What Is Experiential Retail?
To entice shoppers into stores, retailers are finding ways to engage customers beyond just offering them products. Experiential retail concepts shape the creation of branded experiences that appeal to consumers. The act of physically entering the shopping space is filled with a sense of discovery and shareable moments that:

- Forge emotional connections
- Stimulate the senses
- Support brand promises in an authentic manner
- Motivate visitors to return

Successful implementation of experiential retail concepts works in tandem with online stores to build brand equity. Shoppers who have positive experiences at campus stores are more likely to engage with the corresponding e-commerce sites to purchase products and services.

Technology has forever changed the way people shop. With just a few clicks, swipes or voice commands, almost any item that consumers want is available from online outlets. Campus stores are well aware of the competition from e-commerce sites, which attract students, alumni and fans with promises of low prices and convenient delivery.

Yet brick-and-mortar campus stores still have an advantage. Physical retailers can create shared experiences that engage customers by appealing to their emotions and senses. The goal of the concept — known as “experiential retail” — is to inspire people to interact with the stores’ brands in ways that are not possible online.

Authenticity is key. Consumers seek experiences that ring true to what they understand about the retailers while at the same time offering something that is personally of value to them.

Campus stores that appreciate what is important to the communities where their institutions serve are in the best position to offer a compelling and tailored mix of products, services and events that can generate ongoing foot traffic — and ultimately sales.

The goal is to elevate the status of campus stores to destinations that people want to visit on a regular basis, not just at the beginning of a semester.

WHAT’S INSIDE:

- How to create meaningful retail experiences
- Ideas to generate demand all year long

The New Campus Store
Putting Experiential Retail Concepts to Work on Campus
Expanding Opportunities for Campus Prominence

The role of campus stores has evolved into dynamic hubs for their institutions. The stores are natural points for people to visit to immerse themselves in the schools’ brands and strengthen the connections they feel to campuses or institutions, whether they are students, fans, alumni, faculty, staff, community members or prospective students.

Embracing experiential retail concepts enables campus stores to elevate the value that shoppers associate with intentionally visiting the brick-and-mortar outlets, even if similar merchandise is available online.

The challenge for campus stores is to understand how to implement the various elements that go into creating authentic retail experiences. The effort needs to be based on a coordinated strategy, which reflects and supports the schools’ brand values, mission and campus culture, not just a series of marketing tactics.

Personalizing the Planning Process

Successful campus stores constantly take the pulse of what is trending in retail to understand how to best meet the needs of their customers. At the macro level, they monitor what is driving foot traffic for successful brands that are able to grow retail sales — even as the popularity of online shopping grows — and translate those strategies for implementation in campus stores.

While retail trends are applicable across the board, every campus store serves a specialized market. To ensure that specific needs and interests are met, it is important to survey the campus community to inform the planning process for a campus store reimagination.

The campus store can be so much more than simply a place to purchase textbooks and merchandise. Because the physical space is an important part of the campus, it can be customized with amenities, services and gathering areas that cater to the campus community. Uncovering what the people who visit the campus store want is the first step in creating the unique experiences that appeal to their emotions and senses, which will bring them through the door again and again.

Combining in-demand food and beverage choices with comfortable seating options creates an inviting space for students, faculty and visitors to relax and recharge.
Creating Meaningful Experiences

After figuring out what the school community wants from the campus store, the surest way to get shoppers to put down their devices is to use that information to create engaging, targeted experiences. One study found that 76 percent of consumers are more likely to consider purchasing from a brand that personalizes and that personalization can increase revenue by 5 to 20%.

Then campus stores should consider opportunities to offer interactive, engaging experiences in the following areas:

School brand
Students, faculty and visitors expect the campus store to look and feel like it is part of the school. Infusing the school’s brand with graphics packages, flooring patterns, lighting, custom paint colors that match the institution’s brand colors, three-dimensional signage and brand-inspired artwork establishes an immediate connection that patrons can see. The campus store is communicating that it is a significant contributor to the educational and social journey that the institution embodies.

Many campus stores choose to honor campus architectural elements by integrating them into store design choices, whether sleek and modern or historic and stately. Others choose to highlight athletic or academic themes. Visitors should recognize that the school’s culture and brand are celebrated throughout the campus store.

For example, a section that features books authored by faculty emphasizes the academic focus of the institution. Or a larger-than-life sculpture of a popular coach or mascot may greet visitors at the store entrance to honor the athletic success of the institution. These types of visual references create connections for visitors that can inspire school pride, fuel memories and promote merchandise categories.

The draw of specific experiential retail elements generates excitement for campus stores. When the brand is front and center, students, alumni and visitors make the campus store a destination for social media moments on game days, during campus visits and for special events because they want others to see and share what they are experiencing.

Creating Meaningful Experiences (cont.)

**Services and amenities**
The campus store can offer elevated services and amenities that meet the specific needs of its visitors in ways that support the academic journey of students, provide social connections and strengthen relationships between an institution and the surrounding community.

Many campus stores offer:

- **Local or nationally branded coffee shops** featuring hyperlocalized experiences or that fill the need for additional food and beverage services. The combination of fast-casual service options and open seating provides additional gathering opportunities for students and faculty to meet and collaborate. Expanded options are especially successful when the spaces offer experiences that are inviting and buzzworthy.

- **Full-service technology centers**, which sell and repair Apple and other in-demand, high-tech products, are popular. This experience often includes opportunities to try new products and learn more about emerging technology while offering an array of much-needed branded tech accessories.

- **Charging stations meet the never-ending need to power devices**. They are positioned along windows and ledges for use by individuals and in common areas with community tables where students collaborate.

- **Soft-seating areas can be an oasis for breaks** between classes and provide a change of environment to relax, boost energy levels, spark innovative ideas or facilitate social meetups.

- **Online order pickup capabilities** that merge the omnichannel online/in-store experience, further catering to the ever-changing preferences of today’s campus shoppers by bringing the shopper back into the store.

Provide customers access to charging stations for their mobile devices, so they can explore the campus store while boosting their batteries.
Gathering areas
Space to study or meet and collaborate can be hard to find on many campuses. Campus stores that offer enclosed reading rooms, collaborative study areas and group meeting rooms become a destination for students and faculty. In addition to providing a valuable service, students have access to supplies for projects as well as snack and drinks to fuel creativity or boost stamina.

Faculty members also need spaces to meet outside of their departments. Flexible meetings spaces, which can be reconfigured for small or large groups, are useful for this purpose. An online reservation system to reserve the spaces makes it easy for faculty to incorporate the campus store into their daily routines.

Campus stores can take advantage of the need for meeting space by creating multipurpose areas that expand and contract to fit the various needs of the campus community.

Special events
An ongoing schedule of themed events draws members of the schools’ communities and surrounding areas to the campus stores. Research on students’ interests, campus clubs and regional trends helps campus stores pinpoint events that are meaningful to their audiences. Events can encompass a wide range of interest areas and demographics, including author visits, faculty readings, new book releases, fandom events, story time for children, interactive demonstrations, local vendor days and community-based charity drives.

Recent popular examples include “May the 4th — Star Wars Day,” Marvel Comics Day to coincide with the release of blockbuster movies and the much-hyped release of a new graphic novel.

The overarching goal is to create fun, meaningful events that engage groups of like-minded people with experiences that enable them to connect with each other and the campus stores.

Go All Out for Game Days
For schools with a heavy focus on athletics, game days are opportunities to shine for campus stores. Experiential retail concepts can add to the excitement of the game day by creating experiences that enable fans to cheer, celebrate and get caught up in the fanfare.

• Incorporate a sideline brand shop that showcases team merchandise
• Book events before the game that fans want to be part of, such as meeting a beloved former star athlete or a contest to win a tailgating kit
• Feature a good luck spot for fans to visit and promote on social media before heading to the game
• Provide an opportunity to show team pride by cross-merchandising accessories with apparel that complete fans’ game day looks
• Hit the sidewalk or walkway in front of the store with merchandise and signage about what’s featured inside
Flexibility to Generate Year-Round Demand

Campus stores live and breathe according to the schools’ calendars. The appeal of the campus stores should be tied to the anticipation of finding out what’s new and the desire to be part of what’s happening. Campus stores become must-visit destinations that offer experiences tied to what’s going on in the lives of students (current and prospective), parents, faculty and fans.

- Welcome students back to campus with streamlined book sales at the beginning of the semester
- Set up a sample dorm display on move-in days featuring logoed merchandise such as blankets, throw pillows, portable chairs, artwork and hampers
- Create a special fan gear kiosk for the Homecoming game
- Coordinate a special event for Family Weekend that appeals to parents and students
- Offer a customization service to create gear for clubs, intramural teams and departments
- Spotlight seasonal merchandise for holidays
- Host cross-department faculty meetings
- Book meeting spaces for student groups
- Merchandise Greek gear for fraternities and sororities during key weeks
- Promote access to quiet spaces to study for finals
- Highlight graduation items at the end of the semester
- Be a featured spot for prospective student visits with backdrops that visitors want to show off in social media posts
- Erect a pop-up kiosk to redeem promotional coupons for incoming students participating in orientation sessions

Experiences of a Lifetime

The popularity of online shopping is here to stay. To maintain relevance in the changing retail landscape, campus stores must adapt. Embracing experiential retail concepts enables campus stores to elevate their roles at the institutions they serve and strengthen their revenue streams.

The first step is to understand what is important to students, faculty, alumni, prospective students and area residents and what the school's brand represents. Then campus stores can incorporate that learning into determining what services and merchandise to offer, how the school's brand is integrated in their physical space and the excitement that will be generated throughout the year with events and promotions, which connect with their customers’ emotions and senses.

The result is a campus store that is more than a place to shop. It becomes a destination, which promises to deliver personalized experiences that strengthen customers’ sense of connection to the institution, now and for the future.
How Follett Can Help

Follett is a leader in taking campus stores to the next level. We immerse ourselves in the culture of every campus where we partner to understand what makes the institution and community unique. We develop long-term relationships with campus stores to help guide the development and implementation of experiential retail concepts that reach shoppers at an emotional level to tap feelings of pride, excitement and nostalgia for the institution. Every campus store is supported by customized options and systems to meet the specific needs of its retail environment.

RESEARCH FOCUSED
Follett surveys the campus community to understand local preferences. Careful analysis is conducted to determine implementation guidelines that best support the school’s brand. Extensive background research in generational buying trends and general and collegiate retail trends is incorporated into the planning process.

CREATIVE VISION
Follett employs a collaborative team approach to campus store design with input from visual merchandisers, store designers and product merchandisers to create experiential spaces in the stores.

WHITE-LABEL APPROACH
The school’s academic and/or athletic themes are integrated into the store design and experiential elements. Follett does extensive brand and institution research to guide the development of the entire space. Campus mission statements, mascots, fight songs, famous faculty and alumni, mottos and school history can all be incorporated to create a customized, meaningful experience.

EXPANDED PRODUCT PORTFOLIO
In addition to textbooks and general merchandise, what other items are in demand? Depending on where the school is located, convenience and technology products, local goods and specialized services are added, which are useful for the campus and community population.

IMPLEMENTATION SERVICES
An expert Follett store design group works closely with school officials to make sure that all the experiential, technical, design and implementation aspects of the campus store rollout are well managed.

To see experiential retail concepts in action, visit Follett’s Lookbook at https://www.follett.com/lookbook/
Our purpose is to “Improve the World by Inspiring Learning and Shaping Education.” For over 150 years, we have been doing just that by bringing together affordable educational content, products and technologies to prepare learners and educators, term after term. Follett manages all formats of affordability programs at more than 1,100 campuses in North America, resulting in lower costs and better access to learning materials. We are proud to serve as a trusted partner that fosters higher student success rates and influences positive outcomes.