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Turn 'Treasure Hunt' Into Loyalty Engine: Use The S.A.F.A.R. Framework

C. Deep Prakash[i*] & Dhruven Zala[i]
[i]*S.P. Jain Institute of Management & Research*
**Corresponding author, deep.prakash@spjimr.org*



Problem of practice

The rise of e-commerce platforms poses an existential threat to physical retailers worldwide, be it the shopping malls in the United States or in Singapore. One reason is that e-commerce platforms offer convenience, assortment, and prices that are hard to match in brick-and-mortar stores. Many traditional retailers have responded with frequent promotions and discounts. However, these tactics often create a commoditisation trap where customers become loyal to deals rather than to the retailer. So how can retail store managers, category managers, and merchandising heads drive increases in store traffic, customer engagement, and repeat purchases in physical retail environments?

A promising approach to revitalising retail comes from research by Jane Gu, Cristina Nistor, and Matthew Selove, through the concept of the 'treasure hunt' shopping experience.[1] Their study underscores the excitement of searching and discovering products. Extending these insights, our essay introduces the S.A.F.A.R. framework as a practical guide for systematically transforming discovery into customer loyalty and repeat store visits

[1] The article 'The Joy of Shopping: Thrill of the Treasure Hunt' by Jane Gu, Cristina Nistor, and Matthew Selove, featured in a forthcoming issue of *Management Science*, examines how the thrill of searching itself creates shopping value, showing how retailers can optimise pricing and search difficulty to make treasure-hunt experiences more engaging

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Why discovery matters

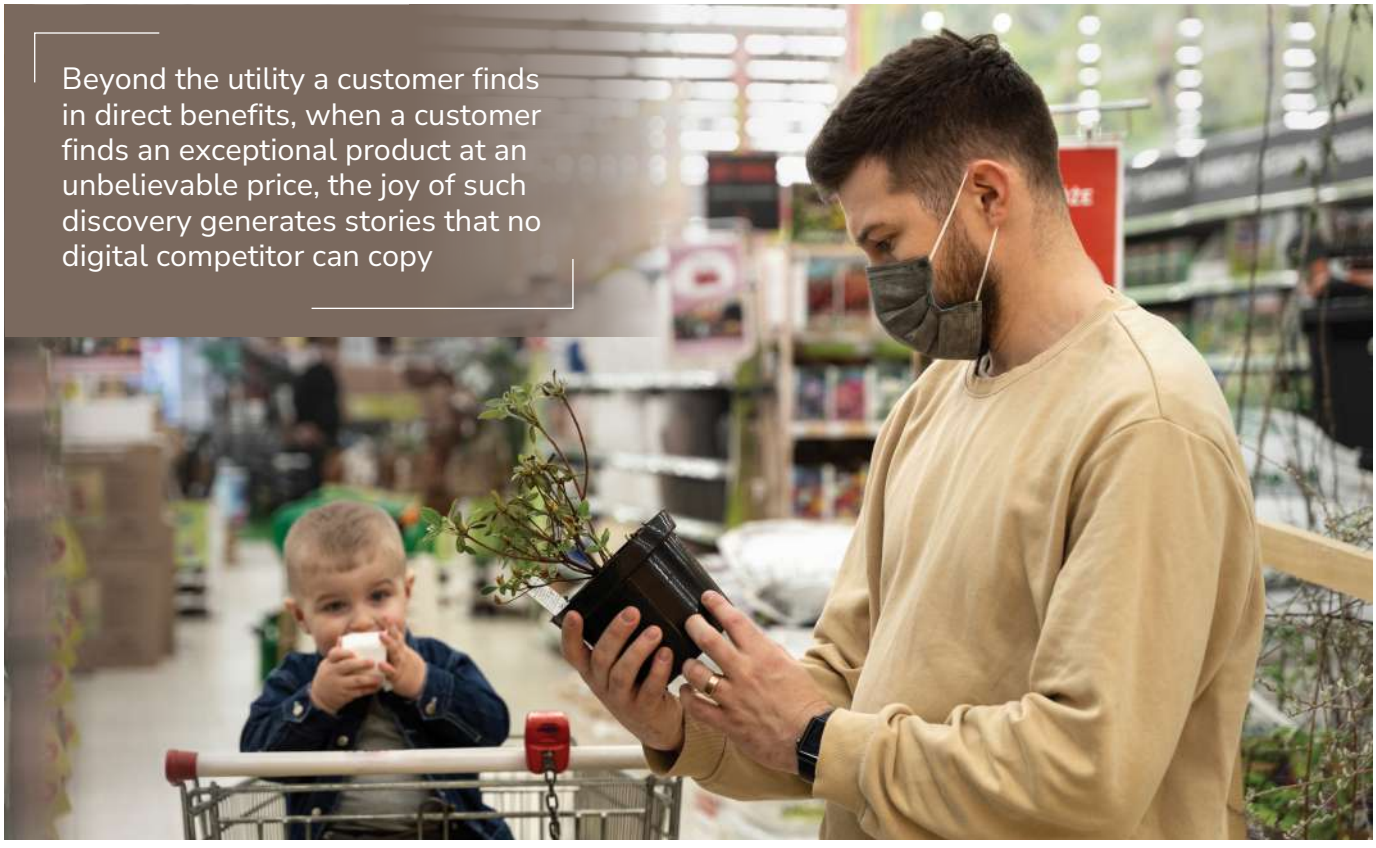
Traditional retail is under pressure: In 2024, the US witnessed 7325 store closures, compared with 5,970 openings – a net loss of 1,355 stores.[2] This trend has been building for more than a decade and is evident across geographies.[3] Even in emerging markets such as Latin America and Asia, although retail is growing, the shift to e-commerce is occurring faster.[4] So how can retail address these headwinds?

Traditional retail thinking assumes that consumers visit stores primarily to acquire products. A 2026 survey of retail consumers suggests that 40% of US consumers classify themselves as value-seeking – confirming the traditional, utilitarian view.[5] However, the same research highlights that 40% of consumers' perceptions of a retail brand's value stem from factors other than price, including store experience, service, product quality, and the delight of discovery. Other research on retailing confirms that a broader set of drivers motivates the typical retail consumer. For instance, one study finds that large assortments and changing merchandise encourage exploration and increase customer engagement.[6] Consumers who encounter unexpected products often spend more time browsing and evaluating a broader range of offerings.[7] The resulting shopping momentum frequently leads to additional unplanned purchases.[8] Scarcity strategies further amplify these effects. When attractive products are available only in limited quantities, consumers perceive greater urgency and are less likely to postpone purchase decisions. Beyond the utility a customer finds in direct benefits, when a customer finds an exceptional product at an unbelievable price, the joy of such discovery generates stories that no digital competitor can copy. These organic recommendations then enable a vital source of competitive advantage, reducing the reliance on discounts to counter digital platforms.[9] So, how best to synthesise these ideas into a winning retail formula?

Treasure-hunts and adaptation

The research by Gu, Nistor, and Selove shows that shopping utility can come from three sources: the value of the product itself, the excitement generated by the possibility of discovering a desirable item, and broader social or experiential benefits associated with shopping. So, instead of treating store browsing as a cost to be minimised through friction-free automation, retail executives need to cultivate browsing — adapted to the desired buyer experience and their context. Adaptation is important because buyer behaviour varies across shopping contexts. For instance, early treasure-hunt formats were developed in Western retail markets where shopping was largely individualistic and self-directed. In contrast, several emerging markets are characterised by collectivistic cultures, where shopping

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is often a social activity involving families, friends, and collective discussion.[10] Also, while Western treasure-hunt formats rely on minimal employee interaction, consumers in emerging markets often value assistance throughout their shopping journeys. Another contextual difference involves how shoppers view value. In many markets, buying discounted items can carry a faint social stigma. However, obtaining exceptional value is viewed positively in South Asian markets.[11] These differences highlight the need to adapt the discovery process to reflect local culture.

While the research explains why consumers enjoy treasure hunts, our essay extends these insights into a framework that enables retail managers to design consumers' discovery journeys across different retail and cultural contexts.

The S.A.F.A.R. framework

The framework's acronym arises from five building blocks: **S**trategic assortment rotation, **A**ssisted exploration, **F**amily-centric design, **A**uthentic value communication, and **R**efreshed merchandising. We offer a detailed description of this framework below.

- **Strategic assortment rotation:** To maintain newness, we recommend that retailers introduce small but frequent product refreshes. Relying only on seasonal inventory changes creates predictability. Newness gives consumers a reason to return. It also creates controlled scarcity and increases the perceived value of discovery.
- **Assisted exploration:** To ensure that discovery doesn't increase cognitive load and remains fun, the role of store associates needs to change from passive shock handlers to discovery guides. That means equipping floor staff with deep product knowledge and handy mobile devices. Crucially, they must guide shoppers toward fresh stock, uncover hidden value, and navigate shifting merchandise while keeping the excitement of true discovery intact.
- **Family-centric design:** To support group decision-making, floor plans ought to be built around shared exploration. Roomier aisles, easy-to-reach displays, and open gathering areas let families and friends experience the hunt side by side.
- **Authentic value communication:** As noted earlier, freshness must go hand in hand with clarity. Stores ought to spell out the connection between price and real quality. Shoppers should walk away feeling like savvy buyers rather than simple discount seekers.
- **Refreshed merchandising:** Sparking curiosity and prompting active exploration across every step of the shopping path is vital. Therefore, the displays should evolve frequently. However, rotation should never compromise quality standards or create the impression of a clearance warehouse.

Taken together, these practices can transform inventory management from back-end operations into a vital capability central to the customer experience.

Insight in action

The S.A.F.A.R. framework is particularly effective when consumers enjoy browsing, comparing, and discovering products. Categories such as fashion, lifestyle goods, beauty products, home décor, and gifting are thus especially well-suited to discovery-driven retailing. Below are examples from across the globe of this framework in action.

MR. DIY operates thousands of stores across Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines – selling hardware items, household goods, and lifestyle items. By continuously rotating small-ticket items in high-traffic, family-friendly layouts, MR. DIY turns routine shopping into a treasure hunt, generating high repeat footfall across Southeast Asian markets.



To drive store traffic, Zudio relies on rapid product rotation, layout changes, transparent pricing, and accessible shopping environments, so customers know that products may not be available during future visits



Liquidation-bin stores: USA-based The Bin Map, catalogue overstock and returned inventory from liquidation stores and provide online map locations.[12] These liquidation stores operate on a weekly, declining-price model: For example, an item's price may start at US$10 on Friday, but declines through the week till is it goes down to US$1 by next Thursday. Before the store opens, customers are queued up to search through mixed bins for high-value electronics and home goods.

Pasar Senen thrift hub: In Jakarta, Indonesia, organised thrift hubs draw millions of young consumers seeking vintage clothing and rare apparel.[13] The thrill of physically searching through curated racks provides an authentic, social shopping experience that pure-play e-commerce platforms cannot duplicate.

Zudio: It is the fastest-growing apparel retail chain in India.[14] To drive store traffic, Zudio relies on rapid product rotation, layout changes, transparent pricing, and accessible shopping environments. Customers know that products may not be available during future visits. The curated urgency, while maintaining a comfortable shopping experience, resulted in a format that encouraged repeat visits without relying heavily on promotional campaigns.

Under- and over-use

Managers should not treat treasure-hunt strategies as a one-size-fits-all fix — context matters. Case in point: Big Bazaar, once a pioneer in Indian hypermarket retail, it failed to curate inventory rotation. The Big Bazaar model relied heavily on perpetual clearance sales, which initially attracted customers, but soon became chaotic. The shopping environment became a dumping ground for end-of-life stock rather than a discovery hub. With the rise of e-commerce, Big Bazaar's early-mover advantage was further eroded, weighed down by steep inventory costs and shrinking gross margins.

High-end products should avoid constant inventory turnover, as it risks damaging that sense of heritage and elite prestige. Take the case of Apple Inc., a seller of premium smartphones, consumer electronics, and laptops. Apple retail stores are standardised, have clear layouts, and steady stock.[15] People buying premium laptops or smartphones usually value certainty and transparency above discovery. In these segments, reliability and trust deliver far more worth than the joy of discovery. So, executives need to ask: 'Will my buyers actually enjoy browsing and weighing options?' That is where discovery shines – when retailers balance novelty with clarity, scarcity with trust, and exploration with guidance. It fails when shoppers are looking for technical precision, custom details, or guaranteed reassurance.

Implementation checklist

Even in the shopping context, which is ripe for discovery-driven retail, team leaders must track metrics spanning sales transactions alongside customer habits. Key indicators cover return visit frequency, average basket size, impulse buying rates, stock turnover, referral rates, and overall retention. These metrics reveal whether discovery builds true long-term loyalty or merely temporary sales spikes.[16] See **Table 1** for a consolidated list of steps to implement discovery-led retail.

Table 1: Implementation checklist for discovery-led retail

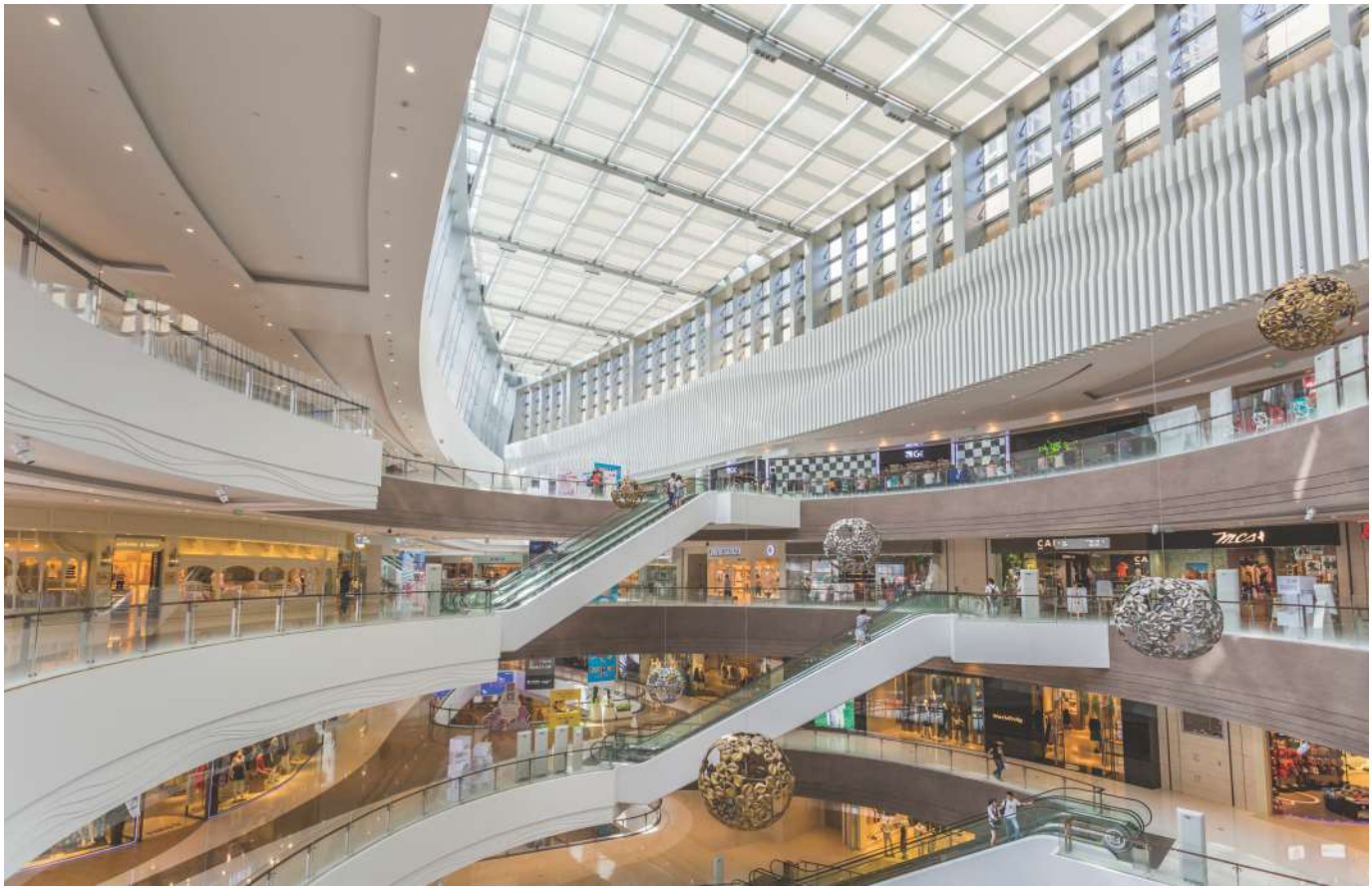
Implementation priority	Questions managers should ask	Monday morning actions	How success can be measured
Audit the current store experience	Are customers merely completing transactions, or are they spending time exploring?	Walk the store from the customer's perspective; identify areas that lack novelty, interaction, or reasons to browse	Dwell time, customer flow, repeat visit frequency
Refresh assortments deliberately	Does the store provide customers with a reason to return every few weeks?	Introduce scheduled product rotations, limited-quantity arrivals, and seasonal *discovery* collections rather than relying solely on end-of-season clearance	Repeat footfall, sell-through rates, and inventory turnover
Equip employees to enable discovery	Are frontline employees simply replenishing shelves or actively helping customers discover products?	Train associates to recommend new arrivals, explain product stories, demonstrate quality, and guide exploration using mobile tools where appropriate	Conversion rate, average basket value, customer satisfaction
Design stores for social shopping	Does the layout encourage browsing with family or friends?	Create wider browsing zones, interactive displays, seating areas, and product comparison spaces that encourage shared decision-making	Group shopping frequency, dwell time, basket size
Communicate value beyond price	Are customers confident they are making a smart purchase rather than simply finding a discount?	Highlight quality, authenticity, certifications, warranties, craftsmanship, sustainability, and visible savings through signage and demonstrations	Customer trust, repeat purchases, and reduced price sensitivity
Compete where physical retail has an advantage	Is the store offering experiences that online channels cannot easily replicate?	Emphasise tactile product evaluation, live demonstrations, personalised assistance, immediate gratification, and unexpected discoveries instead of competing solely on convenience.	Customer retention, referral activity, net promoter score
Match discovery to the right categories	Are treasure-hunt strategies being applied where customers genuinely enjoy browsing?	Prioritise fashion, lifestyle, gifting, beauty, home décor, thrift, and refurbished products, while avoiding categories where certainty and standardisation take precedence over discovery	Category profitability, inventory productivity, and repeat visitation

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Kumar, V., and Werner Reinartz. Customer Relationship Management. Springer Texts in Business and Economics. Springer, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-55381-7; Gu, Jane, Cristina Nistor, and Matthew Selove. "The Joy of Shopping: Thrill of the Treasure Hunt." Management Science, ahead of print, May 21, 2026. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2024.08105

The above discovery engine requires investments in four main areas: (a) consumer research and market survey expenses, (b) associate training and skill development, (c) inventory holding, logistics, and sourcing overheads, and (d) floor layout redesign and store modifications. To derisk these investments, we recommend using pilots and staged rollouts.

Case for discovery-led retail

Brick-and-mortar stores are usually framed as simple spots to buy products. The traditional merchandising, pricing, and display strategies used to trigger sales can be repurposed to spark genuine excitement, customer interaction, and return trips. Instead of going head-to-head with online sellers based on price, physical stores can win by leveraging the power of consumer discovery. Through the S.A.F.A.R. framework, store leaders can convert the excitement of the hunt into lasting customer engagement, building store experiences that digital platforms can't easily rival.



C. Deep Prakash *is Assistant Professor of Information Management and Analytics at SPJIMR. You can reach out to him at* ***deep.prakash@spjimr.org***

Dhruven Zala *is Assistant Professor of Information Management and Analytics at SPJIMR. You can reach out to him at* ***dhruven.zala@spjimr.org***

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