

# Bored of browsing? Try shopping for dummies

Lucy Holden

Shoppers have grown accustomed to sales assistants asking "Is there anything I can help you with?" They may soon have to get used to interruptions from the mannequins as well. Department stores have started using an app that allows window dummies to text-message shoppers.

Bentalls in Kingston this week became one of the first shops in the world to introduce the technology. It allows the store's mannequins to tell you what they are wearing, how much it costs and where to find it. A busy, tech-obsessed generation can go internet shopping in the shops.

"Talking mannequins" are in keeping with Bentalls's innovative history. When the store opened in 1867, Frank Bentall considered himself a modern man for installing the first "moving staircase".

Iconeme, the retail company behind the app, says that 85 per cent of shoppers use their smart phone to help them browse when they're shopping and that 65 per cent don't want to engage with a shop assistant because they are shy or in a hurry or think they will be too pushy. They made an app that means you don't even have to lift your gaze from your screen to ask a shop assistant what sizes a pair of shoes comes in because the mannequins can tell you.

You download the app and log your age group, gender and dress size, then choose how often you want to be "notified" by your phone, which can be once a day or every time the signal released by the mannequins is picked up by Bluetooth. The signal triggers notifications from the app in the form of text messages. If you felt like you were on the phone a lot before, now you've got shop mannequins jostling for your attention too.

You can see everything the mannequin is wearing, how much it costs, whether there are different colours and sizes and where to find it in the shop. It's incredibly efficient shopping — you know whether it's in your



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, RICHARD POHLE

Lucy Holden tries a new app that tells shoppers what mannequins are wearing, where to find the pieces and how much they cost

price range and if you like it you could be at the till in five minutes. The founders of Iconeme are Jonathan Berlin and Adrian Coe.

At Bentalls both shoppers and shop assistants like the idea. Ann Sheridan is looking at racks of Jaeger clothes. "You often see something in the window and wonder where you can find it — and this could save you a lot of time," she said. "I find it off-putting talking to shop assistants because I like to browse and I know roughly what I want so I can go straight for it."

A shop assistant said: "The other day someone came in and said there was a pink dress with a bit of leopard print on it and you've got no idea which one they mean unless you actually go out there. This would help."

The mannequins at Bentalls are suggesting shoppers pair an £89

French Connection leather jacket with a pair of black skinny jeans and chunky-heeled ankle boots from Dune that cost £149. The boots are waiting for them on the ground floor. It's a bolshy way to shop, marching up to the shop assistant with a picture on your iPhone, but it saves time.

Tommy Aitchison, the "visual merchandise manager" at Bentalls, said it was important to attract people into the shop through "drama and theatricality" because everyone was obsessed with being online. "People want to play with gadgets all the time and this allows them to do that," he said.

For shopaholics, the advantage is that shops are essentially open 24 hours a day. While Bentalls doesn't run transactional services yet, other shops do so that you don't have to be in the shop to make a purchase.

Mr Berlin suggested that the app should come with a warning: "Imagine rolling out of a pub in the evening and on to Oxford Street and being able to talk to the mannequins in the shop windows about a beautiful Stella McCartney dress. We all do things we shouldn't when we're drunk and we like pressing buttons. Potentially we could spend a lot of money."

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