As Christmas 'clicks-in' on-line, is any festive cheer left for the High Street?

Posted on Thursday 13th December 2012

Much has been written recently about the death of the High Street but should we be so quick to bury it or rather consider what form of resuscitation is needed to revive it? The biggest threat appears to be from the growth of online shopping, and this seems to have been particularly the case in the run up to this Christmas. With so-called mega Monday occurring this year just after most people's pay-day, Visa's commercial director Dr Steve Perry was reported to estimate that Visa card transactions would be up by 21% that day, compared to last year.

Online shopping is a threat to the High Street for many reasons: high speed broadband has made it quicker and easier; people are increasingly using mobile devices to shop; you can shop at any time, and apparently late evening is popular; you can browse and see whether items are in stock without having the disappointment of driving to the High Street, parking, and then finding something is sold out, and finally there are lots of offers constantly dropping into our email boxes. So is it any surprise the High Street is in trouble?

Yet the High Street has been under threat for years, and a more nuanced discussion of its position is called for. Firstly, the 1980s and 1990s saw a huge expansion in shops on the High Street that even then some of us thought might be unsustainable. Then there is the threat from the shopping mall. Westfield, Merry Hill, the Bullring, Meadow Hall, all big and not-so-big cities have them, and even as High Street shops close more are being built in those same towns and cities. Rates and rents have affected some smaller retailers who do not have the ballast of a large chain behind them, and the lack of cheap parking has also had an impact. Online may in fact be the future for smaller retailers; they may not be able to compete on price but they can provide a professional website as good as their big competitors and if they also offer expertise and great customer service they can win over the often anonymous approach of the big online retailers. Internet sales also offer specialist outlets a much larger customer base.

My view, however, is that the High Street will survive, just not in exactly its present form, and we should sit back and let it move on without too much interference. People still want to go shopping, they enjoy seeing and feeling goods, the social experience of shopping with friends, trying different clothes on, stopping for a coffee, and many want to support local enterprise anyway. The backlash against large firms such as Amazon and Starbucks does reveal some real concern about the ethics of certain big businesses. People complain about the High Street having too many charity shops but I think we need more, not less, at a time of austerity and climate change when we should be reducing our consumption where possible, and where we should be looking for ways to help those less well off. The High Street will move on and reinvent itself in the face of the competition and the economic environment, just don't expect it to look the same as it did 10 years earlier.

Isabelle Szmigin

Professor of Marketing

Birmingham Business School

© University of Birmingham 2015