

Style

Dressing Rooms Of The Future

Jeanine Poggi 07.22.08, 4:40 PM ET

Interactive mirrors, 3D scanners and holographic sales assistants may sound like they belong in a sci-fi movie, but they'll likely soon be part of your future shopping sprees.

That's because, in an effort to make shopping more enticing and inviting, retail developers are adding amenities like these to their fitting rooms.

[Bloomingdale's](#), for example, was one of the first retailers to test a social retailing system in its New York flagship store last year, and [Mitsukoshi](#), a Japanese department store chain, began experimenting with an "intelligent fitting room" in 2004. The fitting room gives customers the opportunity to check available sizes and styles of the items they are trying from inside the fitting room.

In Depth: World's Innovative Dressing Rooms

"When you are in a store looking to buy an item of clothing, there are two moments of truth--when you take it off the shelf and when you try it on in the store," says Fred Dust, partner at Ideo, a business design consultant firm with offices worldwide. "The better the retailer makes the trying on experience, the more likely the shopper will buy the item."

Playing Catch-Up

But retailers have largely ignored dressing rooms, even as the rest of the retail landscape evolves.

The Internet has revolutionized the way catalog shopping is conducted, and increasingly shoppers are avoiding fitting rooms altogether, opting instead to take advantage of liberal return policies and bring merchandise home to try on. But bricks and mortars have not done much to make shoppers want to spend more time in their stores, says Bo Begole, principle scientist at PARC, a firm specializing in innovation and scientific research for technology companies.

One solution might be installing a responsive mirror in retailer's dressing rooms.

"Currently when you bring five or six items into the dressing room and try to narrow down your selection," says Begole, "it becomes difficult to remember how you looked in each outfit."

Related Stories
[Global Shopper's Guide To Sizing](#)

The responsive mirror eliminates that by allowing shoppers to simultaneously see pictures of themselves in all the items they try on to help them decide which they want to purchase. [Prada](#) began using them in its Beverly Hills stores and SoHo stores last year.

Group Think

IconNicholson, a digital design agency, devised a system in 2007 at the request of designer Nanette Lepore that would make retailing a more social experience. Through an interactive mirror and webcam in the designer's space in Bloomingdale's New York flagship store, customers were able to include friends or parents in their shopping experience.

"Typically young people shop in groups," says Joseph Olewitz, senior vice president of client relations at IconNicholson. "But whether they are alone, with friends or a parent, they whip out their cellphone, take a picture of the item they are interested in buying and send it to their confidants asking their opinion. We came up with a system to support that behavior."

Through inventory tagging, the dressing room registers the items shoppers take in to try on and produces video and images of the merchandise. A touch screen gives shoppers the option to invite friends. Through their personal cellphone or key pad, they can then send an e-mail or text message to friends. By clicking on a url and logging on to a Web site, the friends can see the items being tried on and make comments.

The site will also suggest other merchandise in the store. The shopper can then click on one of the recommendations, and make it appear in the mirror superimposed over his image, as though he were trying on the garment.

"We are trying to knock down the virtual walls of a store and allow people to communicate as though they are shopping together," Olewitz says. "Everyone can be at the same place at the same time."

The system even provides an option for the friend, parent or relative to remotely purchase the clothes for the shopper.

IconNicholson tested the social retailing system at the Bloomingdale's New York flagship store in its Nanette Lepore boutique in 2007. While the system was only slated for a test run, it is working with other retailers to launch similar dressing rooms.

[Macy's](#) and J.C. Penney are also exploring versions of the interactive dressing room, according to Richard Russo, founder of Hybridia Design, a retail design and imaging firm.

Shopper Support

Seems that's a smart idea. The TNS Retail Forward New Future in Store survey, which was conducted in May and questioned 4,600 primary household shoppers in Asia, Canada, Europe and the United States, found that 73% of shoppers anticipate using interactive touch screens in dressing rooms to communicate with sales assistants by 2015. Half expect that 3D body scanning and interactive dressing room mirrors will eliminate the stress of trying on that new outfit.

But implementing these dressing rooms throughout a large chain of stores can be costly.

Scanners that can detect customers' sizes can cost about \$75,000 each.

And as the retail space continues to consolidate, it has slowed down the growth of this technology.

Have your spending habits changed with the slowing economy? Weigh in. Post your thoughts in the Reader Comments section below.

But there are other ways for retailers to enhance the cramped, dingy dressing rooms that have become the standard at many shopping malls and boutiques.

Retailers have started to add more realistic lighting that is closer to daylight and increase the size of the rooms to allow more movement and other people to join shoppers in the process, Dan Butler, vice president of merchandising and retail operations at the National Retail Federation, says.

Upscale retailers especially are starting to make fitting rooms an environment within the store by serving refreshments and providing an attendant in the room to assist customers.

And specialty retailers like the Gap and Banana Republic are revamping how shoppers receive service while in the dressing room by installing call buttons and delivery doors where sales assistants can bring items to shoppers.

"Fitting rooms are a great touch point," Ken Nisch, chairman of JGA says. "It provides an unencumbered way to talk with customers about the brand and engage and interact with them beyond the sales floor. When customers try something on and have a pleasant experience, it increases the likelihood that they will buy the item three or four times."

[In Depth: World's Innovative Dressing Rooms](#)