Experiential Retailing: Can it Help Offline Stores?
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The growth of online shopping has led many traditional brick-and-mortar retailers to create and emphasize unique in-store shopping activities and experiences as a way to compete with online retailers. This is known as experiential retailing, and the idea behind this trend is that the one thing online retailers can't offer is the in-store experience. Therefore, if offline stores can develop truly interesting, entertaining, and/or one-of-a-kind shopping activities/experiences, that would be one way to effectively compete.

There are a number of examples of companies engaging in experiential retailing. For instance, Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World superstores feature a number of attractions that make each store a unique destination, such as indoor waterfalls, gigantic aquariums, archery ranges, and ponds with fish native to the store's area. In addition, the stores hold a number of demonstrations and workshops that teach customers a variety of skills related to outdoor activities, including camping, hiking, fishing, and water safety. Another outdoor recreation company, REI offers climbing walls at some of its stores, for patrons to try out and practice their rock climbing skills. In addition, Dick's Sporting Goods offers a golf simulator for shoppers to try out any of their golf clubs on a number of virtual holes before purchasing them. On the simulator, the customer hits an actual golf ball and then a large projection screen shows the flight of the ball through the air, as well as where it lands. In addition to displaying this, the simulator also provides a number of useful metrics, such as ball distance, speed, launch angle, and spin, to further help customers decide if the club they're using is the right one for them.

Sporting goods and outdoor oriented stores aren't the only ones engaging in experiential retailing. Many other brick-and-mortar retailers are starting to use technology to create a personalized shopping experience for customers. For example, many companies such as Target offer mobile apps that allow shoppers to see if an item is available at a particular store, and if so tell them the exact location of that item within that store. In addition, other retailers including Timberland, are beginning to employ the use of augmented reality systems in their offline stores, to allow customers to virtually try on clothing and accessories, as well as instantly mix and match various combinations of shirts, pants, shoes, etc. www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TZmQPdhpak. Neiman Marcus has also developed the "Memory Mirror" shopping assistant, which allows shoppers trying on various items to view them on a large video screen from any angle, as well as instantly change an items color, or see the way different outfits look in side-by-side comparisons: www.youtube.com/watch?v=B97k394jetk.

Since many of these retailers' items can be purchased online, companies are hoping that by offering these extra experiences, it will encourage consumers to go and shop at their physical stores. Obviously online shopping is here to stay and will most likely continue to keep growing well into the future. However, experiential retailing does show promise in helping offline retailers to still have a relevant place in consumers' shopping habits.

What do you think of experiential retailing? Do you think it's a viable technique for allowing offline stores to better compete with online shopping? Are there any other examples of experiential retailing that you've recently seen in action? *Please share your thoughts in the comments section below*.

Image source: Tim Nichols (2014) - "Experiential Marketing on The High Street" (ExactDrive™).

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