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Watsons' Ngee Ann City outlet recently underwent a revamp to provide a more interactive experience for its customers. PHOTO: WATSONS

ARE PHYSICAL STORES ON THEIR WAY OUT?

BRICK-AND-MORTAR RETAILERS SAY ONLINE STORES ARE MORE COMPLEMENTARY THAN

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The signs are alarming for brick-and-mortar stores. Recent trends have shown shoppers here are increasingly taking care of their shopping needs online, drawn to the increasing convenience (especially during the dreaded festive seasons).

Retailers such as Qoo10 and Lazada are a hit because of their wide variety of goods at relatively low cost and reliable delivery services. In fact, a recent survey by Blackbox Research of 800 Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 15 years and above revealed that the majority prefer shopping online. As far as this year's Christmas shopping is concerned, 56 per cent of them said they preferred to do their shopping with online retailers versus the 44 per cent who opted for shopping at physical stores.

Nevertheless, retailers TODAY spoke to remain upbeat and confident about the value of physical stores, stressing that they have a place in the market, providing a human touch and at atmosphere that websites cannot rival.

Katie Page, chief executive officer of Harvey Norman, agrees and scoffs at the idea of online stores eventually

surpassing physical ones. "You can get information about the product online and the price, but that's it," she said, adding how physical contact with the product is crucial, especially with women shoppers. "Women like to see that physical aspect, they will go to the shops to see the product."

Page also stressed the importance of delivering a great shopping experience, pointing out how some retailers forget that. She added: "You need to invest in the brand, and for that, you need space. Some online stores are now opening brick-and-mortar outlets, right?"

Agreeing, Christophe Cann, group chief executive officer of Robinsons Group (Asia), said although the company has plans to have an e-commerce function in the future, online shopping is "just another avenue for customers to make their purchase".

"We are not worried about the trend as we believe that brick-and-mortar business will remain relevant to customers," he affirmed. "As long as Robinsons continues to entertain our customers and provide an enjoyable shopping experience ... I believe we are here to stay." This, he added, is achieved through initiatives such as designer trunk shows, exclusive beauty launches and meet-the-designer events that complement ongoing efforts to constantly bring in new brands and products.

ALL ABOUT ATMOSPHERE AND SERVICE

Retailers are confident that nothing beats being at a physical store, as good experiences will ensure customers return. "We cultivate a friendly ambiance and treat our customers as friends," said a spokesperson for skincare and cosmetics store Stenders, which prides itself on handcrafted body scrubs and soaps made with natural ingredients. "Most of our customers love coming back to test, try, and smell and feel the product, and interact with our store associates," he continued. (To boot, customers will also receive a kaleidoscope, as part of its A Kaleidoscopic Christmas campaign.)

The obvious physical connection cannot be overemphasised, as much of the joy of retail, said Darellyn Lau, managing director of candy and gift store Sophisca Singapore, is in touching and feeling the merchandise. "The desire for instant gratification is still key with some buyers, who appreciate the ability to touch, feel and buy an item all in the same moment, which is only possible at a physical store."

Still, aware that online shopping is time-saving for people with busy schedules, she added that the company is offering free delivery services for purchases above S\$250. Robinsons, too, said it has had to rethink its strategies to improve its services

and in-store experiences.

"It has motivated us, as brick-and-mortar retailers, to sit up and listen, to observe, learn and adapt ... This new platform sheds light on what consumers are looking for, as well as the services they desire," said Cann.

Consequently, the company has made arrangements for delivery services with every S\$200 nett spend and complimentary personal shopper services at its flagship store at The Heeren. "In this day and age ...



Robinsons' personal-shopper room.

PHOTO: ROBINSONS



customers need a good reason to visit you," he added. "Retail is not just about transactions but experiences. Hence, we constantly remind our staff from all departments about the company's vision and mission to ensure that as an organisation, we always put the customer at the centre of everything we do."

ONLINE COMPLEMENTS, NOT THREATENS

Some retailers say their online stores serve more as a complementary service to give consumers more options. Dominic Wong, chief operating officer of beauty-care chain Watsons, said while its new eStore (launched this year) is a quick and convenient option for busy customers, its physical stores "serve as a good platform for customers to discover and try new products, especially for make-up and beauty items". Its in-house pharmacies also provide another touch point for customers who need health consultation and recommendations on sup-

plements. This Christmas, it is also offering a free gift-wrapping service for purchases made.

While the online store's performance is "growing strongly", the company "see(s) physical stores flourishing alongside online channels", he continued, adding that it will continue to be on the lookout for new ways to improve and engage customers better.

Its recently revamped Ngee Ann City and Bugis outlets, for instance, cater better to the demographics and buying patterns of customers in the area, and give clearer demarcation of the different product categories, said Wong.

A Uniqlo spokesman, too, said the fast-fashion brand's online store is an extension of its physical store, giving customers the option of shopping from home and on-the-go.

However, its staff has been specially trained to provide assistance and recommendations by catering to the needs and queries its customers may have in store, she added. "We believe

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Stenders fills its store with colourful fresh flowers and prides itself on handcrafted body scrubs and soaps with real, natural ingredients such as lavender. PHOTO: STENDERS

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