

Fuerst Group Does Retail R&D On KEEN And Chrome Industries Brands

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Research and development is no longer just for product development. Retailers must take an R&D approach to customer experience and experiment with different ways to engage customers, sell products, and build their brands. One company that's leading the way in retail R&D is Fuerst Group which owns the [KEEN footwear](#) and [Chrome Industries](#) bike messenger brands.



(Credit: KEEN Footwear)

Customer experience is becoming a “product” — an offering as valuable to retailers as the items they sell, as I discussed in [my recent article](#) about Apple stores. So it makes sense for companies to apply an innovation process to it. Fuerst Group’s Vice President, Global Digital Commerce, [John Evons](#) recently described the work he and his company are doing in retail R&D during a [Dreamforce](#) panel entitled “Stores Are Dead! Long Live Stores!” and in a follow-up interview I conducted with him.

The first type of experimentation Fuerst is pursuing is one that many retailers are working on: making physical retail more experiential. Actually the stores for Chrome, called Hubs, were created by bike messengers for bike messengers to serve “the utilitarian need of just surviving in the city.” They’ve become places for bike messengers and urban cyclists to refuel, repair their bikes and products if necessary, and connect with others. In addition to coffee services, city guides, and special events, the Hubs house on-site bag makers who will help design your own product. The company views the stores’ community-building opportunities as important as the commerce and is

constantly exploring ways to further the multi-purpose nature of the spaces.



(Credit: Rasta Dave)

With the KEEN brand, Fuerst, which Evons described as “an event company,” is experimenting with how to incorporate its passion for events into retail experiences — whether in its flagship stores in Portland and Palo Alto, CA, its wholesale retail channel which includes REI and Boot World, or even outside traditional brick-and-mortar. For example, the brand’s Live Monumental tour sent staffers on a road trip to 80 locations across the country in a 1970’s style RV to raise support for protecting national monuments like California’s Mojave Trails and, in Evons’ words, to tell the KEEN story “in a more disruptive way than we can even do in our own branding environment.” He says the company is looking for more opportunities to use in-person events to spread the ideology of what KEEN believes in and “help people fall in love with the character of the brand.”

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Perhaps more uncommon is the company’s attempts to translate its brick-and-mortar experiences into the digital channel. One example is the new online experience for Chrome that will launch next month. The new effort is intended to create a digital experience of the city, celebrating each city, giving the Hub staff roles as digital merchandisers, and bringing the community of the Hubs and their cities to life online.

Fuerst’s retail R&D also applies to its operations. Evons’ role, the first global, cross-brand commercial leadership position, is itself a test. The company recognizes the need to breakdown silos and realize synergies across operations if it wants to test and successfully develop disruptive retail concepts. In fact, Evons said that organization design is the biggest challenge for retailers in the constant evolving retail landscape.

It is also challenging itself to budget for and measure retail differently. Evons suggested that traditional marketing budgets and brick-and-mortar P&Ls need to evolve and perhaps blur. Instead of measuring retail by the traditional sales per square foot metric, stores might be considered “destination marketing experiences” and expectations for return on investment would change accordingly. He envisions retail expenditures being allocated as flexible, temporary investments like trade show booths and measured based on impressions and other top-of-funnel results.

Such changes are radical innovations that have generated varying support by different stakeholders within the organization, but the point is to test and learn.

Denise Lee Yohn is a brand-building expert, speaker and author of [What Great Brands Do](#) and [Extraordinary Experiences](#).