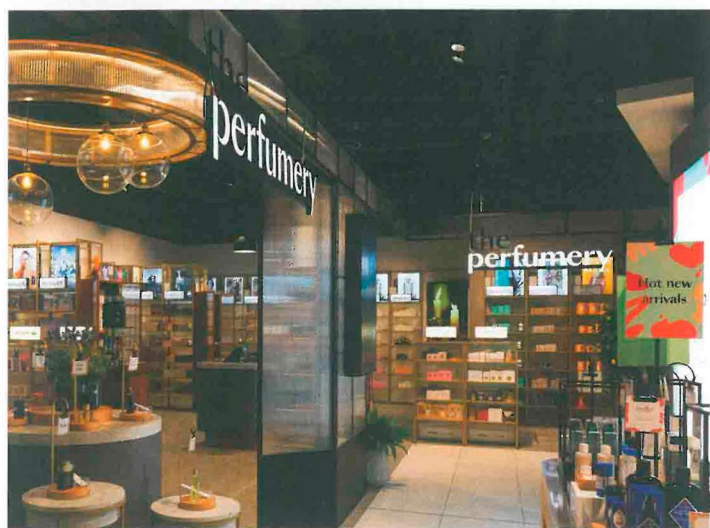
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Sure, the new Loaf & Bloom is much nicer than Debenhams' old own-brand café and the changing rooms are designed with care – adjustable lighting and space to move around will surely help convert sales at the last hurdle rather than leaving the customer harassed and sweaty in an over-bright, claustrophobia-inducing cubicle.

But the fashion ranging doesn't look vastly different and I doubt that the pint-sized homewares section would persuade many people away from bigger, more successful players.

If Debenhams can begin to think about its core clothing product as it has about beauty and elements of the customer experience such as changing rooms, then it may well begin to climb out of the hole it's found itself in.

That's one club that management will surely be keen to join.



The focus on beauty is part of Debenhams' drive to grow its share of the sector

