



The perfect new layout: the news and magazines fixture is more visible, the fresh offer has been enhanced and baskets are located throughout



In search of perfection

Does the real store match the virtual vision? James Durston reports

When Unilever UK Foods and United Co-operatives decided to work together to create 'the perfect store', it sounded like wishful thinking – not least because it demanded genuine collaboration between a manufacturer and a retailer.

But after two years of research, they're confident that they've pulled it off.

In November, the Co-operative store in Bradwell reopened following a total refit to transform it into a copy of a virtual store created by software company The Fifth Dimension. The Grocer visited the store to see how well the reality matched the vision.

The contrast with the old store is immediately apparent. Where once boxes and posters blocked the view into the store, the windows have now been fully cleared to show off the improved fresh produce offer. Inside, cluttered layout and merchandising have been replaced by a clean and lively design that helps shoppers navigate.

And where before shoppers could often find associated products such as beer and wine on different sides of the store, products are now grouped more logically.

Although there are not as yet any definitive figures, early findings suggest it is a hit with shoppers.

The store's turnover has shot up 16% and basket spend 59p in the 10 weeks since its refurbishment compared with increases of 6.2% and 26p respectively at a control store. Store manager Anita Birks says the change has been dramatic: "Sales are up and people spend much more time in here than they

did before. They do a proper shop now, actually stopping to shop here."

Sean Toal, general manager – operations at United Co-operatives, agrees that the new-look store is a vast improvement on its predecessor. "A lot of this seems like common sense, but it's about putting theory into practice. Visibility into the store is key, as it contrasts well with a local c-store, which has opaque windows."

The real store is now reaping the rewards of the virtual research, in which shoppers were asked to shop a virtual version of the original store and a virtual version of the perfect store. The findings highlighted a number of problems with the layout. In the original store a break half way up the first aisle meant only 33% of shoppers shopped the full aisle, where fresh meat and produce were located. In the new store design this gap was closed and 48% of shoppers did so.

Other changes have proved equally effective. The news and magazines fixture


now juts out from the rear set of fixtures in the store so that it is visible as soon as the shopper enters. Aisle widths have been increased by using a slimline chiller in the dairy section, and promotions that were previously on gondola ends or bins have been repositioned mid-aisle to face shoppers as they turn corners.

One of the most popular introductions in the new design has been baskets placed at various points within the store, to encourage a larger spend by shoppers who might have popped in just for one or two items.

Unilever and United are delighted by the results. Suzy Ford, category strategy manager at Unilever UK Foods, says: "This is the first time that a manufacturer and a retailer have worked together at a total store level, and to see it come to life and to see the uplift in performance, I couldn't get more excited!"

Susan Beetlestone, general manager, marketing at United Co-operatives, adds: "This is just the beginning. If just changing the layout to match how shoppers shop can achieve these results, think what we could do if we looked at specific categories in detail, too."

The next stage for the project is to carry out similar refits at eight other stores in United Co-operatives' portfolio this year, testing the 'perfect' theory on L-shaped and other non-typical stores.

Next year these theories will be implemented at category level, with the reorganising of merchandising and planograms, starting with the Bradwell store. We will be following progress closely. 



Visibility is a key philosophy at Bradwell