



# Experiential Purchasing and the New Retail

## What it means when consumers want to do something, not just buy something

In traditional department stores across America there are comfy chairs set in out-of-the-way places. They're called "husband chairs." Usually you'll find them in women's departments, where the purpose of the chairs is clear. Older couple enters. The wife shops. And the husband takes a seat and waits. But you'll find these seats in other departments too — beauty, housewares, furniture . . . most everywhere except sporting goods.

The premise of course is that men hate to shop, but are obliged to visit stores with their wives. It's an old-fashioned idea, based as much on an outdated vision of gender as an outdated vision of retail.

Your father probably sat in quite a few husband chairs. Your grandson likely never will. Here's why:

### **Retailers have come to accept that . . .**

- a. people today ain't what they were in 1965, and
- b. assuming that shopping must always be a tedious chore for half of the population is a recipe for retail disaster.

So the retail industry is bidding adieu to the husband chair, and saying hello to an era where shopping is fun — for everyone.

### **Welcome to the world of "experiential purchasing."**

## Come fly with me

There are numerous definitions of experiential purchasing. Generally it refers to a store in which stuff happens in addition to selling, and shoppers do things besides buying. The idea is that a retailer offers consumers a chance to buy an experience rather than just an object or service. Or to put it another way, the consumer buys a memory.

### **Air travel is the classic example of the phenomenon.**

Back in the day, the flight to and from a vacation was something meant to be experienced. It evoked adventure and glamour. But the idea of air travel as something people want to experience has been consigned to the past by airport security lines, uncomfortable seats, and [the disappearance of manners](#).

But the desire for adventure, for glamour, and for fun hasn't disappeared. Now retailers of all stripes are finding ways to make the shopping experience as memorable and remarkable as a Pan Am flight in the 1950s.

Consider just a handful of the stores that have become destinations to experience, not just places to spend money:

**Lululemon**, the yoga-inspired apparel chain that debuted in 1998, offers yoga classes in its stores, serving as a sort of one-stop community for both seasoned practitioners and novices.

**Macy's** flagship store in New York City's Herald Square offers fitness classes in conjunction with Nike. And Nike is considering plans to expand the Nike Training Club idea to other retail locations.

**REI**, the employee-owned outdoor retailer, is also an outdoor educator. The company offers in-house and in-the-field classes in kayaking, hiking, rock climbing, and more. Competitor Eastern Mountain Sports offers similar programs, while rival Cabela's organizes hunting and fishing trips.

**Whole Foods** and **Williams-Sonoma** aren't just places to buy cookware, they're also places where you can take cooking classes.

**Pirch** is shaking up the home space with stores that [offer guided, interactive tours of working kitchens and bathrooms](#), letting consumers experience high-end equipment from manufacturers around the globe.

## Are you experienced?

It would be misleading to suggest retailers are leading the experiential purchasing movement, however. Our Shopping Activity Services data shows buying visits fell 9 percent from 2012 to through 2014.

The reasons behind the drop are numerous. But the central issue is that consumers, particularly young adults, are different from the folks of earlier eras.

Since the U.S. financial crisis of 2008, consumers have been driven to make purchases "count." Americans today take less pride in having stuff, and they take more pride in doing stuff . . . particularly stuff that can be done with friends and family and shared through social media. (Just consider the rise of Tough Mudder races, selfie sticks, and GoPro cameras.)

Just as important, consumers have learned that in a digital economy there's less of a need to own things, particularly brand-new, expensive things. The sharing economy means when you want to travel you can order a car on demand (Uber, ZipCar), borrow a bike for an hour (Citibike), or nab a place to park at the airport (Just Park, FlightCar).

If you don't want to move around, you can rent a couch to crash on (Airbnb, Couchsurfing), get a free couch from someone who's moving (Craigslist), and then rent the perfect entertainment for couch potatoes (Netflix, Amazon On Demand).

## Are we there yet?

So how can you sell stuff to folks who prefer not to go shopping and would rather rent than own?

The key, as illustrated by the retail examples above, is to foster a sense of community in an entertaining setting. Or, to put it simply, to help people have fun with friends and family.

Dining in four-star restaurants is the archetype of such activities. High-end meals tend to be both pleasant and memorable. And our data shows fine dining [is becoming more popular with people who can afford the](#)

experience.

Another example is the rise of the outdoor malls known as [lifestyle centers](#) (and the emerging trend of [mixed-use lifestyle centers](#) centers popular with developers today).

The next step on this path appears to be the arrival of next-gen technologies like virtual-reality headsets and body-scanning measurement systems that turn routine tasks like trying on pants or buying shoes into a fun and futuristic experience.

Until then, you may want to take the kids to a traditional department store and have them sit in the husband chairs. The chairs are a little bit of American history, and they will disappear soon, like wooden ships and buggy whips.

And you can tell the kids that George Washington slept here . . . while Martha shopped.

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