

The tricks stores use to make you spend more

Jane Fryer reveals the insidious tricks stores use to part you from your money.

This is the most alarming shopping spree I've ever been on. Not because I'm haemorrhaging money on all sorts of rubbish I don't need — so far I haven't spent a penny.

Or because nothing fits — I'm yet to make it to a changing room. Or even because Westfield shopping centre in West London is full of the sort of shops I could happily go mad in with my credit card.

But because my companion is a very beady man called Professor Alan Penn who, as we march past H&M and Dior and House of Fraser with wallets firmly in our pockets, is systematically unmasking every trick in the book used by retailers to part us from our hard-earned cash.

Trick one: Smell

'Nothing is ever left to chance,' he says, as we stare at the shop-front of House of Fraser. 'Colour, music, flooring, placement, pricing — they've thought of everything — even the smell.' The smell? 'Of course! Smell is vital.'

It's also fantastically evocative and because it can't be filtered out by the brain it's terribly powerful.



Hot idea: Ikea kitchen display may smell of sausages

'So if you go to Ikea, they pump the smell of cooking sausages into their kitchen display areas to make them more appealing.'

'Supermarkets waft fresh bread smells about all day to stir up hunger pangs and fill trolleys. And in Harrods every location has a different, very carefully chosen, fragrance to enhance sales.'

Even travel agents are at it. Thomson Holidays apparently uses coconut oil to sell Caribbean breaks and orange grove aromas to evoke the Med.

Trick two: Carpet and floor tiles

'It's all about texture,' he says as he strides into M&S. 'So a hard, smooth surface draws you into and through the shop, while carpeting and rugs to either side immediately slow you down to have a browse. Look to your right — no one on the carpet's going anywhere.'

He's right — they're at a standstill, browsing silk blouses and shawls as if they're on holiday. Department stores constantly change floor texture to steer and hold customers where they want them — invariably in areas displaying the costliest products.

The manipulation goes further in some places. Some supermarkets even vary the size of their floor tiles, with smaller tiles in areas with more expensive goods with the idea that, as you roll your trolley along and the clickety-click-click sound of the tiles becomes quicker, you instinctively slow down and, hopefully, look at the merchandise.

Trick three: The zig-zag maze Of course we all know of the nightmare that is Ikea — that phenomenally successful shopping hell where you're trapped in a one-way trail that zig-zags through the shop, hides every short-cut and exit along the way and is cleverly designed to bewilder shoppers and maximise impulse buys of cheap candles and casseroles.



A few days ago, he exposed in the media many of such tricks that Ikea uses to keep shoppers in. But it's rather unsettling to discover from him that we're guided and tricked and manipulated in pretty much every other shop, too.

Trick four: Music manipulation

Certainly, shopping with Professor Penn — an architect who specialises in designing shopping spaces and is director of the Virtual Reality Centre For The Built Environment at University College, London — is beginning to leave a queasy taste in my mouth. Because nothing is quite as it seems.

Researchers at Leicester University even discovered that when supermarkets play French music, sales of French wines rise. When they pipe German folk music, shoppers opted for German wines. Even the positioning of goods within shops has less to do with design and all to do with profit.

Trick five: Positioning

'In department stores they put all the high-profit stuff at the front, right where you walk in — perfume, make-up, costume jewellery,' says Professor Penn.

'The profit mark-up on costume jewellery and perfume is phenomenal — they make over 1,000% on perfume — after all, it's just coloured water, isn't it?'

What about big items such as sofas and garden furniture? 'Right at the top of the shop, because it's big and bulky and the profit margin is only about 200%.' Blimey.

A quick pop round Waitrose is even more enlightening. Every teeny detail has been thought through by a crack team of market researchers, accountants, architects, you name it.

Aisles of plenty: Waitrose store layout is key



Which means that the fruit, vegetables and fresh flowers are all near the entrance. 'It's supposed to make women feel healthy and wholesome — so if they buy enough of this stuff, then they won't feel guilty about buying mountains of crisps and biscuits later, which of course is what their kids will actually eat.'

Supermarkets are awash with tricks to get us to spend more — giant trollies that beg to be filled. Three-for-two offers that lumber us with dozens of loo rolls. 'Destination goods' such as milk and eggs hidden right at the back. And the deeper we go into the shop, the bigger the surprises.

It turns out that the gorgeous fresh-looking blood-red meat in the meat counter isn't nearly as red and bloody as it looks. It's just lit with red-tinted lights. Even the lettuce isn't always as fresh and green as it looks — but appears so thanks to clever lighting.

And nothing is random. So big-name brands are all positioned in the middle of aisles, drawing shoppers past everything else on their way.

The most expensive of any range is invariably at eye level — the priciest Baxters soup variety (cullen skink) is right in front of me at £2.69. The most expensive jam is hovering temptingly before me, while own-brand jams a fraction of the price are tucked safely down by my feet. Even the most expensive washing powder is cunningly placed in the eye line.

Trick six: Lighting

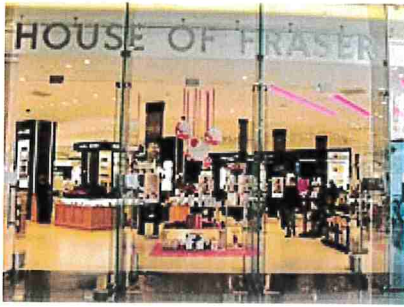
Light purple colouring in a store is associated with luxury and encourages people to spend. Blue has a calming effect and is often associated with trust.

Trick seven: Shopping centre layout

It's not just the shops that are planned with military and scientific precision. The entire shopping centre — shape, layout, shop locations, escalators — has been designed to maximise spending.

The tricks are endless. Mirrors in shop windows slow shoppers down. Posher goods are displayed on the right (according to American research, most customers will subconsciously veer right at any opportunity, though no one seems to know why).

Location, location: House of Fraser store in Westfield shopping centre



There's nothing remotely random about the order of the shops, either. All of them want to go next to M&S because it spends so much money on store location market research that anyone next to them can just piggy-back its hard work.

Others, such as House of Fraser, are 'anchors' — there as attractors, or 'shopping centre dog bones' and, as Professor Penn explains, will always be at the end of a long parade or corner, to draw people past the shops in between.

All the really posh stores, meanwhile, are bunched together in an exclusive area with chandeliers, mood lighting and even a champagne bar, to complete the experience — 'You're spending money on designer stuff because it says something about you or the person you love. It's aspirational.'

A quick look at the shopping centre map is just as revealing. 'The main shopping streets are basically shaped like one big race track,' says Professor Penn, 'carefully designed so you go round and round it. It's all about keeping shoppers in for as long as possible, and I suspect there's a degree of "disorientation by design" that goes on as well.'

'Look — by the posh shops, they've used rounded spaces which are "containing" — they keep people in that area, again going round and round. That's very important, because the longer people are shopping, the higher the "footfall" levels — ie the number of shoppers — and the greater rents the complex can charge the retailers.'

Goodness. A couple of hours with Professor Penn is enough to dampen even the keenest shopper's enthusiasm. It's no fun when you realise that half the decisions you make aren't really your own.

He's spot-on, though. After we say our farewells, I run into a shop to buy a present for a friend's new baby and, without thinking, grab two items — both displayed at eyelevel, both on the right of the shop and both the most expensive in their range. And then get enormous pleasure from putting them back and starting again.

