Selfridges shows department stores can be Christmas winners

By Sandra Halliday - 22 January 2018

Selfridges had already told us that its Boxing Day clearance sale business was buoyant and at the weekend it revealed that the Christmas season as a whole was better than ever.

While footfall was dropping in the UK with many department stores losing physical store customers to the web (and not always their own web stores), the reverse was true at the luxury chain.

Just look at some of the headline figures as reported in The Telegraph. In the week before Christmas, the late shopping surge saw Selfridges sales rising 15% year-on-year. And while footfall dropped for UK retail in December, at Selfridges branches, it rose 6%.

Perhaps that was mainly down to the resilience of the luxury shopper with high-end product suffering less from a footfall downturn given the need to touch and feel items that cost hundreds or thousands of pounds before purchase.

But Selfridges MD Anne Pitcher also put it down to more specific reasons. She cited the exclusive mix at the stores as offering a compelling reason to buy from it (rather than from rivals Harrods, Harvey Nichols or any of the monobrand luxury stores nearby). The retailer had 1,000+ exclusives on offer during the Christmas period, not just in fashion, but also in gift food and drink, beauty and home.

And Pitcher also said that the range of experiences in its stores over Christmas also helped.

These included a traditional pantomime at the Oxford Street flagship in London, a recreated London pub in-store and confetti explosions to get shoppers into a festive mood. The London flagship also saw the opening of the brand’s ‘corner shop’ complete with giant floating Santa.

“Everyone is talking about retail theatre, but Selfridges is much more than a shop - it’s a social place and we want people to remember their trip as unconventional and fun,” Pitcher said, as reported in The Telegraph. “It’s a
people to remember their trip as unconventional and fun,” Pitcher said, as reported in The Telegraph. “It’s a compelling and memorable destination.”

Her reference to Selfridges as “a social place” is interesting given that “social shopping” is the big mantra at Debenhams, a chain that saw very different results at Christmas.

While Debenhams and Selfridges don’t compete directly at the luxury end of the market, they do offer many of the same products when it comes to premium brands and especially high-end beauty. Clearly, Selfridges is much more successful as a “social” destination so far.

The retailer’s Christmas season had started with a scare when Oxford Street was evacuated in a mass panic on Black Friday after reports of a gunman on the loose. That turned out to be a false alarm but business was hit at a crucial time. However, Pitcher said that Selfridges recovered quickly from that. And in fact, it went from strength to strength with its overall Christmas period very focused on full-price sales.

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