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Make way for distinctiveness – ICSC RECon wrap-up 2018 - by Diana Perry

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Though ICSC RECon feels like ages ago and our suitcases are now stored, our feet finally healed, it's important to reflect on the show and look for key take-aways. It's clear that our industry is changing and that's not surprising, but what is exciting about this change is that it's making way for more creative concepts/distinctiveness. Many of these new concepts have built a business online and have excelled through the use of social media, studying their customers' behaviors, purchases and even values.

Many retailers can't compete for regular products stocked by Amazon, so having a brand concept that is completely unique, personal, ultra-soft, heavenly delicious, constantly changing, rentable etc...paired with over-the-top e-telligent customer service is an absolute must. I'm officially coining "e-telligent customer service" meaning: Utilizing online customer data and social media to create the most personalized in-store experience. The second RECon keynote (and someone I highly admire) was Jennifer Fleiss of Rent The Runway – a clicks-to-bricks retailer that rents out designer clothing and accessories and is the epitome of e-telligent. When a customer arrives at the store, the dressing room is already pre-populated with fabulous garb in the colors, shapes, sizes and designers of that customer's preferences without the customer ever having to lift a finger that day. The brand already knows the customer including the event date in which she needs the items so clothing is pulled accordingly based on how many days she'll need to rent. The more dense our cities become and housing prices increase, the more of a need for renting is clear, even if it's just to cut down on overflowing minuscule closets. These factors paired with exceptional personalized customer service is a no brainer.

The shared/rentable retail experience was a hot topic at the show which also led into community-based retailing growing concepts that bring people together. In just New England alone we've seen the rise of micro-breweries and tasting rooms (like Trillium, Night Shift & Hopsters), open farmers markets (like Boston Public Market, SoWa & Charlestown Farmers Market), independent bookstores with local author events (like Wellesley Books, R.J. Julia Booksellers and An Unlikely Story Bookstore & Café), and local restaurants (like Juliet in Somerville, Café Luna expansion in Cambridge and Wildflour expansion in Pawtucket). I believe that especially Millennials and Gen Z

are going to wholly embrace the local concepts as their trust for big brands continues to fade. With social media, the local brands also have a one-up due to the hyper-local location tagging.

These generations are furthermore connecting with brands in which their “beliefs and lifestyle align with their own,” as Michael Brown of A.T Kearney mentioned in his Tuesday session. We’ve seen retailers like Everlane (now in San Francisco and NYC), Roma Boots, Zambrero Mexican, The Outrage, Love Your Melon and many others appearing and rising to the top of the charts because people are emotionally connecting to their pricing transparency, nonprofit outreach and community partnerships.

Clearly by now, we know that experience retail is here to stay; it was partly a broken record at the show, but now it’s time to drill down and get to know these retailers and restaurants better and learn more about their distinctiveness and how they are utilizing social media for a prized customer experience.

See you soon at the Boston ICSC New England Conference & Deal Making show at the Hynes coming up on July 16th-18th with special session, Into the Mindset of Millennials on the 17th at 1:45 p.m. where we’ll be digging in even more on distinctiveness and experiential retail.

Fun Fact: Many e-tailers always wanted brick and mortar space when they originally started online including Warby Parker.

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