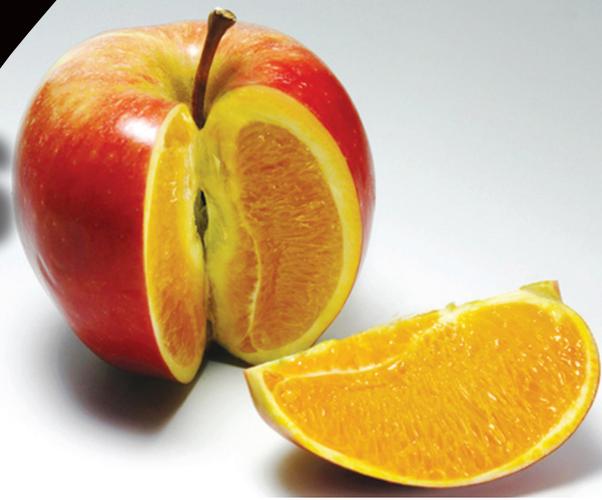


Lessons From the Street



CLIVE WOODGER, MD AND OWNER OF SCG LONDON EXAMINES ORGANISED RETAIL AND THE LESSONS TO BE LEARNED IN IMPROVING THE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE FOR ALL.

When reviewing the development of retail in emerging economies the percentage of 'organised retail' is often quoted to reflect the increasing proportion of retail formats and organisation that reflect the modern stores, shops and centres we associate with retail in the west. Presumably the existing remaining retail activity is, by default, 'disorganised' retail although it is never referred to as such and 'traditional', 'informal' are accepted terms. One reason is that it is highly organised – family, mom and pop operations, street traders, which know the local market and shoppers intimately and can respond to their every need. It can be highly flexible, able to respond to customer needs, treating them as individuals and providing services and products to meet available circumstances and budgets.

Ironically, these are some of the best practice traits of retail – customer knowledge, accessibility, flexibility, ability to adapt and reinvent. Increased access to the Internet has now exposed the limitations and rigidity of formal retail and those operations that cannot adapt and offer multichannel convenience are in trouble. Shopping centres have replaced the traditional bazaars, open markets, high street shops and department stores in cities as modern retail formats and practices responded to the lifestyles and needs and aspirations of modern city dwellers.

However, the static formality of modern shopping has become a real turn off for many who are looking to consume experiences rather than just 'stuff'. This has led to the development of more 'experiential' retail. That maybe fine for fashion and more aspirational shopping, but more functional product offers must compete on value and convenience that can be achieved online or from a local convenience store. In some ways we seem to be coming back to the advantages the market stall and local traders who know and treat you as an individual.

'Guerrilla' shops set up on temporary locations are seen as more exciting than yet another cloned brand format. Immediacy and impermanence provides dynamic streetwise credibility for trendy young fashion; farmer's

markets are another expression of this search for more personal quality shopping experience. But such approaches do not fit easily into the conventional infrastructure and formats of 'organised' retail. Shopping centres can typically reflect this world of static permanent investments – expensive architecture and services which cannot easily adapt to the new economic environment of declining retail tenancies, long-term leases and increasingly unacceptable service charges for retailers who want more than basic facility management.

In the wider context, cities worldwide are trying to bridge the gap between the static fabric of their buildings, spaces and facilities with the fast changing dynamics and aspirations of modern urban dwellers. This is a challenge for planners, developers, architects and designers to create environments and facilities which nurture, stimulate and sustain positive communities and places where people want to visit, live, work and shop.

These raise issues of planning policy and local democracy representing massive challenges for politicians and businesses and particularly retail, which is recognised as a key component of any community mix whether for new urban or regeneration initiatives

For many cities, the needs of the car are still superior to the pedestrian. One measure of a more civilised society are moves to limit the intrusiveness of the car and prioritise the pedestrian and cyclist, ideally supported by efficient public transport. Ten lane highways through city centres and uncontrolled pavement parking hardly promote any sense of place.

Equally, city centre shopping centres that positively encourage cars need to be ready for the day when environmental and sustainability values make such development anti-social and ultimately unacceptable.

City commentators talk about the kinetic interests of people and their activities in relation to the static fabric of buildings and spaces. The potential rigidity of city development and retail formats must be able to respond to the changing needs of users. Allowing for a degree of positive 'disorganisation' is key for places and venues if they are to be attractive, vibrant and successful. Festivals and fireworks combined with well-known fixed landmarks are a good example of creating a synergy of people and places to promote a city or neighbourhood's image and reputation.

It will be interesting to see how future retail development will perhaps avoid the limiting definitions and perceptions of being too 'organised' and take on the lessons of traditional street trading by becoming more responsive, organic, dynamic and spontaneous.

