

WHEN THE HEART RULES THE HEAD

When we buy a product, an experience or a lifestyle we are increasingly thinking, not with our heads, but with our hearts. This emotional response indicates, as many a psychologist can testify, that consumers have scaled the dizzy heights of Abraham Maslow's famous 'pyramid of needs' and hit the stage where self-actualisation is what counts.

Self-actualisation - literally doing what gives you pleasure - is the feelgood factor increasingly shaping our best retail environments too. And these days shopping is not about what you consume but how you consume.

Let's think about the word consumption. It has taken on almost negative connotations because it smacks of excess. Not only that but people have, for years, been categorised by income and shopping behaviours. Now the As, Bs and Cs are climbing out of their pigeonholes and grabbing control. People don't want to be labelled - they want to be engaged, educated and inspired.

Yes we live in a world of mass marketing and mass consumption, but two E-words - Empathy and Emotion - are coming to the fore. Put them together and they add up to a new era of Consumer Empowerment. Empowerment means being valued as an individual and having a clear vision not only of what you are buying, but the ethics behind it.

Consider three names on many people's lips - Apple, Starbucks and, to a smaller extent, Innocent Smoothies. All three engage their audience in an emotional and empowering way. They talk to them about how products will make them feel. They project images of a company that cares for environment, staff and end users. Yet their computers, coffee and smoothies are products that are widely available elsewhere - and for less money.

What they have created is something beyond mere brand. It is the concept of 'Emotional Consumption' - be it retailtainment in a 21st century superstore, cosy camaraderie over a latte or 'doing the right thing' by heading a free charity concert.

With fragmented and time-poor lifestyles people are looking to seize the moment - any moment - and find meaning in it. And that is why

savvy brands have learned the art of selling something more. We are seeing the rise of 'Yeppies' (Young, Experimenting Perfection Seekers) who value life journeys above worldly goods. To them a trek to the ancient ruins of Cambodia is worth more than a Ferrari in the garage. And there's a bit of Yeppie in older consumers too - witness the growth of luxury short breaks, boutique hotels and spa/pampering experiences. These perfect 'experiential' products are a way of cramming pleasure into every spare moment of life. They are not about owning more 'stuff'.

So where does that leave shopping? It will remain as essential as ever, but increasingly it must be entertaining, informative, illuminating. Consumers want to be treated as honoured guests and find an emotional connection with both the products they are buying and the store where they are buying them. And the final question they will ask before they hand over their money is: 'so how does this make me feel'.