

Touch-screens, self-service tills and not an assistant in sight... why today's High Street shops are so baffling

Author: Claudia Connell - Daily Mail

Date: 30th March 2015



- Stores like Argos have transformed their shops with space-age technology
- Face-to-face contact has been replaced with self-service checkouts
- The older generation are the ones who have the most money to spend
- Retailers are alienating their older customers with the constant changes

My mum Lesley, 69 — who is retired and a fine example of someone who likes to splurge her pensioner pounds — last week flounced out of Argos, where she'd intended to spend upwards of £200 on her grandchildren.

She was just too daunted by their new space-age shops to buy anything.

Gone are the catalogues, little jotter pads and blue pens that used to fill the stores. Instead, the desks, revamped in clinical white and looking more like a scientist's lab than a shop, are fitted with white touch-screen iPads.

Customers search on the iPad for their items, place an order and pay at a self-service kiosk. Then their goods are placed on a counter for them to collect. The transaction can be carried out without so much as a please or thank you to a member of staff.

My mum told me afterwards: 'I've never used a tablet. I should learn but I don't want my first lesson to be in Argos with other shoppers breathing down my neck and making me anxious.'

'I couldn't find a sales assistant, so I just walked out and bought the grandchildren's toys from an independent toy seller in another town. They cost more and I had a 12-mile round trip, but it was worth it not to feel like a silly old fool holding everyone up.'

We know the baby boomer generation have the most leisure, money and time to spend on the High Street, so why are retailers doing all they can to make them feel like outcasts?

Our High Street stores have changed beyond recognition in recent years — and for many older customers it's certainly not for the better. The convenience of online shopping is the only way to go for some, but for those who still prefer to shop in person, the experience is becoming an increasingly stressful and confusing one.

Given that retail sales have been declining steadily for the past two years, businesses are doing all they can to get customers through their doors.



Argos stores used to be known for their weighty catalogues (pictured), little jotter pads and blue pens but instead they now have iPads, self-service counters and barely any customer-employee contact

The trouble is, they all seem to be looking for trendy high-tech solutions — gizmos and gimmicks designed to lure in the under-30s, intimidating the rest of us in the process.

Retail analyst Kate Hardcastle says: 'It's all about retailers panicking over what their competitors are doing and not wanting to be left behind.'

'A lot of them were stung by coming too late to the online market and they don't want the same to happen again by being too late to take on board in-store technology.'

'But they are getting carried away and aren't stopping to see the long-term damage they could be doing to customer relations.'

'Older people have money to spend, but what our research tells us is that, more than anything, they want human interaction. They want a trained, friendly person in the shop who acknowledges them and knows their stock.'

'They don't want to wander into a shop and feel as if they're on the set of Tomorrow's World.'

'When I give advice to clients I always tell them to get staff out on the floor, get them to make eye contact when they talk and to be friendly.'

'For some older women a trip to the shops can be the only human contact they have that day. They don't want to be directed to some touch screen computer on a wall when they ask a question.'

Kate also believes that some of our best known High Street brands are getting it horribly wrong.

'Even Marks & Spencer, which relies heavily on the pensioner pound, is focusing too heavily on in-store technology in the form of touch-screen ordering stations and self-service checkouts.'

Also, the rise of super malls, such as Westfield in London and the Trafford Centre in Manchester, have only served to isolate older people even more.

Speaking as a 48-year-old shopper, I find London's two Westfield centres to be stressful.

'Who wants to spend their day wandering around a maze of shops, getting lost, walking miles and not being able to find your car at the end?' says Kate.

'Shopping malls are geared towards young people. They're exhausting for older people and are another clear example of how the retail world is putting up keep out barriers for senior shoppers. 'It's why we're seeing a rise in the independent, with shops offering old-fashioned customer service.'

It isn't just department stores that have become a mind-boggling minefield as anyone who has ever attempted to go into a High Street coffee chain and order a plain, white coffee or tea will know. First, you have to select the type of bean, then the type of milk, then how you want that milk to be heated, what topping or flavours you want and finally — after lengthy negotiation — you might get your drink.

Oh, but not before having your name (spelt incorrectly) scribbled on your cup.



The new CEO of the supermarket chain Morrisons has decided to stop relying on technology and instead will get more staff manning tills and assisting in the shops (stock image)

Now Greggs, once a go-to place for no-nonsense, simple food, is undergoing an image makeover, with Cajun soups and Mediterranean flatbread wraps alongside the sausage rolls and iced buns. A hankering for some fries recently led me into my local McDonald's — and then immediately back out again — when I realised they have introduced a complicated touch-screen ordering system and that the tables have imbedded tablets preloaded with games. I only wanted a carton of chips, not an 'interactive experience'.

Self-service tills in supermarkets are fine — unless you are buying alcohol, single items of fruit or veg, want to use your own bags, require cash back or intend to pay with anything other than the world's smoothest, crispest banknotes — in which case you'll need to call on the hovering assistant, who is busy helping half a dozen other confused people.

There is some good news, though. Earlier this month, David Potts, the new CEO of supermarket Morrisons, took the decision to stop relying on technology and, instead, get more staff manning tills and assisting in the shop.

The reason for this decision was that customer feedback revealed that — surprise! surprise! — shoppers like to interact with humans and not machines when we visit stores.

MailOnline

So, forget 'unexpected item in bagging area,' isn't it time that other retailers followed the example set by Morrisons and gave us a few more 'unexpected humans on the shop floor'?

Link: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3017087/Touch-screens-self-service-tills-not-assistant-sight-today-s-High-Street-shops-baffling.html>