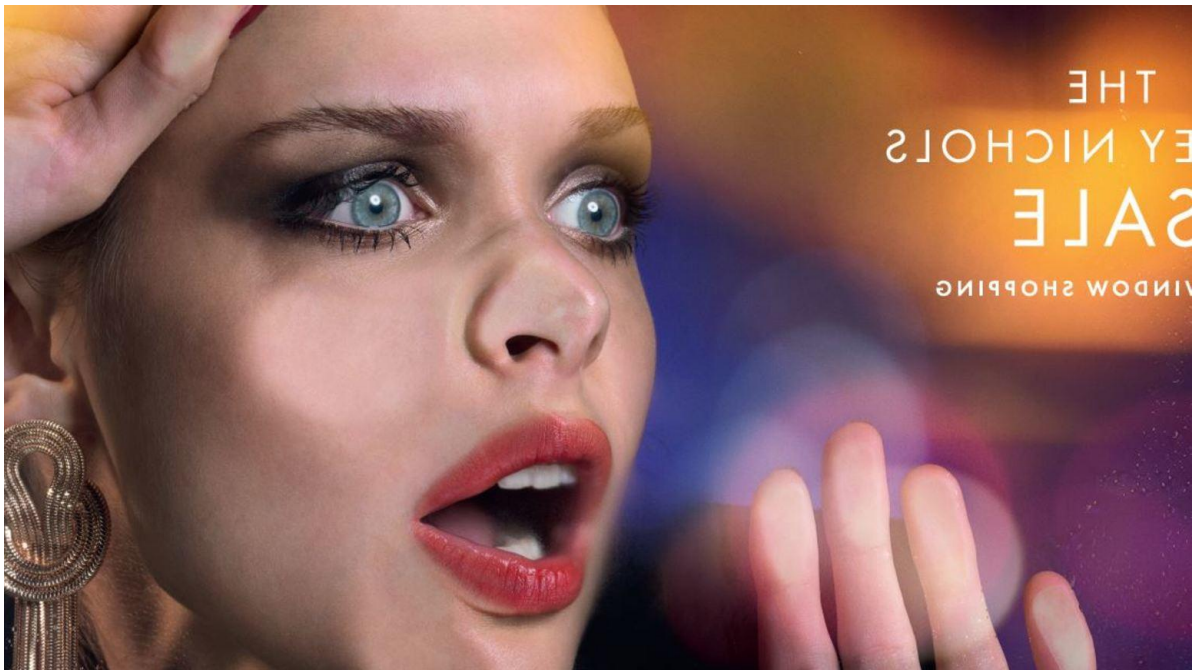


# Fearless Style

Few retailers could turn two middle-aged alcoholics into much-loved brand ambassadors. But Harvey Nichols isn't any retailer. It's the antidote to a typical department store. And – organised around a powerful new vision – it's shaking up the high street, fabulously

November 13, 2015



Harvey Nichols is a British institution, a symbol of high fashion and unapologetic affluence. For almost two centuries, it has stood tall in London's wealthy and fashionable Knightsbridge district. But when Stacey Cartwright became the chief executive in February 2014, her first task was to define the brand.

This may seem like an odd priority for a retail store with 184 years of heritage behind it. But Cartwright realised that, in order to survive in the toughest-ever retail environment, Harvey Nichols had to strengthen its brand and recapture the iconic status it had enjoyed 20 years earlier.

‘If you look back on Harvey Nichols in the heyday of the 1990s Ab Fab world, it really was *the* destination in London,’ says the store’s head of marketing, Anna Davidson, in reference to its connection with the TV show, *Absolutely Fabulous*. Throughout the 90s, the brand’s flagship store was London’s epicentre of culture and style. It attracted glamorous fashionistas, celebrities, even royalty.



Today, Harvey Nichols – which stocks men and women’s fashion, beauty products and food and wine – has expanded to seven stores in the UK, seven abroad and a dedicated beauty bar in Liverpool. But, somewhere along the way, a little bit of that magic dust disappeared. ‘I just think it’s lost that edge. It was the innovator at a time when Selfridges [was behind] and I think now it has taken over. I wouldn’t go to Harvey Nichols to see who the new designers are,’ said Mary Portas, Harvey Nichols’ former creative director, in 2013.

## The Success Of Excess

Harvey Nichols' iconic status is, in part, down to an unlikely association with two misbehaving, over-indulging British women. Edina and Patsy were the lead characters in *Absolutely Fabulous*, a BBC sitcom that played on the absurdities of high fashion.

Before the show launched in 1992, Harvey Nichols' creative director at the time, Mary Portas, called up the show's creator and lead actress Jennifer Saunders and offered exclusive access to designers in exchange for name-checking Harvey Nichols in the series. Saunders took her up on the offer, starting a relationship that lasted four series. 'It could have fallen flat on its face if that show hadn't taken off and been really clever,' said Portas in an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*. 'There's an element of risk, it's about all these things coming together.'

*Ab Fab* went on to become a cultural icon in its own right and is currently ranked as the 17th best UK television show of all time by the British Film Institute. For Harvey Nichols, the partnership became a lifeline, promoting the store to a legendary status and spreading awareness to a much larger audience.



## Retail Wars

It's no coincidence that this slight dip in fortune coincided with the most severe global financial crisis in living memory. A crash that has, unequivocally, changed the rules of retail. 'A lot of people might think that the luxury sector was immune from the crash, but they couldn't be more wrong,' says Richard Hyman, founder of consultancy Richard Talks Retail.

By forcing potential customers to tighten their belts, the credit crunch changed consumer attitudes. 'The Ab Fab image, which was embedded in the culture of excess, doesn't exist anymore,' says Neil Saunders, managing director of consulting firm Conlumino. 'Retail is a lot more understated now and Harvey Nichols is having to adapt to that.'





Shopping habits have also evolved since the champagne-swigging days of 90s exuberance. ‘Department stores were once meccas for brands – places for research, leisurely shopping and exploration – but increasingly those are all activities occurring online instead,’ says Rachel Arthur, editor of industry news website Fashion & Mash.

For boutique brands, being stocked in Harvey Nichols was once the only way to guarantee exposure. But online retail now enables any designer of any size to sell directly to the consumer. ‘I don’t think other department store chains are necessarily the primary source of competition for Harvey Nichols today,’ adds Saunders. ‘More of a threat are the boutique chains selling products themselves. This means customers can bypass Harvey Nichols completely.’

*\*\*\_It’s not enough for these values to just exist in advertising. You’ve got to make them something the whole company rallies around\_\*\**

– Paul Billingsley, adam&eveDDB

This complicated retail landscape, combined with renewed challenges from other British institutions like Selfridges, Harrods and Liberty, presented a serious challenge for Cartwright, the former executive vice-president of Burberry, when she joined. ‘Her appointment coincided with the emergence of the toughest retail market in over 30 years,’ says Hyman, ‘This really is the most turbulent time I’ve ever seen, and that includes the period immediately after the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008.’

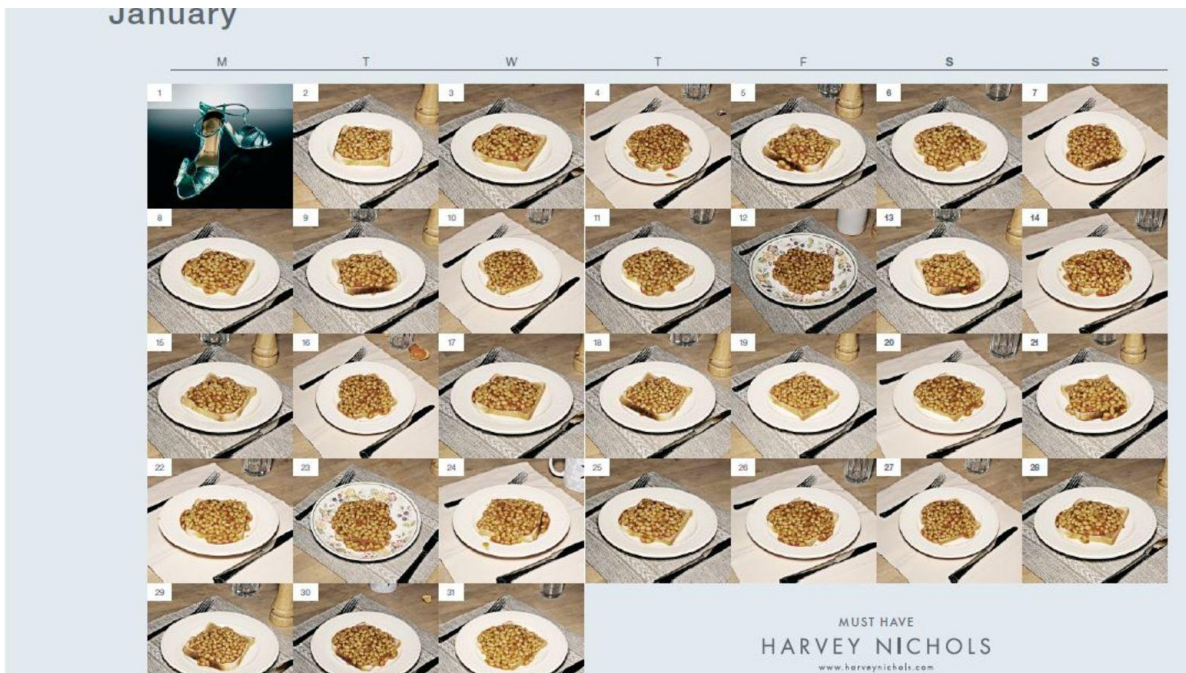


## Style And Substance

To get its groove back, Harvey Nichols needed a rallying cry around which the future of the business could be moulded. A confident, articulate organising principle that would let the brand atomise its message into emotional stories, complex services or physical spaces, while maintaining a strong and coherent personality.

‘Stacey and [newly-appointed group marketing and creative director] Shadi Halliwell knew that it was no longer good enough for the company’s values to only exist within the marketing department. So we were told that we had to define the brand better,’ recalls Paul Billingsley, business director of adam&eveDDB, the store’s agency.

Working with London-based strategy consultancy The Foundation, adam&eveDDB distilled the knowledge from a 15-year relationship with the brand into a positioning that would revitalise every facet of the organisation; a master proposition that encapsulated the store’s heritage while also empowering it to shape the future.



‘We realised that the idea of fashion versus style could be something that defined us. Fashion is just a bandwagon that everyone jumps on, but genuine style – whether you’re into streetwear or suits – is something that you can come to Harvey Nichols for,’ says Billingsley.

This idea alone, though, wasn’t distinguishing or exciting enough for such a bold brand. ‘We realised it sounded bland on its own, but then had a breakthrough moment where we thought: “Ok, how about adding fearless to this?”’.

‘Now we have a brand promise that the whole company can embody, from the shop floor to the IT department,’ says Davidson. ‘From now on, everybody has to embrace the idea of being Fearlessly Stylish.’

Underpinning this organising principle are four key values that form a unified vision across the company. Devoted to the Customer comes first. Next up is Obsessed with Style, followed by Playful in Attitude – ‘We’re very tongue-in-cheek with what we do and that’s something we’ve never lost,’ says Davidson. Finally, Daring in Delivery is designed to ensure that Harvey Nichols pushes boundaries, takes risks and is seen as an innovator.



‘What’s interesting is that most of these values already existed,’ says Billingsley. ‘The main change that Stacey and Shadi brought is the notion that it’s not enough for them to just exist within advertising. That’s not good enough for a company this size. You’ve got to make them something that the whole company rallies around.’

## Service, Please

Fearlessly Stylish is more than just a catchy phrase, it’s a strategic pivot. Not only does it give the retailer licence to move away from being a fashion provider and into the role of a bold style curator, but it also helps draw a distinction between Harvey Nichols and other department stores. ‘We don’t sell electronics, white goods or homeware, so a real focus for us is how we evolve as a large boutique as opposed to the department store that everyone has previously positioned us as,’ says Davidson.





This vision has been put into practice at the retailer's new store in Birmingham, England. Set across a colossal 45,000 square feet in the heart of the city, it's a manifestation of Harvey Nichols' new, modern approach. Gone are traditional high-street features, like window-displays, tills, clearly defined walkways and separate floors for men and women.

Instead, customers enter the store via an immersive tunnel surrounded by LED screens before being encouraged to flow freely and randomly throughout the single-floor building. Says Davidson of the unique design: 'This is unlike anything else out there. It's the pure epitome of what we mean by boutique.'

Woven through this unique retail environment is a layer of service that aims to empower shoppers to feel Fearlessly Stylish. Every member of staff is put through the Style Academy, an intensive course designed to improve knowledge and skills, and ultimately make employees more useful to customers. 'We don't want our staff to be sales assistants, we want them to be style advisers,' says Davidson.





People who want a personal touch can book a private consultation with the Style Concierge team. While sipping on bubbly (okay, so maybe those Bollinger-swigging days aren't entirely gone), shoppers get a helping hand in figuring out what their style is and what outfits might fit into this vision. A private chauffeur then transports any cumbersome shopping bags back to the customer's hotel or home.

For those who prefer to shop alone, the store is kitted out with small touches intended to make a big difference. All transactions are carried out on mobile by style advisers walking around the store. They come to you, rather than you having to queue up at a checkout. Seating areas and small lounges are discreetly distributed around the store for people who need a rest or are waiting for their partner to pick an outfit (we see you, guys).



Inside the changing rooms, Harvey Nichols remains Devoted to the Customer. Cubicles have ‘modesty cupboards’ so that staff can pass through different sizes of outfit – assisting but not disturbing prospective buyers. The rooms have dimmer switches, in case people aren’t ready to face what they look like in a swimsuit in the middle of winter.

And the cubicles also sport 360-degree digital mirrors that enable customers to take photos of their outfits and upload them to social media or email them to a friend. One nifty feature: the mirrors have a ‘time-delay’ function, so people can turn around and check whether their bum really does look big in those designer jeans.



‘Birmingham was the first opportunity to express the new direction of Harvey Nichols as a daring and creative specialised boutique rather than a department store,’ says Carlos Virgile, founder of Virgile + Partners, the architects that designed the space. ‘But there was also a more ambitious objective, which was to redefine what luxury means today and communicate a refreshing, more experimental and less conventional image than the predictable language used by many luxury brands.’

To answer this brief, Virgile + Partners looked beyond high-street retail to understand what a genuinely luxurious experience feels like. Elements of the layout were borrowed from five-star hotels – for example, the positioning of the Style Concierge at the entrance mimics the feeling of entering an indulgent hotel with unparalleled service.

The restaurant is also centrally located so that more attention is drawn towards the fine dining offered by Michelin-starred chef Glynn Purnell. ‘We wanted the customer to perceive the store as a place where they could feel relaxed and enjoy themselves, not just be bombarded with products,’ says Virgile.





Perhaps the defining characteristic of this store is demonstrating how much of a difference the small touches can make – introduce enough incremental improvements and they add up to create an enormous impact. ‘All those things are just small pieces of evidence that say: “We get you, we listen to you and we’re going to build the experience around you,”’ says Billingsley.

*\*\*\_ Companies think that success comes from crystallising everything into a strict set of rules, but these can become a straightjacket. We try to be recklessly un-reductive\_\*\**

– Paul Billingsley, adam&eveDDB

### **The Lap(Top) Of Luxury**

‘Birmingham is very much the direction of the store of the future for Harvey Nichols,’ says Davidson. And work is currently under way in the menswear department of the brand’s Knights-bridge flagship, which will be transformed according to this new blueprint by April 2016. Meanwhile, outside the bricks and mortar stores, the team at Harvey Nichols is also working hard to imbue the company’s organising principle into all other aspects of the business.

The retailer’s new website allows shoppers to connect with style advisers over live chat if they have questions about a particular product, or if they need help picking out specific items to suit their style. They can book Concierge appointments at their nearest shop or pick up a conversation that they may have had with a stylist earlier that week.

The brand's new loyalty app also endeavours to create a luxury experience in the digital space. Customers can use the app to collect points on all their purchases, but unlike a traditional rewards scheme, the service doesn't give money off products. It gives customers much more stylish benefits: free fine dining, Botox, Champagne and massages.



When designing the programme, Harvey Nichols again veered away from the category norms and looked to other sectors. In this instance, the addictive qualities of the British Airways app caught the brand's eye, as did the fact that BA gives customers something of value (like flights) rather than boring old coupons.

'Our customers expect more than just straight- up cashback, so we designed this programme around indulgent experiences' says Kerem Atasoy, head of digital marketing at Harvey Nichols. 'Again, it reinforces our brand strategy that if we reward our customers with an amazing dinner or a one-off treatment, they'll leave our store feeling fabulous and more stylish.'



Sticking to the Daring in Delivery value, Harvey Nichols has also ditched the plastic loyalty card entirely and replaced it with a mobile app. ‘Everything we’ve done with this programme has been driven by customer behaviour and insight,’ says Atasoy. ‘We spoke to hundreds of people through focus groups and surveys in-store and 80% told us that they’d prefer an app over a physical loyalty card.’

To promote the launch of the service, adam&eveDDB created a campaign using real footage of people shoplifting from Harvey Nichols stores, with identities obscured by cartoonish burglar faces. The spot showed hilariously poor attempts from thieves to stuff products up their jumpers, or jewellery into their pockets, before being caught by security guards. The strapline read: ‘Love freebies? Get them legally. Rewards by Harvey Nichols.’

‘What struck us was that it’s the only rewards programme to actually give you something,’ says Michelle Gilson, the planner who worked on the campaign. ‘Other retailers went down the transactional approach and there wasn’t anything tangible that the likes of Liberty, Harrods or Selfridges were offering.’





‘The creative idea itself came from a throwaway insight, which was that everyone loves a freebie, no matter how affluent you are,’ Gilson continues. ‘Even our most prestigious customers will still take that goodie bag from a fashion show or enjoy a free glass of Champagne. We all do it, it’s a universal truth no matter how much money you have.’

Many brands would probably have dismissed such a bold advertising idea as being too risky. But when the team at adam&eveDDB presented it at the Knightsbridge store, Davidson tells me her first reaction was to rush down the stairs to ask the head of security whether it would be possible. Within five minutes, they were laughing at tapes of real footage that the security teams used for training purposes.

### **Away With The Fairies**

If the Birmingham store represents the future aesthetic of Harvey Nichols as a retailer, the shoplifting TV spot symbolises what we can expect from Harvey Nichols, the brand. It’s rooted in the values of the store, but – crucially – isn’t held back or restricted by them.



‘When we presented our positioning there was an image of a fairy nailed to a wall’ says Billingsley. The agency’s point? While a strong positioning and set of values is crucial, what makes a brand great can’t always be nailed down. ‘A lot of companies think that success comes from crystallising everything into a strict set of rules, but these can become a straightjacket. We try to be recklessly un-reductive at the start of any creative process.’

Therein lies the crux of what makes Harvey Nichols so intriguing: a new CEO and team have successfully concentrated the essence of a 184-year-old brand without diluting the creative output or restricting the strategic direction of the company. Unified around a strong organising principle and an empowering set of values, the company has been freed up to express its personality and heritage in a thoroughly modern manner. After all, if you’re going to do something, make sure you do it in style, darling.



### **Box Out / Christmas Craft**

Nowhere is the brand's Playful in Attitude value more evident than in its Christmas advertising. The past few winters have seen a series of controversial creative ideas hit people's screens, such as *The Walk of Shame*, which laughed at the silliness of the one-night stand by filming women leaving other people's houses early in the morning – wearing high heels and mini dresses from the night before. 'There's a playfulness to Harvey Nichols when you put it against all the other retailers who, at that time of year, are incredibly schmaltzy,' says Jessica Lovell, a planner at adam&eveDDB.

Without doubt, the brand's most successful festive film was 2013's *Sorry, I Spent it on Myself*, in which various people give their loved-ones cheap, tongue-in-cheek presents so that they can use their cash to get themselves something fantastic. To support the campaign, Harvey Nichols created a range of Ultra Low Net Worth products – like gravel, paper clips and elastic bands – that people could actually buy for their friends and family. Within a day of going on sale, all products sold out.





The campaign also piled up awards at the 2014 Cannes Lions festival, winning the Grand Prix in the Film, Press, Promo & Activation and Integrated categories. ‘A lot of the comments at Cannes were about how it was so brave to fly in the face of Christmas,’ says Richard Brim, an ECD at adam&eveDDB. ‘But that’s how we’ve behaved with Harvey Nichols all along; we just pushed it to the N’tth degree.’

This year’s stocking filler comes in the form of #GiftFace, which laughs at how we all put on a brave face when we get presents that we don’t like. ‘The brief was to do something different with a Harvey Nichols twist, and that hasn’t changed much over the past five years,’ says Ben Tollet, also an ECD at the agency.

At time of going to press, the 2015 advert hadn’t yet launched. But, having watched an early cut of the film, it’s clear that brand and agency have high hopes for this instalment – in particular, with the potential of #GiftFace lighting up social media. ‘When we don’t have a huge share of voice, an idea that enters the vernacular and gets shared easily is the holy grail,’ adds planner Michelle Gilson, who worked on the spot.

Let’s hope none of you, dear readers, will feel the need to share your Gift Faces come Christmas Day.