

Overseas blog from Springboard's Insights Director

Why footfall remains the key indicator

I was very disappointed to miss this year's ATCM summer school - not only because it was my first absence in 15 years but the theme of footfall is close to my heart (some might say even sadly embedded into it as I am penning this during a trip to NZ whilst following the Lions rugby tour!).

Of course I didn't hear the debate held on the day, but I think it's vital to step back and restate the fundamental; that 85% of all retail spend still takes place in bricks and mortar stores, and that retail remains the key driver to the economic success of town centres - the fact that around 70% of all footfall is generated between 9am and 5pm substantiates this. So herein lies the import of footfall - without people retail does not succeed and without retail the performance of town centres is compromised. Yes, where there is sufficient intervention or sponsorship from the public and private sectors town centres can be insulated but, in a cash strapped economic environment where evidence of an ROI is a driving force for investment, it is still retail, and therefore footfall, that acts as the engine for driving performance. All other indicators - vacancies, sales, rents, car parking - derive from the presence of people footfall!

But the magic of footfall as an indicator is that it's apparent simplicity belies its actual complexity - yes, it's possible to just look at the overall volume and seemingly gain little insight, but dig only slightly deeper and it's like peeling the layers off an onion. Not only were we the first to deliver national and regional benchmarks that deliver the necessary context to evaluate a town's performance (a -1% drop in a town vs a -3% drop across the region or nationally demonstrates a town's resilience), but we were the first to deliver evidence of the shift to leisure led trips to high streets by observing the rise in footfall post 5pm; we were the first to deliver evidence of the recent success of retail parks through owner led improvements; and most recently we have been the first to deliver evidence of the challenge facing many shopping centres in retaining customers as a consequence of being slow to evolve their mix.

Indeed, it is these increasing complexities around consumer behaviour that created the impetus for us to lead the Innovate project that is underway with MMU. And rather than footfall failing to tell us about a town's personality, the findings already have shown that it has delivered ground breaking intelligence that could - and should - change the way policy makers evaluate town centres and practitioners plan and implement town centre strategies. The outdated hierarchy based on only the size of a centre that has been hanging around since I started working in town centres 30 years ago should now be cast aside, and instead be replaced with a hierarchy that is founded on how centres are actually used by consumers - over a decade of 24/7 data across 200 town centres provides a robust backdrop! The clear evidential base that has identified four centre types (also referred to as signatures or even personalities) means that towns can implement strategies that are today relevant. And by being able to track behaviour continuously 24/7, practitioners have the critical early warning signs of change that are needed to future proof centres and make the changes necessary to harness and capitalise on shifts in consumer demand.

But whilst we are best known for our footfall service, at Springboard we are not complacent about the intelligence that other indicators deliver - we have been collecting vacancy data



since 2011, tracking sales in town centres since 2008 and now collect sales data alongside footfall each week a large number of towns around the UK. But working with around 200 town centres on a continuous basis has shown that for any data to be "desirable" it needs to exhibit eight key characteristics (insert graphic), and footfall is the only indicator that meets all eight "desirability" criteria. So the lesson must be that, yes, understanding of performance can be better understood by incorporating other metrics, but footfall should still be at the core of town centre evaluation.