

# Retail excellence ... an ever moving target

I have a strong memory from my childhood. My Dad, a retail man, was going to Disney World for work. Being eight years old, the prospect of my father hanging out with Mickey Mouse for the sake of business was beyond me. I recall Dad coming home after three weeks of being away in Florida. Being one of a triplet, the three of us sat at the foot of his bed while he told us stories of team building events, showed us shaky handcam recordings of war cry anthems being yelled by teams clothed in brightly opposing coloured t-shirts, and projected photos of work colleagues posing with the beloved Mickey outside the Epcot centre. He had magic in his eyes, the future of South Africa's retail was glittering with potential.

Many years later with dad retired and my parents moving house, the three of us kids, now young adults, were helping to sift through items that had accumulated over three decades. Mountains of memories in the form of photo albums, video cassettes and primitive nursery school scribbles prompted a nostalgic trip into the past. It was here that we revisited the same video tape of the 1997 Disney trip, a now shockingly pixelated account in comparison to the mobile phone video capabilities of today. Dad retold the story of how a top South African retailer took a team of people to Disney



World in an attempt to learn greatness from the best. The purpose of the trip, I now understood, was bigger than Mickey. Its objective was to instil a set of core values into these trainees and managers that would, in turn, re-energise the very values that drove the in-store retail shopping experience for staff and customers alike. It seemed like a magical period in the retail age, where those who could,

were able to gain the knowledge to execute the highest levels of global retail excellence right here on South African soil.

Fast forward to today, and I find myself working with top people on all sides of retail; store managers, head office executives, merchandising agencies, distributor partners and brands alike. I have much to learn, but I know the age-old elements of retail



execution in more detail now and I understand how complex it all is; inventory management, merchandising and display efforts, in-store promotional executions, broadsheet production, planogramming, ranging and customer service. These are the basics, which, if you get right, you have a good store. But is this enough to make it a great one?

Technology and pandemics aside, I so often hear from friends how a trip to the supermarket is a banal and begrudged activity. Fuelled by parking bay battles, overcrowded avocado-pokers in the fresh food section and unfriendly staff asking flatly for loyalty cards, disinterested that you, once again, left your shopping bags at home. Surely this was not the retail excellence dream of the 90's? Has the global standard of retail simmered down to the bottom line as a sole measure, rather than a strive for brand pageantry and innovation both on shelf and online? Or do profits and pomp have nothing to do with one another?

Each retailer has their own aesthetic, their own identity and their own philosophy. On the one side of the spectrum, less is more. We see this in the higher LSM retail category a lot; a regard for minimalism as a core value is key. There is no place for banners, bunting and dump bins. A well-lit and well-stocked shelf is the only thing that matters. Price is irrelevant when you are giving your customer what they want. For those on the other end of the spectrum are retail chains who believe more is more. Originating from the 'hypermarket' era of the 1970's and inspired by big-box stores

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in France and the US, these chains hinge their values on an immersive shopper experience. The key here is customer engagement and in order to delight shoppers in a more meaningful way, brands must flood the floor with a vast range of brand activity. This includes parking bay media, retail radio humming in the background, wet demo promoters offering shoppers a taste of new products, bunting suspended between aisles, dump bins full of delights, flashing aisle wobblers catching our line of sight and free-standing units (FSUs) piled with product at every turn. Price in this territory is king.

If both philosophies, albeit wildly opposite in

values, have a place in retail, then is retail excellence linked to what we see in a store or is retail excellence linked to how we feel in a store? And if it is linked to how we feel in the store, then surely being able to build a relationship with your local supermarket manager is more important than dump bins piled with discounted washing powder. Others would argue that the perception of greatness is in the hands of the trolley-beholder; with one LSM group appreciating the price of the soap, and the other, the soap's branding efforts.

However, irrespective of the retail group or LSM, the investments that retailers make into





their people, their stores, their suppliers and their partnerships determine greatness. A retailer with an epic loyalty campaign is better than the retailer with a poor one. A store filled with well-designed and strategically placed in-store advertising structures is better than a poorly lit store with fading bulkhead wallpaper. A retailer with strong technology partnerships, be it internal point of sale software or a scooter delivery application is better than the retailer without one. A customer manager who spends time on the shop floor is better than one who sits on the phone all day. A store manager who can help you source that exotic spice you need for a new recipe is better than a store manager you can't ever find to even ask.

“Retail is tough and retail excellence is something that is ever-changing. The people who work in retail, across all disciplines work hard. To be 'good' is not easy to achieve when there is so much to get right, 365 days a year with no reprieve.”

With so much evolving in the retail space in terms of online shopping, 60 minute delivery services, social media platforms and online content, retail greatness is an ever moving target. When we look at the global standards and the evolution of retail spaces like Amazon Go, there is still so much for South African retailers to learn. Our industry must continue to strive for global retail standards, however high the bar may be. Management must continue to travel and bring back new ideas.



Operational teams have to take risks investing in big-idea projects, like field sales platforms and artificial intelligence technology. The future isn't around the corner, it has already arrived and it is evasive, impressive, impatient and fast moving. Retailers have to get closer to their customers and give them what they want, even if shoppers don't quite know what that is yet.

Retailers cannot marinate in the lukewarm puddles of 'good enough'. They need to dive deeper and push harder to continually strive for retail

excellence. Disney was just the start of it. Times have changed but the future of South Africa's retail is glittering with potential. **SR**

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