

# Putting consumers first

The fight to maximise consumer loyalty grows more challenging for shopping centre owners. The recession, rising pump prices and online all combine to create a challenging commercial environment. It's against this backdrop that owners, retailers and sector partners must increasingly collaborate to focus on exceeding consumer expectations – and nowhere is this more the case than for those tasked with providing car parking facilities.

For shopping centre owners, the challenge is to recognise that perceptions are created from the moment a consumer drives into the car park. Everything must be done to ensure that this is a professional, consistent and positive experience – whether or not there is a charge for parking.

After all, British consumers are brand aware, technologically confident and willing to choose businesses that give a great service. They're increasingly likely to share their perceptions with friends and through social media. True consumer centricity is achieved when operational expertise, matched with leading edge equipment and applications, is tailored to anticipate the way customers want to park.

What does the latest best practice look like for shopping centres?

For all operators, the journey starts from the moment a car approaches the centre's surrounding road network. Accurate guidance signage giving real-time updates and directions is a prerequisite. Once in the car-parking area, the driver should then be helped to find an available space quickly and easily. Systems featuring sensors linked to indicators that light green or red, depending on whether a space is free or occupied, reduce congestion and time-to-park and add significantly to the consumer experience. This technology can collate space occupancy status to feed into guidance signs to maximise accuracy, as well as alerting enforcement should a car outstay a time limit where this is deployed. Equally vitally, the data a solution like this generates represents a rich asset of management information, enabling shopping centres to understand occupancy profiles and predict likely periods of high demand.



With shopping centres competing against online and other retail locations, consumer-centric parking solutions that add value to the overall shopping experience are increasingly important, says Charlie Leaper.



For sites that operate a paid-for parking model, the challenge extends to managing access to car parking and enforcing contraventions fairly, while simultaneously reducing the drawbacks typically associated with a charging structure.

The good news is that technology allowing a driver to enter a barrier-less car park, pay via cash, card or by phone where enabled, then walk away without displaying a ticket is now becoming increasingly commonplace. RFID tag identification that is incorporated within the sensor can also be integrated with a centre or retailer RFID-based loyalty scheme to deliver added value options. These could include fuss-free Blue Badge parking and receipt-validated refunds where centres wish to offer this benefit.

In these scenarios, compliance and enforcement is discreet and consistent. The system's pay station transmits space occupancy information and parking session payment confirmation to the parking attendant's handheld, who can then review all occupied bays and check, instantly and accurately, that each car is parked legitimately,

and enforce infringements quickly and efficiently where they occur.

This solution, and others that incorporate ANPR, enables shopping centres to overcome the problems associated with traditional pay on foot and pay & display – both of which deliver a compromised, frequently unwelcoming experience for drivers that can also be costly to maintain for operators. After all, few shoppers wish to queue behind barriers then go to a pay-on-foot station, or shuttle back and forth from car to pay station before they can do what they came to do in the first place – spend money with your tenants!

By matching parking technology with customer-centric operational management, centre owners can give themselves a real advantage in the ongoing challenge to secure consumer loyalty and advocacy. ■

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#### Find out more:

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