



## The Pub Bore

### Let Me Tell You a Thing or Two About the Psychology of Shopping

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The thing about M&S is that they specialised early on. Not like Woolworths, like I was saying. No, M&S have a selection, but it's not some bloody impossible rainbow of everything. They mine a narrow shaft of that rainbow, if you see what I mean. When old Marks and Sparks set up on their barrow they didn't have one of everything in the world. They had maybe a handful of underwear and probably some shirts and ladies shirts. Blouses. They had underwear and blouses and shirts and socks, which everyone would have known and then it'd be plain as Jane where to go when you wanted a bra or whatever. They didn't even have food until the seventies, with the sandwiches. They were the first to do sandwiches ready made, which seems mad nowadays because you can get a sandwich in Boots or in a petrol station now. In fact I'd say you can get a sandwich in too many places And places that don't know the first thing about sandwiches. Don't put them in the fridge for starters. Don't put them in the fridge so that the lettuce goes all floppy and cold on the teeth and the bread dries out except for where it's touching tomato, where it goes soggy, and the tomato, meanwhile, has gone all grainy from being in the fridge, but it's also all gone slippery with the mayonnaise, so you've got these two grainy, slippery, dry, cold, floppy triangles that they palm off as a sandwich. I mean, there's a whole list of foods you shouldn't put in the fridge: fresh tomatoes; open tins of tomatoes, but that's another story. Because it's the sandwiches and all the other food that came out of that that ruined M&S, that confused their attention, if you like. Now you've got this shop with two bits to it: the blouses and bras and stuff, and the food, which is really nice food, sure, like party food and for picnics and that, but it is confusing. I've never gone out shopping thinking, oh I need some socks and some pre-cut pineapple and a cake in the shape of whatever. But like I say, at least it's a controlled sort of mix of things they're going for. It's not the out-and-out chaos of your average high street, which seems to be a case of whatever can cling on for a couple of years can be there, no thought for what people actually want on a daily basis. Because the council is totally out of touch with what people really want. Never mind what they need. Those council apparatchiks living in their show homes out towards the bypass. Their show homes that come with driveways and kitchen utensils to match the door-knobs and wotnot, and they have no clue what it's like out there in the high street. They go straight to M&S. Or bloody worse. They go straight to John Lewis click and bloody don't even collect if you please, just stay at home and a man can bring it in a van, if you don't mind. Pfff. You wouldn't ask a dog to design a cup, so don't ask a councillor to design a high street. You hear what I'm saying? Take East Street. Now there's a proper

car crash. Meat and hair is what you got a lot of. There's the kebab shop and the burger bar and Greggs, of course; then there's the barbers and two ladies' hairdressers and the Turkish barbers too, though I never go in there – they only do one hair cut as far as I can tell. Yes, meat and hair. That's East Street. Any other sort of shop just sort of passes through. I tell you what it's like: it's like watching evolution. The wet fish shop became the fridge-freezer shop; the fridge-freezer shop became a wine bar; the wine bar became a place that sold pink hair things for girls – no idea what that was. Never went in, of course, but you'd see girls go in and girls come out with glitter all over them. Then the glitter shop became Cash Converters. But yeah, I've seen all the fads evolve. Apart from Webbs. Webbs – there was a shop. Old Webby was a canny bastard. You see, old Webby, he knew what he was about. And he knew what the shop was about. He knew his customers and his customers knew him and everyone knew he knew what it was all about. What it wasn't all about was click and collect, I can tell you that. It was about old-school face to face. I knew old Webby well. For decades, from when I was knee-high. He knew me too of course, and saw how I was getting to know what was going on. He saw me grow up and at some point overtake everyone else in a certain way. I always had nous, you know. I have this knack of knowing how to run something properly, even if I haven't run anything like it before. Take, like, say, a swimming pool or a hardware shop – I could tell you all sorts of things you hadn't thought of. Like how to police the lanes or whatever, or how to organise the stock so as to make it go out the door quicker. Webby could see I had this sort of imagination. A very practical imagination. So he was always talking to me about his shop, asking my opinion and that. He'd ask me what I thought about them getting in such and such a range or changing the colour of this and that and I'd give him the benefit and he'd nod and take it on board. He said I had a great appreciation of attention to detail, which he was very appreciative of and attentive to actually. And I think it was that that separated Webbs from the rest, from all the other shops on East Street, which were constantly struggling and going under and being replaced and starting up and struggling and going under again. I felt bad watching them all go like that, but I couldn't help them all in the way I was helping Webby. There's only so many hours in the day. You know what I'm saying? So old Webby was dead grateful, always thanking me and giving me little gifts of packets of cup hooks and dustpans and that. This was donkeys years ago now, and they'd call it something else these days, but to me it was payment in kind, I like to think, for all the good advice I gave him. I used to tell him to do this and that, and explained the details about why you don't have the tubs with the nuts and bolts next to the door alongside some cardboard cut-out advert for weed killer. It was hilarious how even old Webby, who was the only one doing all that well in East Street, how he didn't realise that even though people can tell the difference between a nut and bolt and some weed killer it didn't give the right impression of the shop putting them together like that. It sort of leaves it all up to the customer to work out what bits of the shop are what, because you have to look round the whole place to track anything down. I mean sure, you can ask Webby himself, but some people don't want to have to ask, even if that's how you like your shop run. We're not in black and white times any more, and Webby isn't old Arkwright, if you get my drift. You can't be the only person to know where everything is kept. You can't have it all in brown boxes behind the counter like some weird new place where it's

all plain and impossible to know what's what. You can't exclude shy customers can you? Or anyone who doesn't happen to be able to guess what this or that plain brown box is. If they've the money to pay for the stuff they want then you've got to welcome them in. It's that welcome that's important. You want them to come in and think oh yes, it looks like such and such will be over there, instead of them standing in the doorway like they're on the edge of a cliff. That'd block the doorway up for starters. Your rookie error numero uno. You want to get people flowing through the shop, flowing in the direction they think they need to go, but past things they didn't realise they wanted. That's the psychology of shopping, which is what I was teaching old Webby about, and which is why Webbs was around for as long as it was, which was decades. Because the thing about psychology is that it's in everything, even the little things you don't think about. Like I was saying about getting customers to flow through the shop. I mean, that's a basic bit of psychology right there, but even before that you've got the opening of the door itself. It'll sound mad to you, but there's a psychology in the opening of a door. Honestly, no word of a lie. I'd explain to old Webby the details of why the bell on the door was putting people off and how if you got a smaller one, say, a smaller one that wasn't so aggressive and clanging you could still know when someone was coming in. Even a small bell is loud enough. You've only got to hear it, I used to tell him. You don't need to be able to *feel* it. The whole point of a bell, I used to tell him, is that when it rings it's got a lot of high frequencies that can move across a distance. And that holds for all bells under a certain size, not just the medium ones. The small ones too. And you can still hear a smaller one while you're out the back, but it won't deafen the poor bastard opening the door. If you really need a hinge or something, a bloody great clanging bell might not stop you going into the shop for definite, but all I'm saying is it might make you look forward to going in less. You might have what they call a Pavlovian response, where you think of Webbs and feel like an unpleasant, loud clanging. That can't be good for a business. And that's psychology right there, even if it's hard to pin down exactly the knock-on effects, because people don't even realise they're not going into the shop because of the bell, because all this happens in the subliminal. And it's not just sound either. Colour has a whole other psychology to think about. You know, like I was saying about all that plain brown boxes being a real turn-off for your common-or-garden shopper. You can use colour to tell people what to think about something, whether to be excited or reassured, by which I mean colour isn't just decoration, it's an idea as well. And I for one don't know what brown is telling me. It's what they call a neutral colour. It doesn't have an idea in it, so I, as a shopper, don't know what to do with it. These places with their brown boxes and packaging, they're trying to be extra-specially clever, double-bluffing us with their psychology, like they're too clever to even use colours. Really bloody annoys me, actually. Just use the bloody colours like everybody else and then I can decide if I want to buy your shit or not. Really bloody annoys me. So anyway, old Webby'd listen to all this, and take it on board and you could see he'd taken it on board because I'd come back in and the bell on the door was smaller and the nuts and bolts were over by the tape measures and the counter top was changed to a blue one, which means reliability. Did you know that? Blue means reliability? Well you wouldn't I suppose, not in the way that you'd know you know it, but your conscience would know it. Of course, I told him that by the tape measures still wasn't

the right place for the nuts and bolts, but you have to admit it was better than it was. And we came to the gentleman's agreement that sometimes, even if you're a perfectionist, even if it's in your nature to pay attention and to be able to work out the best way of doing things, sometimes, just sometimes, a setup just doesn't allow for it, but in those cases you can at least make the best of it, given the circumstances. There's a sliding scale, you see: if you can't have something perfect, it doesn't mean you have to have it really terrible. It's not feast or famine. There's normal meals in between, right? You don't have it completely perfect or totally bloody rubbish. Sometimes things are just ok. By which I mean middling. And Webby understood that I was very natural with this way of thinking, so he'd listen and nod and take it in and what have you. And so, when you pay attention to detail, when you really understand the psychology of a situation, you are going to survive for longer. But longer is longer though. It's not forever. D'you see what I'm saying? However much care and attention and focused branding you put in and good advice you take on, a shop can't keep going forever because that's the law of nature. Something bigger will always get you. With Webby's it wasn't Wilko's in the shopping centre. No one went there. I don't know how that's still hanging on there. Too big to fail, I suppose. But you could tell Wilko's were desperate when they started putting those funny slogans on the packaging. What was it? Things like, funny things, you know, like it would say 'dish the dirt' on a dishcloths label. I mean, yeah, that's really funny, but what business is it of a hardware shop being funny? It's like they want to be a hardware shop and entertainment, which is really ill advised because washing dishes is never going to be funny so like don't pretend that it is because that's the one thing we all know is not ever going to be funny. Going to Wilko's is not a fun day out. It's just one of those things you have to do sometimes, like the washing up. But no, it wasn't Wilko's that did for Webby. It was those bloody pound shops, but don't get me started on that! Right, fancy another?

—— as spoken to Sally O'Reilly

