

Shop for success

Retail expert Mary Portas, whose new series is returning to BBC TV, shares her secrets for achieving the ultimate shopping experience

✦ Can you judge a shop by its window?

Yes, window displays are very revealing – they should seduce you. The ideal shopping experience should be as pleasurable as possible, and if the windows don't entice you in, don't bother crossing the threshold.

✦ How can customers get good service?

We've fallen out of our love affair with fast, fast fashion, based on buying as quickly and cheaply as you can in stores like Primark. Instead, we're demanding more service and knowledge from sales assistants. The growth of the Internet means that shopping needs to be a truly social, interactive activity in order to compete with all the information we have at our fingertips. Department stores such as John Lewis, Selfridges, Harvey Nichols and Harrods have really cottoned on to this need. We're also starting to buy less, relying more on quality. If you don't get good service, don't hand over your money. To get it, ask questions and be ethical in your shopping.

✦ Best shopping strategy?

Know what you need. Plan in advance and focus on what you want. If you're after a particular item of clothing, and you find something you love, then buy it – but if you are not sure, look elsewhere. If you still want it at the end of the day, buy it then. Don't buy on impulse. I have too many impulse purchases sitting in my wardrobe and it's all landfill. Only buy something you weren't intending to because it's fabulous and you were seduced and served well. Avoid shopping on a Saturday if possible because it's a bunfight. Shops tend to get new deliveries on Tuesdays or Thursdays so try to go mid-week.

✦ When is it okay to ask for a discount?

Always, as long as it's reasonable. In smaller, privately owned boutiques, avoid asking for a discount for the sake of it, because a price is a price, and shop owners can get upset. But if the item's damaged, of course ask. In larger stores, only the manager can authorise a discount, so ask to speak to him or her.

✦ How should I handle snooty assistants?

Don't shop there. Vote with your feet and don't show them your money. I'm sick of bad service. It's so rare that you'll find an item so fabulous that you won't find it elsewhere, so tell them to stick it and walk out. If you get the snooty treatment in a privately owned shop, find out who the owner is and complain. In bigger stores, call up head office and post your complaint to the right person. What have you got to lose?

✦ How can I spot bargains in the sales?

To get the best bargains, visit stores you don't normally shop in, in different towns, to find cut-price, hidden treasures. For example, I've found some great bargains on Jil Sander pieces in Harvey Nichols in Leeds, because the ladies who shop there tend to favour other designers, such as Roberto Cavalli.

✦ What are your favourite local shops?

I love the fashion boutique, Matches, on Ledbury Road in West London for its designer clothes. For groceries, I go to the brilliant Lebanese, family-run deli, Amoul, in Maida Vale, which has heavenly fresh bread. For jewellery, I love Portobello Market, and Pippa Small in Westbourne Grove.

✦ What shops do you love?

John Lewis: the staff have great knowledge and offer great service. For the same reasons, I think Waitrose is the best food shop. I used to do my Christmas food shopping in stores like Sainsbury's but they always ran out of a staple product. In Waitrose, that doesn't happen. Other personal favourites are Selfridges, where you'll always find what you're after, be it shoes or a suit. I also love Liberty because it touches all the senses.

✦ For serious shopping do you prefer to go alone or with a friend?

With a friend. Shopping is a social pastime and should be an uplifting experience. If it's a friend you trust, you'll also get an honest opinion, which is important. It's no good shopping with a friend who says, "You look fantastic", when you don't. Of course, with a friend, you'll be very likely to end up spending more.

✦ Who inspires you most in retail?

Urban Outfitters is a very clever business, placing their twenty-something customers at the heart. You want to hang out there, thanks to its music, the décor, gifts and fashion. Similarly, the new Banana Republic that's just opened on Regent Street knows its market. That's the key to successful retailing. **w&h**

✦ The new series of *Mary Queen of Shops* airs on BBC2 this month

