

## New trends in sales points. Business as second production place

### The recorded world

A downpour of merchandise is dragging us along during this end of millenium: it is the last great tale of modernity, an open tale, capable of making the superfluous necessary. Saturation makes products and images live together in an intimate relationship and, in consequence, between these two systems it is no longer possible to establish true priorities and hierarchies. We must be conscious of the fact that merchandise is a complex perception reality continually made up by the narration of different components of experience.

The communication media are, thus, powerful filters which subtly modulate our perceptive experiences: we believe we have seen, have felt, have touched, but the information really comes from communication and not from our direct experience. In this century of the mass media, the relation between what we live firsthand by means of direct sensual knowledge and all we acquire as data transmitted by communication instruments has been profoundly modified and it becomes impossible to define a percentage for one or the other form of experience.

Television and satellites, the PC and the webs, virtual reality, all modify our judgement on the reality of the world and, consequently, our capacity of experience as to industrial objects and products.

### The sales point as new mass media

In this setting, the sales point and distribution take on a new role, become places for real physical experience, and are a counterpoint to the unstoppable expansion of virtual reality and sensory promises allowed to seep through by technological means. Distribution practically becomes a second production place, or the occasion for consumers to physically test not only product quality but also brand identity, which finally comes true in specific terms.

The sale is no longer only a commercial substitute for production; knowing how to sell means knowing

how to create new needs in an increasingly saturated and mature market.

Speaking of products and services with strong identity, the shop thus becomes the place where publicity and communication promises are carried out, where we touch the merchandise's corporeity, to put it in the words of Jean Baudrillard.

Nowadays it is impossible to think of a shop as a space isolated from the brand's communication strategy; on the contrary, it is an integrated part of it, perhaps even the most important. The ecology-loving identity of The Body Shop emerges clearly and coherently at the several sales points all over the world. On the other hand, the simplicity in display and structure of the United Colours of Benetton shops is perhaps justified as a reaction against Oliviero Toscani's aggressive communication campaigns.

The sales point is thus a basic instrument for managing the productive system, a basic implement to test customer reactions and final tastes by means of physical contact with their habits and every-day choices. At this moment, the designer perhaps becomes anew an alchemist, responsible for processes and dynamics which move goods as if they were atoms, whether they be material or immaterial.

### The service shop

This is even more so when there is no specific physical product to offer, but rather a service, as in a bank or mobile phone company; these are spaces where physical and sensory relationships with customers are very carefully studied, as is proved by the new offices of the Deutsche Bank in Europe or the Telecom establishments in Italy.

The meeting space between brand and consumer is no different, symbolically speaking, from a stage, a theatre scenario where a life-style is described, or a world to join: there is no casualty in the fact that these are monobrand establishments, where brand identity must be manifestly obvious.

But we must also understand service in terms of the growingly active role of the customer who enters the sales point to carry out complex operations, to exchange information, or to learn methodologies. A good example of this are the British chain of Do It All stores, where the sales space becomes a great showroom for techniques and fashion in home do-it-your-

self. Or the Milan Nimium Design Shop, a little *Made in Italy* museum specifically aimed at Japanese tourists as a service for buying, in a short time and in their own language, all their souvenirs of Italian creativity.

### The speciality shop

In many cases, whether the shops are monobrand or theme chains, the sales point becomes a place for greatly developing a theme, a physical space totally dedicated to particular types of products or specific interest activities. We can cite the case of Kinokunya, Tokio gastronomy able to offer the most refined choice in Japanese cuisine and the best of typical creations from French and Italian food. It is easy enough to wander through any airport and notice the spread reached nowadays by chains such as The Tie Rack or Footlocker, where the idea of obsessive and unlimited supply of gift items like ties or gym shoes is a formula for true success.

But it is possible to bump into a kite shop before finding travel articles, and personal passions can find expression in a speciality shop. This is clearly a way of making consumers fit into themes, rather than specialising distribution; actually, new hobbies, new tastes, and new leisure activities are launched upon the market.

### Brand shop

In some cases of extreme specialisation, the establishment even takes on the role of playing (sometimes uniquely, sometimes in a limited series) the place for the exclusive production of brand values. In Dublin, within the historical Guinness factory, there is the unique and exclusive Guinness Hop Store, where the Irish tradition of dark ale is preserved and practiced, staged in a rustic cellar full of vast and fantastic merchandising related to this well-known brand. Official Walt Disney outlets are sought by young and old, where three-dimension productions such as T-shirts, glasses, posters, and bath foam give us the famous Disney characters: this is not a unique place, but rather a chain which requires a minimum seal of quality to take a place among original merchandising and the numerous replicas and variants in licensing to be found all over the world.

Besides strictly sales activities, there are, in fact, places meant for other activities (restaurants, entertainment, etc.) which, however, have as their main commercial sense the sale of products directed to feeding a characteristic brand identity: places such as the several Planet Hollywood and Hard Rock Café, 100% consumption sites. At New York's All Star Café or Fashion Café, merchandise order forms are abundantly visible and bar employees are under siege by young men and women buying serially legitimised objects, giving them much more work than what traditional waiters tend to have.

### The Multiaction shop

Increasingly, the sales point is becoming a place for activities complementing the sale itself, and go beyond the idea of a place linked to specifically selling brand products, even though this is the main aim of the business. The seduction present in selling is increasingly expressed by means of other services such as cultural or entertainment services, thought up to qualify our every-day experience and our sensitivity as mature and other-directed consumers.

We do not enter an establishment, then, only to buy, but also to be cultural, to try virtual travel, or even to try the direct experience of the merchandise. Quite often the establishment takes on the shape of a great multi-ethnic and trans-cultural bazaar, such as the nowadays extremely famous Corso Como 10 in Milan. Or it might well happen that exhibition activities become even more important and better-known than the sales activities, as is the case in the Spiral department stores in Tokio, nowadays a cult space for a new generation of Japanese artists.

Thus, at the sales point we go beyond the ambit of our five senses, beyond a sensory exchange with mere merchandise: we are looking for a deep symbiosis, we could almost say an intimate encounter, between brand and consumer, with sensory faithfulness as the goal.

### The Factory shop

In metaphorical terms, shops are undoubtedly the body parts of a chaotic and infinite production system in continuous contraction and expansion; they are watchful seismographs of cities' capitalism.

I have asserted that at the sales point there often takes place a sort of second production of industrial merchandise, in terms of living and communicating product identity. Well then, in some cases the sales point even physically becomes a place of industrial manufacture, thanks to mature production techniques and flexible management and control processes.

For example, we have Levi's Stores, where you can have your jeans adjusted without touching the original make or, in a lesser sense, a chain of Japanese baker's where bread is produced right before our eyes, and in real time.

But be aware that this is not a return to the artisan workshop or the laboratory but, quite the contrary, the decentralised and diffuse presence of the factory in city territory. It would be like saying that a MacDonal'd's is an artisan's lab. Nothing can be further from this: this is all about reproducing the original and basic quality of the brand name in a series of diffuse places with executive micro-capacity.

A challenge which sees how the sales point becomes not only active and interactive, but also physically productive in sectors where this function was normally assigned to specific and exclusive places.

### The Urban shop

Normally, the sales point is physically a place trying to achieve autonomy and identity before a city, fighting to emerge and attract the attention of the visitor/customer. Paradoxically, however, this strategy is not valid and convenient everywhere: there are sales points which actually pursue a sort of mimesis with the urban environment and do not wish to declare their independence from it but, on the contrary, declaredly try to become a part of it. The strategy works at some levels of intervention or for some determined uses: see the case of Japanese Pachinko halls named Kinbasha or the British Coral betting-offices, both linked to collective and almost social uses and which, precisely for this reason, compete with an infinite number of other such similar services. In this case, the option chosen is that of becoming a part of the landscape, substituting others of their positive strong qualities.

The shop apparently loses its substance, as happens in some American cities when you leave the subway and immediately step into a large mall, with a certain feeling of displacement for those of us used to the

model of the classic European station. This is about the step from the place to the system: actually, between the mall and the station there is no noticeable difference and we are free to choose within among a range of offered services, from transport to sales.