

PARKING – YOUR CUSTOMER’S FIRST AND LAST IMPRESSION

When starting a consultancy project for a retailer, Paco Underhill, consumer behaviour author and CEO of the global consumer behaviour consultancy Envirosell, says his first task is to get the executives into the parking lot. Often it isn’t easy, as the executives don’t see the point of analysing other environments besides the actual store. However, as Underhill stresses, the consumer experience starts at the car park and its entrance is where the store or mall beginsⁱ.

It is easy to understand why car parks can be neglected by developers and retailers. They are often dark and cold places which don’t consider that drivers become pedestrians as soon as they leave their cars. As the parking lot is the first touch point with the consumer, a bad impression can set a negative mood that will continue inside the store.

Think about your trips to a shopping centre. Now, imagine that you are at the car park entrance and you can see it is full and several drivers are in a queue waiting to find a spot. Is that going to affect your mood? Probably yes, and depending on the difficulty of finding a parking space the negative emotions caused by this episode will influence your entire shopping experience.



The academic literature about retail and shopping centres also recognises the importance of parking. Several authors agree that accessibility, which includes the ease of getting in and out of a retail site and the parking facilities, is one of the four main attributes affecting consumers’ perceptions of a retail environment. In shopping centres, easy access can increase patronage and minimise negative psychological outcomes such as stress and frustrationⁱⁱ.

Research conducted in Singapore about the factors affecting consumers’ preference of retail stores demonstrates interesting results about the significance of parking. The survey indicates that the “accessibility” attribute, which included parking, ease of travel and travel duration, was more important in determining the consumers’ preference than the store reputation and its promotional incentivesⁱⁱⁱ.

Consumers' main priorities when it comes to parking at a shopping centre car park are to find a spot that is easy and fast to reach when they arrive, preferably near the entrance that will bring them closest to their first destination inside. Finally, they want a spot that is fast and easy to find at the end of the shopping trip.

When a car park is full all these desires cannot be completely satisfied; nevertheless, it is possible to minimise the pain points by implementing proper wayfinding signage, technology and car park design. The main stages to consider when reviewing the car park experience are:

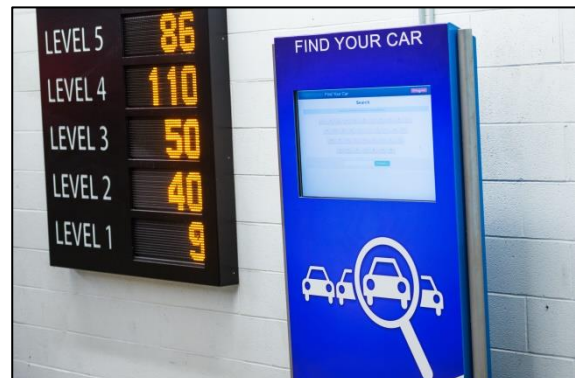
- The arrival and the search for a parking spot.
- The moment when the driver and passengers become pedestrians and go toward their destination.
- The departure.

Entering the car park

Remember the previous example of arriving at a car park entrance? Now, imagine a different scenario where the car park has wayfinding signage showing the number of vacant spaces and guides you to where they are. Or even the possibility that you could reserve your parking space from home. Would these improvements result in a different experience?

Dynamic signage can be applied to enhance user experience, especially in large car parks where the driver can't easily see all the available parking area, as is normally the case in multi-storey car parks or in university campuses.

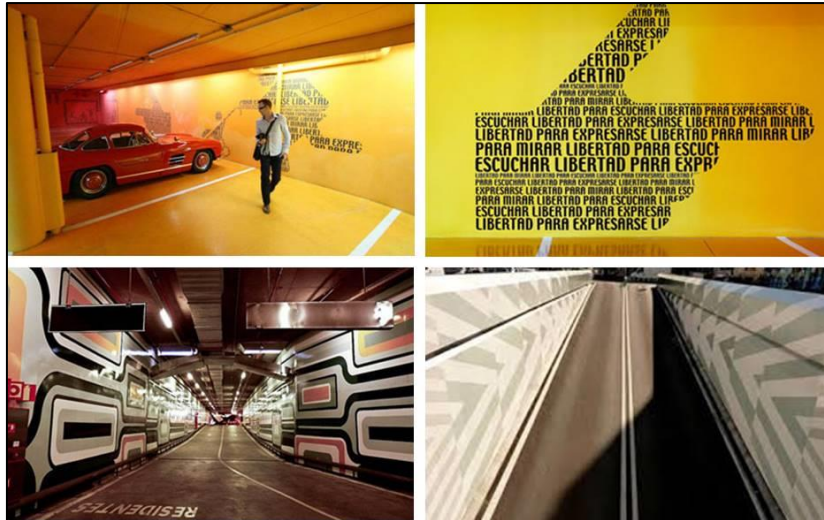
Some car parks such as airports and large event venues can benefit from online reservation tools. In these cases, normally people plan in advance how they are going to get there (car, taxi or public transport) and if driving their private cars, where they are going to park. Therefore, to reserve the spot in advance becomes beneficial.



Dynamic signage

From driver to pedestrian

Differently from parking on the street where the walk from the parking spot to the destination can be pleasant as the walker can window shop, observe other people's behaviour and style, in a car park normally there are no stimuli and nothing interesting to distract the pedestrians and guide them to their destination. There are of course exceptions where car parks are planned for people and not just for cars. Theresa Sapey, known as Madame Parking, designed car parks that aren't commonplace. The architect believes that spaces should be emotional and functional at the same time and her work demonstrates that, as can be seen in the following image. PTC has written about Teresa Sapey in the Wayfinding Forum Blog, read more [here](#) and [here](#).



Hotel Puerta de América and Serrano Car Park by Teresa Sapey

Leaving the car park

When leaving car parks, it is important for customers to easily find their car location. Different colours, letters and numbers on each sector of the car park are the traditional way of helping drivers to remember where they parked. Nowadays, technology can make it easier for users: there are mobile applications that save the GPS location of the car which can be accessed later to find the vehicle. Another possibility is the use of QR Codes which are placed on key spots, such as columns. In this case, the users scan the QR Code closest to their car and they receive the location details by SMS or email.



Finding the car

The focus on consumer experience is vital for future retail success as physical shops now need to compete with the convenience of online stores and shopping centres face a commoditization with all competitors becoming very similar. Entertainment, convenience, targeting to specific markets and having an exclusive store mix can differentiate one mall from the others. Therefore, parking strategies must be focused in enhancing the consumer experience contributing to the overall outcome.

References:

ⁱ Underhill, P., 2004. *The call of the mall*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

ⁱⁱ Anon, 2016. Entertainment-seeking shopping centre patrons: the missing segments: *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*: Vol 31, No 2. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chze Lin Thang, D. and Lin Boon Tan, B., 2003. Linking consumer perception to preference of retail stores: an empirical assessment of the multi-attributes of store image. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 10, pp.193-200.

Image sources: PTC archive, Teresa Sapey Studio, and Daily Mail Australia.

Sydney Office:
Suite 102, 506 Miller Street
Cammerly NSW 2062
Ph: (02) 8920 0800



Melbourne Office:
Suite 4.06, 838 Collins Street
Docklands VIC 3008
Ph: (03) 9020 7333