



ILLUSTRATION: Reena de la Ros

Top of the pops

For companies of all sizes, pop-up retail and promotional spaces are increasingly a way to grow business both at home and abroad. A short-term solution with long-term staying power, *Lorraine Shah reports*

Take a walk down any city street and you may well come across a 'pop-up'. A temporary store or commercial space, pop-ups were conceived in the US almost a decade ago to sell limited edition or seasonal items in mature retail markets.

The trend has long since migrated to other countries, including the UK, and is now being used creatively by large retailers and small firms alike, across a wide variety of sectors, to build business, particularly during tough economic trading conditions.

Nicholas Russell, CEO of We Are Pop Up, a London-based company which helps businesses find suitable pop-up spaces, says: "In the past, big brands have used pop-ups in shopping centres as a way of generating excitement or a buzz around a particular product.

"Now pop-ups are increasingly used by both companies and commercial landlords as a way to fill empty or unused retail space. They are a cost-effective way of testing products, connecting with customers, building brands and expanding markets."

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The UK has seen a boom in pop-ups over the last four years, driven by the global financial crisis and advances in mobile technology. "The number of vacant retail spaces has gone up because of the economic downturn, while the growing use of mobile devices and social media is a great way for entrepreneurs with little or no budget to broadcast and advertise their pop-ups," explains Russell.

"Such is the increasing popularity of the concept that commercial landlords in

London are now creating spaces for pop-ups in their portfolio, seeing them as a great way of trying out a new retailer and maybe paving the way for the permanent filling of a retail space."

As well as retail, pop-ups are popular in sectors such as food and drink, with budding restaurateurs using them as a way to test out their culinary creations and assess public demand. "In the UK, there is a growing trend of food businesses starting out as supper clubs, turning into pop-up restaurants and then becoming full-blown, permanent establishments," says Russell.

WORLD STAGE

From a global perspective, pop-ups are also a great way for firms to expand and gain exposure overseas. "If a company wants to expand overseas, pop-ups enable them to test a market before committing all the necessary resources," says Russell.

"They can help them decide whether the market is right for them, gauge demand and what the size of their operation should be, and receive customer feedback. We've seen pop-ups in Australia, China and India, while there is also a thriving scene in Berlin and Amsterdam."

UK Trade & Investment can offer advice to help companies decide which markets may be right for such an approach, through a tailored Overseas Market Introduction Service (OMIS) report.

Among the UK companies recognising the global potential of pop-ups are auction house Christie's, which recently ran a pop-up promotional event in Singapore, and fashion retailer Topshop,

which opened a pop-up in Los Angeles. Small yet burgeoning converts include MyEdo, an online menswear retailer which provides unique brands from overseas. It recently shared a pop-up retail space in Surrey, as part of the Start-Up Britain initiative that aims to fill empty shops with new budding businesses, and is now interested in using the concept in Spain and Italy. It already ships to customers in countries such as Australia, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and South Africa.

"I had retail space for two weeks on a great high street and was able to engage and sell my products to everyday customers," explains founder and director Edoardo Cannarsa. "Pop-ups enable you to be in front of different customers with no long-term rent commitments, which is a great advantage."

With a breadth of locations and creative opportunities, pop-ups are, somewhat ironically, here to stay. "Our view is that pop-ups represent a new class in retail," concludes Russell. "When you look at the boom in online commerce and the changing nature of retail usage in the high street, it appears increasingly inefficient for companies to have a permanent, geographically fixed store. We're likely to see pop-ups become a formal part of the global retail economy." ■

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