

Bricks, mortar, popcorn and coffee

Spark has recently won Red and Top Shop awards for its Albany and Sylvia Park store fit-outs. Head of consumer sales Greg Clark talks about the changes and challenges facing bricks and mortar stores, and how Spark is embracing change in its new store format.

Stark whites, bright fixtures and product lining the walls – it's not a foreign image for anyone who's been into a Spark (previously Telecom) store in the last six years, but it soon will be. When we became Spark just over a year ago we started exploring how our stores could reflect the new brand. This wasn't just about a new look, but a completely new approach to how we connect with our customers.

Some colleagues and I travelled throughout America and Europe, getting a view on best practice retail in stores like Nike, Apple and Swisscom. These are tactile, inviting and engaging destinations. They offer what consumers increasingly expect from retailers – an experience.

On arriving home we began mapping out the main transaction types in our stores, thinking about how we could make them as positive as possible. To do this we partnered with Spaceworks, which quickly understood what we were trying to achieve. The Spaceworks team digested our findings from overseas and brought plenty of ideas to the table, creating a customer experience that sets a new standard for our bricks and mortar stores.

CREATING AN EXPERIENCE

Our main driver was to deliver the best possible in-store experience for our customers and frontline staff. The biggest piece of feedback we get in-store is, "Your team are awesome, but we want greater access to them." To deliver this we've set up point of sale (POS) stations throughout the store as an interim step to conducting mobile transactions.

We've also introduced virtual queuing and have ensured that if customers ever have

to wait, it's as enjoyable as possible. There are bottles of water they can drink and cafe-style tables where they can sit and use the Wi-Fi. At our concept store on Queen St we've teamed up with Flight Coffee to provide customers with home-roasted, barista-made coffee.

We did some research and found that many New Zealanders find technology intimidating to shop. We wanted to make technology accessible and highlight how it can enrich lives, so we created a more tactile environment, moving product off the walls and onto tables where people can gather in groups, discover and play. Our product stories are also being told in more tactile ways. Spark customers get discounted movie tickets, so our Queen St store will have a popcorn machine that works at certain hours of the day, just to bring some theatre to the offer.

There's been a global trend amongst telcos to colour their stores in brand colours. What it means is people come in-store and are distracted by the bright fixtures. On our trip we met the designer of the first Apple store. He'd made it really neutral so the space was all about the product. We've headed in a similar direction with our new fit-outs, using neutral tones so that the shop gets out of the way, people are brought to the forefront and the product is hero. We've also softened the space with timber tones to make it warmer and more comfortable, encouraging people to spend longer in the store.

Another trend we've pushed back on is the tendency to load stores with technology. We've made sure that any extra tech we use is there specifically to improve customer experience and enable our team to do a better job.

A NEW KIND OF STORE

Digital technology will continue to drive developments in retail, so we've ensured the new fit-outs can be easily adapted for future change. The fixtures are modular and our sales stations can be easily removed when our POS becomes mobile. We've also allocated space for self-service machines. Before long our customers will be able to come in and self-manage their accounts.

There's no doubt it's an interesting time for bricks and mortar stores. We've got the task of winning customers who can jump online and order the same products from almost anywhere in the world. To compete with that, stores have to be a destination worth travelling to.

Our stores have come a long way – from stark tones and immovable counter tops, to staff sitting down with people over quality craft coffee for a personal consultation. This is where the customer retail experience is heading in New Zealand and we're proud to be among the Kiwi retailers who are leading the way.

