

Talking Point

Your views on the issues shaping the industry

(Show)room for growth



DIANE SYKES, owner, Diane Sykes Fashion Marketing

I am now officially in business and with one full year of trading under my belt, I feel like I am 100 per cent unequivocally a fully fledged agent. No longer just a fanciful idea or a far off daydream, my new daily reality (and breathtaking responsibility) is a fully functioning multi-label agency with a full-time showroom representing hand picked collections from all over Europe.

Aside from the acquisition of said labels (and that is a whole different conversation) one of the

toughest decisions that agents – new or established – now face is the space that they show in. It is their biggest financial consideration and therefore a real make or break decision. The impact of this can literally dictate whether or not your season is a success or not. No pressure then!

A very successful agent told me once that if your product was right you could show in a barn. I suppose there was some truth to this, back when all agents showed in the West End of London and there was a designated rag trade area. For the most part agents could afford a year-round space in any one of the many buildings adapted especially for our industry. Few ventured outside it. Sadly times have changed and this formerly gritty, eccentric area is now full of fancy coffee shops and modern concept art galleries. What a shame. It seems that only the biggest brands with the biggest budgets can show their wares in this now achingly cool area known as Noho (North of Soho).

The eye-watering rents in the West End have forced many multiple brand agents to take a leap into pastures further afield where they can get a lot more bang for their buck. This move requires nerves of steel and only really works with agencies with a large stable of labels to help create a

destination. Many agents are fans of the temporary showroom too. There are some really lovely temporary arrangements; although not ‘cheap’ at least there is the comfort that you are only paying for the time and space you need. Alas, with my 12-week selling period this was not for me.

I’ve worked in some fabulous showrooms and so I had become a little spoilt. My own business dream was always to replicate that luxury vibe on a smaller scale, and with the brands I represented I knew I needed a West End base. The sky-high rents meant thinking outside the box, so the result was a little rented town house set right in the heart of it all. It’s ‘bijoux’ but pretty and customers tell me they like it, so a happy ending for the time being. But what is really interesting about this wholesale space ‘evolution’ is that there are no expectations. There is no right or wrong. Wherever you show, in the West End or Chelsea, hotels or exhibitions and whether you are in a temporary space, or invest in a building, each case is unique. There is so much more choice and each brand or agent can look at their business and take the approach that works for them. Quite simply, there are now no rules, and when there are no rules, there is freedom.

The value of fostering communities to build a brand



WILL ROWE is the CEO and founder of Protein, which helps businesses to grow and develop by understanding consumer trends and behaviour.

Every single year in our annual Audience Survey we ask our global early adopters a certain question: do you purchase more items online or in store? While the figures have been inching ever closer, for the first time this year we saw online purchases overtake in-store purchases. Figures reveal that 52

per cent of our Protein Audience prefer to buy online. But it doesn’t have to be a case of one versus the other, rather understanding the comparative advantages each one has to offer.

In order to determine the advantages for the early adopter we dug deeper with our questioning and discovered that 61 per cent of the Protein Audience would rather spend money on experiences than products and 64 per cent want an in-store experience to connect them with members of the local community. The responses saw an overwhelming desire for connection, community and experience, but in what ways is it possible for retail to really capitalise on this?

Above all else, when a brand decides to action any or all of these desires it’s vital it aligns with their core brand values. Dove recently launched the #MyBeautyMySay campaign, which is an online platform that highlights the judgemental comments women experience about their appearance. It encourages women worldwide to participate using the #MyBeautyMySay hashtag, allowing a community to thrive off the back of negative incidents. The reason it works so well for Dove is that they’ve spent the last 12 years carving a space for themselves within the female

empowerment territory. It’s entirely in line with the values the brand is built on. If a company with no previous association attempted a similar thing, it could have come across disingenuous at best, if not exploitative.

A fashion brand that has fostered a physical – not online – community space is COS. The Swedish retail chain teamed up with bookstore project The Book Society for their Cheongdam store in Seoul, South Korea. They turned the passive experiences of shopping on their head by providing a reading area, bookstore and exhibition space for people to peruse in between shopping, or while waiting for partners. It was an experience that encouraged people not only to shop, but immerse themselves in the sensibility of the brand, as well as giving them the chance to interact more easily with one another.

We believe that a brand isn’t what you tell people it is, it’s what people tell each other it is. If you can nurture a community and show them the values and principles of your brand, then you provide an opportunity for our Audience to identify with those values. And if there’s something they identify with, they’re going to want to share that with their friends – their community.