Smart shopping

Digital tools can transform the customer experience in-store, says Hointer founder **Nadia Shouraboura**. If they provide solutions rather than retail razzle dazzle, your customers will use them naturally. They'll spend more time interacting with your products and you can get to know them better

How does Hointer fit with the traditional retail model? It expands it rather than challenge it. Hointer retains all the best aspects of real-world shopping, while exceeding expectations that have arisen through online retail – convenience, great prices and a wider selection. Hointer keeps prices down because our cost structure is lower than online retailers, and our setup means we can offer a huge selection of products in a smaller space.

How did you get started? By examining each step of the shopping experience. We eliminated the unpleasant aspects – searching for sizes, taking piles of clothes to the fitting room, going back out to get different sizes, the checkout process, and so on. Innovating came down to getting rid of all the frustrations and nuisances, while keeping the best bits – gorgeous displays, discovery, personal service and finding the perfect fit.

What type of shopper did you have in mind? Initially men, because I felt they were the customers

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most in need of this kind of service. Then we had a huge amount of feedback from women visiting the store who also wanted to shop in this way, so we launched a women's collection. The store is now evenly split between menswear and womenswear, and it's been massively successful. Women enjoy this style of shopping because they love trying things on and finding a perfect fit. Now, Hointer is not so much about providing a retail format for a specific type of person, it's about improving the practicalities of the trying and buying processes.

If you speed up the process, does it take out the enjoyment? Hointer is designed so you can be in and out in minutes, if that's what you want. The name is a play on the word 'hunter' because we believed men always have a target when they shop and they want to get it quickly. But in fact, men (and now women) are spending more time shopping in Hointer than they would in other stores. Shopping can involve a lot of wasted time – finding your size, waiting for changing rooms, waiting for a sales assistant to help, waiting to

pay. The reason people shop fast because they hate wasting time. But if you remove these frustrations and allow them to use their time more efficiently, to try on more items in a shorter space of time, they don't mind spending longer in-store because they're more likely to walk out with products they love.

Many of our customers aren't necessarily into fashion, but they do want to look good, so having extra time to figure out what looks good is important. People are trying on as many as 15 different styles in one visit because it's so much quicker and easier. By making the process more efficient, Hointer allows more time for discovery and exploration.

How does it change the role of store staff? When our sales staff are on the shop floor, they have tablets showing information on customers in-store, via the app they use to choose jeans. We know what they choose and try on, what they discard, the jeans they hold onto for longer, any alterations they request, for example, as well as data from previous visits. This information allows us to serve each customer better. We can greet each person by name, talk to them about the brands and fits they like, as well as what doesn't work for them. As the back-end system can be fully automated, our sales associates don't really have much to do except talk to customers!

As well as opening more Hointer stores, we're working with several US retailers to integrate Hointer technology into their stores. One of the retail partners we're working with is known for its amazing in-store sales associates and stylists. They want the data collection abilities that Hointer offers to improve that service even further.

But that level of personal service doesn't suit every customer… True, that's why customers can have an entirely self-service shopping experience if they prefer. We've developed Hointer around the idea of giving customers more choice and control over how they shop. We approach customers visiting for the first time and ask if they need any help or styling advice. If they don't want to talk and say they would prefer to shop alone we can make a note of it, so next time they come in we know they may not want to be approached. Of course, that might change; on a future visit they may actually need help.

We did trial a button on the app that allows a customer to summon a sales associate but no one was using it. The reason was simple – customers who wanted to talk to a sales associate would simply approach one and talk to them. Not everything needs a technical solution!

Is it practical to put such emphasis on technology in the physical store? While Hointer is backed by powerful technology, we make sure it's practically invisible to the customer beyond the app they use. It's very hard to design, implement and launch something and have it work perfectly first time. We're constantly testing ideas – we run about ten experiments per day and we're wrong nine out of ten times. Our in-house software development team shares a floor with the store, so when we trial something we can watch closely to see if and how people respond to it. Any changes can then be made very quickly.

Tell us about the interior design and visual merchandising. Traditionally, fashion retail designers are limited in what they can do because of the restrictions that come with storing and displaying extra sizes. As you only need to display one of each style with Hointer, the designers we're working with are coming up with endless ideas for improving the customer experience. We're looking into how to evolve mannequins, for example, to take their function beyond showing how items might fit on the body. For customers, it's hard to identify and locate the individual items of clothing that make up the mannequin's look. We're picturing a situation where customers could tap the mannequin with their smartphone to send everything it's wearing to a fitting room.

Nadia Shouraboura
Former technology vice president of Amazon's worldwide operations, Nadia is the CEO of Hointer, which launched in Seattle in 2012. hointer.com

How does the Hointer setup differ from a traditional retail space? If you convert a regular apparel store to the Hointer model, you can shrink your footprint by five times. On the shop floor, which takes up 90% of the store, we've removed bulky displays and racks so only one of each item is displayed. Jeans are hung so customers can walk around and see them properly rather than the piles and clutter you often find in denim stores.

The back-end is very small, it takes up the remaining 10% of the store, but it can hold thousands of products because of the way our stock is organised. This back-end system can be entirely automated, but it can also be configured to be more manual, depending on what works for our other retail partners or different store formats. The Hointer pop-ups we have planned will need to be set up in two days and taken down in one, so we've decided on a more manual back-end system where we'll have staff distributing the products to the fitting rooms.

How do the supply chain logistics work? Hointer is a micro-warehouse within a store. That's a powerful concept with many advantages for the brand, including easy exchange of products across stores and the prevention of shoplifting because we always know the status and whereabouts of every item within the store.

For customers, it means we can offer a truly omnichannel way to shop that utilises a tool that almost everyone already has – a smartphone. In a traditional store, if you find an item you like but they don't have your size, you may decide not to pursue that item. At Hointer, you can tap it with your smartphone to see if the size is available not just in that particular store, but in any Hointer store in our network – there are currently three, with more opening soon. You can also save items you like to view again later. At the moment, customers have to visit the physical store to make a purchase, but soon they'll be able to buy via the app or online.

With the micro-warehouse concept, everything needs to be done fast. For customers shopping in-store, this means they're not sitting half-naked for three minutes while another size is brought to them. When we add an online shopping option, the micro-warehouse system will mean we can offer same-day delivery from individual stores because we have such tight control over our inventory. We'll be able to get products ready for dispatch within seconds of a customer order being placed. ●