

Retail's future is the 'Theatre of Dreams'

 By [Jonathan Cherry](#)

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"Fashion is very important. It is life-enhancing and, like everything that gives pleasure, it is worth doing well." - Vivienne Westwood



Cherryflava futurist and strategist Jonathan Cherry. Source: Supplied

When I was a kid - picture the late 1970s, early 80s - there was a small toy store in Cavendish Square called Treasure Island. It was a dimly-lit pokey shop where Cape Union Mart is located today.

The sign outside had a dark blue background; a bold palette on which a vibrant, off-white, old sailing ship was illustrated. Inside, toys filled baskets on the floor and huge metal shelves held hundreds of Lego sets, Playmobil kits, model airplanes, boxes of remote-controlled cars, dolls...and every other conceivable 'afternoon of joy' a kid could possibly wish for.

Walking in there felt different every time, and even today, if I close my eyes...I'm right back there, 'slap bang in the middle of pure joy'.

It still is, in my mind at least, the ultimate 'Theatre of Dreams'.

I obviously don't know who owned that shop (it was an independent store most probably it was family-owned), but what was clear, is that the brains behind it must have loved toys and children and understood the importance of creating a fantasy space where the two could amicably meet.

That intimate 'retail wisdom' of how to imagine and stage the perfect meeting place of 'desirable things and the people who will love them' wasn't entirely unique to Treasure Island. Various iterations of it existed in the minds of most shopkeepers, but it is a wisdom that has seemingly now been lost in the collective business mindset of modern data and information-led retail.



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Data-led efficiency vs imaginative fantasy

On the customer experience continuum between data-led efficiency and imaginative fantasy, the pendulum has swung far away from the latter 'soft-power' approach and appears to be doggedly lodged firmly at the results-driven end of the spectrum, where information-rich algorithms and business process solutions dominate the approach.

“ You just need to walk into a toy store these days to get a sense of just how cold and devoid of wonder modern retail has become. ”

Our fascination with the early stages of the information age, which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s has hijacked and stalled our natural evolution of 'shopkeeper consciousness', which should naturally have moved on to by now integrating these technologies with higher-order levels of nous.

Retailers, overpopulated with leadership teams of accountants and analysts who are obsessed with empirical evidence, are left to race their way to the bottom of the margin barrel.

This treacherous racetrack is not very long, and the winner gets nothing more than a set of customers who are now well-trained to hunt for bargains.

What seemed like a profitable path to follow at the time, is now the very route that leads to unbearable levels of competition.

Create magical experiences that connect with consumers

In the current world, and the one forecast to emerge in the coming years, desperate for joy, community, connection and enthrallingly imaginative experiences that feel nothing like real-life (which is what the so-called metaverse promises to deliver); retailers have a unique, massively impactful platform on which to reconnect with people and bring back the old shopkeeper's trade secret of the 'Theatre of Dreams'.

“ No other business category has a footprint of physical customer touch-points, that is capable of enabling the creation of magical alternate reality experiences that connect on a deeper psychological level with the people that matter. ”

As a complete system, made up of a unique combination of adaptive technological assets and augmented by creative thinking and expression, the future offers technically-innovative and creatively-adventurous retailers the opportunity to manifest something truly remarkable and strategically defensible.

Instead of hedging all bets on technology in isolation of a bigger brand narrative, the strategic blending together of appropriate technological artifacts with an imaginatively evolving brand and product narrative, allows dynamic brands to lock in their customers mentally and emotionally, without having to rely so heavily on issuing loyalty points or discounts that simply subsidise revenue targets.

The convergence of these process and imagination pathways is already happening, yet very few have as yet spotted the strategic opportunity to capitalize on it.

Those that have - like the American art collective/product innovator/retailer [MSCHE](#), which is constantly delighting its fans with intriguing sneaker drops and headline-grabbing innovations - stand out from the crowd and almost taunt the media with news of their latest developments.



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Retailers must rid themselves of distractions

Why is it that there is such a remarkable lack of boldness when it comes to brand progression from most retail brands?

One key reason for this could be that many retailers are distracted by other things.

While issues related to environmental sustainability, and the active solving of these challenges are important; in the long term they don't fundamentally offer customers a compelling reason to support one brand over another.

Nobody dreams of buying 'green' products or chooses to only do their shopping at a store whose electricity is generated by solar panels. At some point, these sustainability innovations will simply be considered an 'expected operating benchmark', rather than a significant brand differentiator.

Green innovation is, after all, just a delayed, restorative reaction to historically poor product and value chain design frameworks; not a bold, forward-orientated, proactive, positive, showcase of imaginative excellence driving the future of retail.

I'm obviously not suggesting for a second that sustainability efforts shouldn't be made, but in the long term the outcome of throwing everything at just this one aspect of innovation doesn't represent a sufficient competitive advantage.

“ Version 2.0 of the 'Theatre of Dreams' retail strategy will require a reversal of the recent purge of creative talent from senior leadership positions in retail businesses. ”

Not just that, but it will demand that at the upper echelons of management power - design-, technology- and business-minds collaboratively join as equals to actively plan and rollout an ongoing narrative of experiential customer joy that truly sets them apart from the competition.

Let's not forget that when you strip away all of the new technology trends and the endless conferences showcasing 'less damaging production methods', and everything else that serves as a distraction; retail for people who love to shop, is after all, the stage where 'desirable things and the people who will love them' are able to meet.

A new age of 'Treasure Islands' is rapidly coming to save us all from the retail boredom that we face as consumers. They will be armed with a new mindset that is reminiscent of one that we thought had long gone, but they'll know how to rekindle

the child in all of us with a fresh revolution in how we experience joy.

ABOUT JONATHAN CHERRY

Jonathan Cherry is a futurist and business strategist who works with organisations to design better strategies that effectively create a significant competitive advantage. Over the past 20 years he's worked with retailers such as Yuppiefchef, Woolworths and Kitchen Warehouse (Australia), has an MPhil Futures Studies from Stellenbosch University and is a member of the Association of Professional Futurists. .

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