

Monsoon, Oxford Street

This flagship store's refurbishment and Summer of Love-style product is set off perfectly by an early burst of hot weather, wooing central London shoppers

OUR EXPERT



John Ryan
Group stores editor
With a background in fashion buying, including a 10-year stint at C&A in the UK and Germany, John Ryan writes about visual merchandising, store design and the business of launching new shops. As a journalist, he has covered the sector for more than a decade

A recent unseasonably hot and sunny day on Oxford Street meant that almost everybody seemed to be in a cheerful mood. It was one of those rare central London moments when the stinking heat that can affect the capital in high summer was being experienced for more or less the first time this year – and shoppers were lapping it up.

It was near-perfect weather for those retailers with sun dresses in stock and one of the more eye-catching collections seemed to be in the recently revamped Monsoon store, which proved to be something of a magnet for those wandering past its threshold.

Monsoon still has a mild sense of the 1970s hippy about it and, allowing for the prevailing winds of fashion this year, this looks bang on. Equally, whoever was responsible for the range seems to have predicted with almost uncanny accuracy what would be in demand, and when. Couple this with a refreshed store (including a new logo) that has the feel of a bazaar – in the best sense – and you have a format that looks set to find favour as the days draw out and we all begin to swelter. This may be a relatively small store, but it is a flagship nonetheless. And with its younger sister, Accessorize, also unveiling a good-looking new store on Oxford Street recently (*Drapers*, February 25), the company's store design department must have been working overtime.

Key looks and merchandise mix

The printed Indian summer dress is more or less synonymous with the (first) Summer of Love and, as you step through the door of this Monsoon

branch, there is a feeling that you have somehow stepped back in time. The price of entry to this time warp? It seems to be about £40, which will secure you not a dress but a floaty, diaphanous printed top. Shorts and plain tops are also dotted around the store – these pick up on the background colours of many of the printed styles – but the overriding reason for visiting has to be the dresses, both plain and printed.

These are almost everywhere you look and range from knee-length numbers in summer brights to full-length printed floral maxis. In the latter case, the world is more or less the shopper's oyster with ditsy florals predominating, but bolder, larger floral prints are also on offer positioned towards the front of the shop.

While the majority of what is in store might readily be termed 'mid-market', head upstairs and there is a party area as well as a bridal section where prices



take a distinct hike. At the very top end, a heavily embroidered long white dress with several layers is on sale at £225; selections from the range of party dresses are priced at £200.

If dresses aren't your thing, Monsoon may not be the place for you at the moment – but when the collection is this strong, shoppers will probably be tempted in spite of themselves.

Score 8/10

Visual merchandising

The thing about having a lot of floral dresses in a shop is that if there isn't some pretty nifty segmentation of the offer, then the whole can end up being a little confusing. There are two floors in this Monsoon branch and the ranges have been zoned by the simple, yet effective, expedient of graphics around the perimeter on both levels. You know exactly where you are, for instance, when you stand in front of some neo-hippy stock next to which a sign announces '70s', or when some long and shiny numbers are displayed beside a graphic stating 'party'.

There would be nothing terribly clever about this if each of the areas had



Sum of its parts: the interior blends merchandise and props to perfection. Monsoon has also unveiled a new logo (above left)

not been given added vim with the clever use of props. The front of the shop is a good example: here a panel featuring large-print floral dresses is broken up by teapots and teacups that are similarly patterned. It's all about creating interest and areas of differentiation around the shop – this has been managed adroitly.

Score 8/10

Service

There are shoppers aplenty inspecting the offers on the morning of visiting, despite the fact it was still early. The greeter at the front of the store was friendly and welcoming and sprang into action as soon as she was asked where anything was. Further into the branch, the many customers were having their needs attended to by staff, who seemed almost similar in number.

The merchandising in this store is pretty tight in the mid-shop and, as such, it would be easy for staff to be in the way. They were not, however – appearing, almost by magic, only when service was required. This really was service as it should be.

Score 8/10

Essentials

Location 264 Oxford Street, London W1C

Number of floors Two

Ambience Romantic hippy

Standout feature The product

Reason for visiting One of the best combinations of interior and merchandise on Oxford Street

Store appeal

When it comes to the store's fascia, with its ample use of dark wood and the word 'Monsoon' picked out in cream, there really is nothing objectionable. In spite of the weather, it is not yet summer; the windows reflect this, feeling spring-like.

Stepping through the door, the first thing visitors might notice would be the pendant lights, whose shades appear to have been created from filigree lace. On two levels, with the first floor a mezzanine that is accessed by a staircase at either end, Monsoon has worked hard at creating a 'romantic' feel for this interior. With hazy June days just around the corner, this felt like one of the more seasonal shops on the street.

Of course, there is the matter of making money, and the cash desks, situated on the right-hand perimeter wall on both floors, have been painted a tasteful shade of magnolia. This works well with the wooden and cream terrazzo-tiled floors. All in all, this is an appealing store that is in tune with its 30-something market (or so it appeared, given the shoppers filling the interior).

Score 8/10

Would I buy?

Yes. It's that simple really. This is a store interior that chimes perfectly with its target market and where the ranges seem to meld with the environment that has been created. The assumption must be made that the store designers have worked alongside the buyers in order to create an integrated whole, which should mean the next step will be a purchase.

Score 8/10

Verdict

The refurbishment of this Monsoon store on Oxford Street has to be deemed a major success for the retailer. Not only does it house a collection that captures the zeitgeist, but there is sufficient flexibility in the store design to ensure the look can be rolled out more generally across the whole chain, which is what Monsoon intends to do. ●

To see more pictures of the Monsoon store, go to www.drapersonline.com/news/shopwatch

40/50