



"The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

Look up 'premature obituaries' in Wikipedia and you will quickly discover a list of famous people as long as your arm who have mistakenly been reported as dead. Sean Connery and David Cameron to name just two. Some have since shuffled off in their own good time, others remain alive and well. What unites them is that someone was too eager to declare their demise without checking the state of their health first. And surely the same can be said of the latest clamour to declare the death of the high street.

Complacency and resistance to change are more easily forgiven if retailers can convince themselves that the whole bricks and mortar landscape is inevitably collapsing around their ears as online attacks. Too many big names on the high street have been asking why customers aren't visiting them and come up with the answer of ecommerce. But the more important question to ask themselves is why SHOULD shoppers make the effort to visit their stores. We live in a 'what's in it for me?' age and with such proliferation of shopping experiences to choose from, retail spaces need to make the effort to earn our shoe leather.

Pile it high and sell it cheap still works on the high street – but only if it's cheap enough. Add a sprinkle of jeopardy, by offering regularly changing bargains so customers are conditioned to buy before they miss out, and you're on to a winner. Our 'autopilot' shopper brains are wired to avoid loss, so limited availability simply drives desire. Discount retailers like B&M understand this all too well and appear to be thriving as a result.

But if you're not offering discounts to die for, vanilla stores and sloppy merchandising simply won't cut it any more. Retailers who do little more than rack and stack offer no defence against websites with great visuals, nimble search functionality, speedy delivery and easy returns. Smart online retailing has gradually torn down the old high street barricades of accuracy, security, immediacy and freedom from the risk of a bad buy. Traditional retailing needs to fight back by asserting its ability to offer an engaging social experience that beats sitting on the sofa.

The success of (Flying) Tiger, with its growing UK fanbase, powerfully demonstrates that 'fun' can work just as well as 'cheap'. With Scandi cool baked in, this is a retail experience designed to make you smile. And happy shoppers evidently spend money.

But beware the retailer who thinks in store theatre and great experience-led merchandising is the preserve of its flagship stores. Chains are only as strong as their weakest links – and high street success relies on being able to pull it off in a small awkward footprint, as much as creating the all singing all dancing Westfield showcase.

From barrow boys to Apple concept stores, retail has always been about setting out your stall and enticing the shopper in. Since when was it supposed to be easy?

