

The evolution of pop-ups

Strategy director **Rupert Pick** of experiential marketing specialists **Hot Pickle** discusses the strategic role that temporary retail spaces play in a multichannel landscape

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Five years ago, pop-ups, particularly those created by FMCG brands, were considered a rarity. Since then, the number of pop-ups has increased exponentially, bringing a new level of interest to a somewhat depressed retail market. Some retail and marketing commentators are cynical as to the future of this format, arguing that pop-ups are a short-lived trend borne out of commercial opportunism and destined for the scrapheap on the return of a rosier retail market. But pop-ups are here to stay (they have already been around for 10 years), albeit in an evolving form, with an important part to play in the retail and marketing landscape.

The growth of pop-ups

The dramatic growth in popularity of social media platforms has played an important part in the emergence of the pop-up phenomenon. They have the ability to rapidly drive awareness (essential if the store is only around for a short time) and create significant marketing value through the sharing of updates and images. Without the existence of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as blogging platforms, it is arguable that pop-ups would not have achieved the same level of cut through.

A change in attitude towards pop-ups from the commercial retail property market has also helped. Landlords looking to cover financial liabilities have come to see pop-ups as valuable economic stop-gaps. Beyond that, they realise pop-ups can give a vital injection of life and excitement to retail schemes, driving news coverage and footfall.

The best pop-ups reward bravery and innovation. Consumers appreciate brands and businesses that are willing to experiment and open themselves up to feedback and collaboration. Launching in beta has become common place in the digital sphere but this approach has also been adopted in the physical world. A more open, less precious attitude to innovation on the part of brand owners has certainly helped encourage the development of pop-up retail.

While the genesis of the pop-up movement may be rooted in a depressed retail market and affordable short-term leases, the successful pop-ups of today need to be so much more than an incremental sales channel. Engaging human interactions, novel products and experiences, visual spaces and the use of digital platforms are critical for delivering compelling pop-ups.

The role of pop-ups

Pop-ups can act as a 3D media vehicle designed to communicate a brand idea and generate buzz. Kellogg's Special K Tweet Shop in London (see page 90) was a brilliant example of this. Shoppers were rewarded with free product for endorsing the brand on Twitter. Fashion retailer Hobbs intends to open temporary mini stores in offices to sell its workwear range, which demonstrates how this flexible format can be used to efficiently target a specific group at a moment that's both relevant and absent of competitor noise. Pop Tarts' Pop-Up in Times Square New York (below) took brand and product experimentation to a new level, challenging consumers to create new flavour combinations and personalise the



product. If, on the surface, many pop-ups feel whimsical, dig a little deeper and you'll find they can provide marketers and consumers with significant commercial intelligence. They allow a brand to interact directly with its target consumer in a way that many broadcast channels cannot match. In the Marmite Store on London's Regent Street (below right), we allowed visitors to write all over the walls, tables and chairs. We had to replace the tables five times, which was a small price to pay for invaluable consumer insight.

Pop-ups can also effectively address the challenge of brand positioning. In the case of the Design Your Magnum store (below, GIR46), we created a personal and highly sensorial experience to reinforce the brand's premium credentials. Every decision was defined by this brief, determining the selection of high-end locations through to the development of a store-specific product. The concept was simple – people were invited to customise a Magnum ice-cream with a selection of toppings – but the queues were always out of the door. The project was so successful that it is now being rolled out internationally and we've created an operations guide that allows the experience to be easily recreated in other countries.

For businesses that are unsure of the appeal of a new concept or location, pop-ups present a highly practical alternative to endless rounds of hypothetical discussions and commercial modelling. For a modest investment 'test market stores' can be created and real data collected that enables a true assessment of the potential of an idea.

The future of pop-ups

Akin to the wider world of retail, only the best pop-ups will succeed and, because this is a relatively immature format, the quality bar is rising at speed. At Hot Pickle we are excited by this challenge and buoyed by the enthusiasm of stakeholders to push boundaries. Landlords are becoming more supportive of the concept, building spaces into development plans for pop-ups rather than reacting to voids. The advancement in social media platforms and, more broadly, technology, is helping make physical spaces more dynamic and engaging, as well as negating the need for permanent infrastructure.

The definition of pop-ups has also widened. Instead of being restricted to fixed stores, they take many forms – a truck, an inflatable unit, a mid-mall concession, say. As long as creative and brave brand owners exist, pop-ups will continue to flourish. With the retail property industry embracing the format, and advances in technology providing a more supportive context, the opportunities can only increase. As consumers and brands, we should embrace pop-ups – they bring variety to an increasingly homogenised retail market, provide jobs, generate income for landlords and offer a cost-effective platform for brands to test new ideas. ■

Rupert was previously marketing manager at Unilever. He has worked across multiple brand categories and is creator of the award-winning Marmite licensing programme. He co-founded retail innovation and brand licensing agency Hot Pickle in 2009. (hotpickle.co.uk)

