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The future of fitting rooms

Retailers are installing stylish fitting rooms to enhance the shopping experience



May Seah

With the unstoppable forward march of online shopping, stores are putting effort into experiential retailing by paying more attention to an oft-overlooked space – the fitting room.

After all, giving customers the option to try on clothes before buying is an advantage that physical shops have over online retailers. The fitting room is also the place where the decision to purchase is made.

There are several ways such a space can make an impression on shoppers.

Here, retailers can and do use design tricks to enhance the customer's experience and hasten his or her decision-making. In addition,

a thoughtfully designed fitting room is part of experiential retailing and serves as an extension of a store's brand, say experts.

Some businesses, such as those in fast-fashion boutiques including Zara and Mango, may invest in flattering lighting and mirrors. Others, such as those in smaller, independent boutiques, are decorated with their owners' touches.

Luxury retailers such as Dior and Ermenegildo Zegna offer private VIP spaces and refreshments.

But in all the cases, what works is that each of these fitting rooms is an extension of the store's brand.

Every shopper has stories of dank, cramped, stuffy fitting room experiences, so this intimate space is an opportunity to communicate with customers on behalf of the brand.

It is a good thing when a fitting room is "an extension of a retail space", says Associate Professor Ang Swee Hoon of marketing at the National University of Singapore Business School. "If it flows through, it makes the retail space seem bigger. I don't think customers think so much about it, but from the business perspective, it makes it seamless."

It may not occur to retailers, for instance, that one way in which they can provide a seamless experience is by engaging more senses than one.

"Stores usually have scents in the shopping area, but not in the fitting

room area, which is sort of the (unloved) stepchild," Prof Ang says. A scent in the fitting room can "make people feel more relaxed and soothed, and just makes for a more pleasant shopping experience".

A fitting room's design should also convey a certain aesthetic.

"Letting the brand speak is best," says Mr Chris Lee, founder and creative director of local design firm The Asylum, who has designed several retail spaces, including the men's and women's departments at Tangs. The design has succeeded if "you can go into the changing room and still feel the brand", he says.

This can be achieved in several ways, especially since different retailers have different aims.

A fast-fashion retailer, for instance, usually has a high volume of shoppers and, as a result, needs them in and out of the fitting room as efficiently as possible. So it may pipe in upbeat music. "Research has been done on this. When piped-in music is faster, people shop and leave the shop faster," says Prof Ang.

Retailers may also pull out all the stops to make sure shoppers look and feel good.

Both Prof Ang and Mr Lee cite the most common practice: positioning mirrors at an angle instead of flush against the wall. "The mirrors are (usually) tilted, with the top end closer to you so that you look slim-

mer. It's like camera angles – you always shoot from the top down, not the bottom up," says Mr Lee.

Smaller, independent boutiques can and should reflect the owner's personality, says Prof Ang.

"There is a shop I like called Von's at 62 Collyer Quay that sells sweet Korean outfits. The female owner puts a personal touch in it – the hooks are vintage ones in the shape of flowers and the wallpaper complements the accessories."

She adds that "these things don't cost that much", but "show how much thought the owner has put into the business, and customers appreciate such thoughtfulness".

Luxury brands can afford to devote much space and plush furnishings to their fitting room spaces to build up their image in customers' minds.

But even different fitting room designs for the same brand can have different effects on shoppers.

Fashion stylist Sharon B. Tan, who works with celebrities including home-grown actors Elvin Ng and Romeo Tan, visits the Ermenegildo Zegna store at Ion Orchard more frequently than the Paragon store because it "has a nice fitting room with a sofa outside for VIPs".

She adds: "It's also cosier and more private."

Adjustable mirrors and bright LED lights greet shoppers as they enter the fitting room at multi-label store Surrender.
ST PHOTOS: ALPHONSHUS CHERN

Mirror on the wall and more

Entering the fitting room at Surrender is like entering a glamorous 360-degree photo booth – or maybe a red-carpet version of a full-body scanner at the airport.

Inside the cylindrical space, you are surrounded by adjustable mirrors and bright LED lights.

The space was created by local design firm The Asylum, which conceptualised the look of the multi-label store stocking cult brands such as Palm Angels, Ambush Design and Fear Of God. Headed by founder and creative director Chris Lee, The Asylum is also responsible for other retail spaces including Fred Perry Ion Orchard and Comme Des Garçons in Tokyo.

"In every store we design, the fitting room is always quite special because it's a very intimate space, where it's only you and the clothes," says Mr Lee.

"Surrender is an insider kind of store with a lot of cult brands... if you look at the store, it almost looks like a sculpture or an art installation.

"We wanted the changing room to be a place where you walk in and go, 'Wow, there's a little surprise.'"

Surrender opened at 268 Orchard Road in November last year, having moved from its Raffles Hotel location. Its futuristic fitting rooms actually have an old-school starting point.

One of the inspirations, says Mr Lee, was martial artist and actor Bruce Lee in the mirror maze featured in the 1973 action flick, Enter The Dragon.

"There are so many mirrors, you kind of get confused about what is forward (facing) and what is backward," he quips.

Another inspiration was the teleportation pods in the 1968 sci-fi film 2001: A Space Odyssey.

He says: "We thought it would be cool to have mirrors all around so you can see yourself from all angles."

There are two fitting rooms in the store, each with a cleverly hidden entrance. Inside, there is a free-standing clothes rack and a stool. Jaunty music plays.

To make sure shoppers look their best in the clothes, Mr Lee applied the same lighting principles he uses when designing restaurants – non-direct lighting.

"The light is reflected off the mirrors," he says. "The last thing you want is harsh light coming down from the top – it creates a lot of shadows. You want reflected light that is more complimentary, so you look like you're glowing within the space."

And one does glow in this unique fitting room that makes colours look more vivid and skin more radiant.

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