



RETAIL, ON A ROLL

MOBILE STORES COVER NEW GROUND

By Shamontiel Vaughn // Staff Writer

**Move over, pop-up shops:
There's a new retail trend in town.**

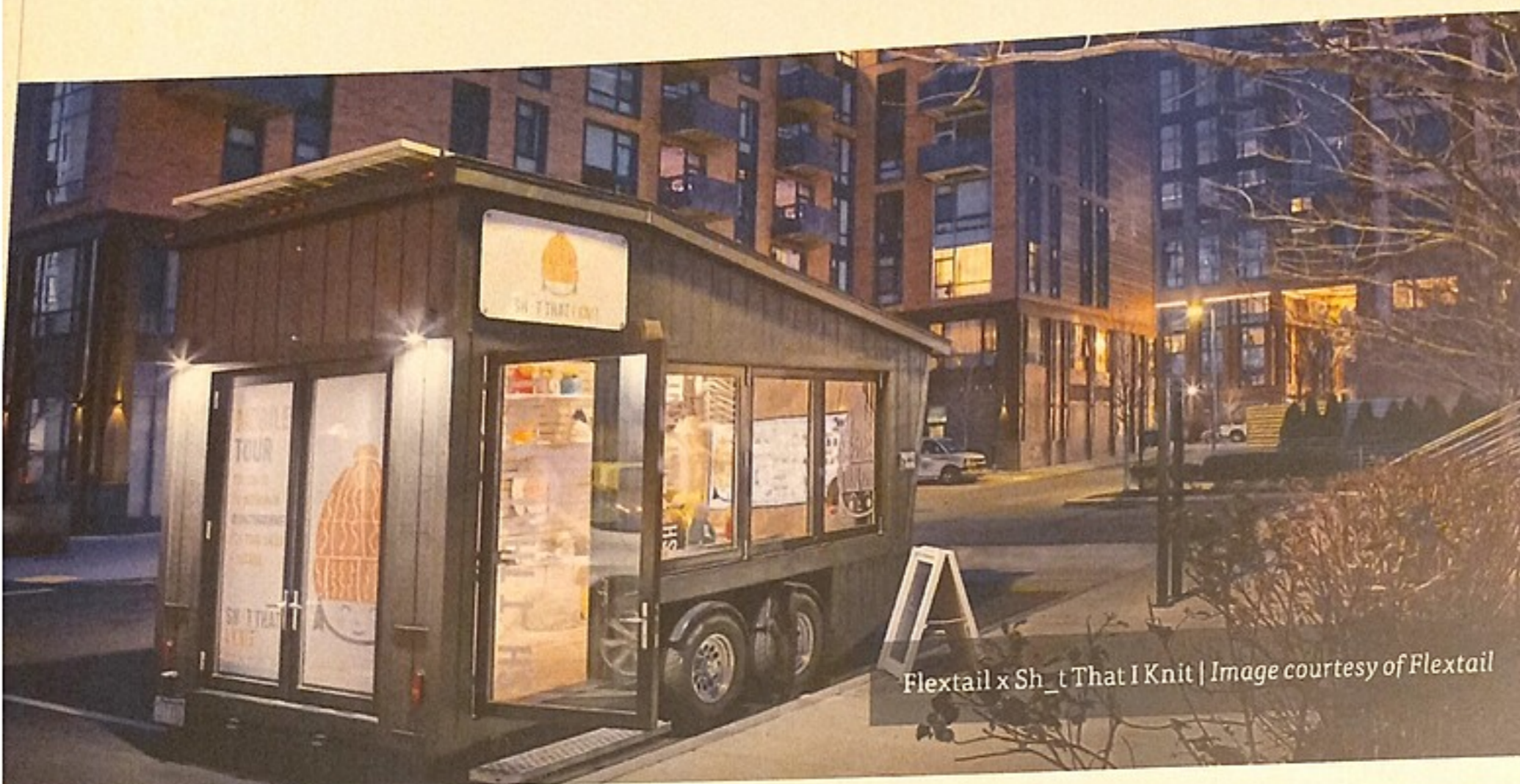
From rolling beauty bars to grocery stores-on-wheels, mobile boutiques have been making a name for themselves in 2019. And as consumers become more convenience driven and less easy to impress, these retailers-to-go may find themselves in it for the long haul.

Their appeal is pretty easy to grasp: Instead of having to travel to a distant shopping center to try on luxury clothing or crossing your fingers in hopes that your online purchase will look the same in person, a gorgeously outfitted airstream or modern smart trailer shows up in your town readily stocked and waiting to dazzle you—all you have to do is walk outside.

Inspired by Asia

In the United States, people may be more likely to find a food truck than they would a retail trailer. But in some cities, such as Boston and Chicago, retail trailer companies are challenging this idea.

“When you look at Asia, almost every corner has street vendors or pop-up shops,” said Joel Kamm, the founder and CEO of Flexetail, a leading retail trailer design firm. “This is also the difference between food trucks and retail trailers. The latter creates an urgency to buy now because the trailer



may not be there next month. Food is every day and consumable. Retail trailers provide an on-demand space that stores in shopping malls simply don't. They're contracted to be there for 10-15 years. There's not the same level of novelty."

It's not all good news though, and Kamm does admit that municipalities haven't quite figured out how to treat retail trailers as a business.

There's also the matter of keeping them honest. For example, it can be quite difficult to confirm recordkeeping and tax revenue for a store that can drive away. Because street vendors can come and go as they please, operation hours are completely up to them.

And in some neighborhoods, there may be questions of safety. Well-lit areas with plenty of foot traffic are ideal. However, blocking traffic or hard-to-find parking areas could upset passersby more than intrigue them.

Luckily, organizations like the National Association of Street Vendors of India are helping trade unions, community-based organizations (CBOs), non-government organizations (NGOs)

and other professionals be able to network and learn from each other on a more professional level.

Reigniting the Brand

Outsourced marketing may not be doing the intended job. It may be cheaper or faster, but sometimes the message gets lost in translation. And stores that are not owned outright may be losing control of their brand.

"Rather than sitting back and waiting or hoping for customers to come to them, brands are starting to invest in mobile retail that allows them to be in front of the consumer," said Justin Potts, marketing & business development manager of Advantage Trailer, an Illinois-based mobile store designer.

"This includes where they eat, where they work and where they play. Those unexpected touchpoints keep a brand top of mind and—when done well—help create brand affinity."

Of course, fashion designers and other creative artists can sell their items on consignment or work with larger retail stores to sell on their

own. However, those same items could end up buried in the back or associated with store displays that artisans may not feel is the best fit.

Tweaking the Customer Experience

But what happens once a customer is in the trailer and wants to buy an item? In this cashless environment, a customer can easily purchase an item through a number of means, including pay-it-later options such as Klarna, credit cards through smartphone apps or even cryptocurrency.

The goal is to not just provide convenience for customers to window shop. These trailers provide an opportunity to make everything be right at their fingertips from the pavement to a payment.

Of course, that idea is already evolving, too: Mobile markets have found their way into a few U.S. cities and are bringing fresh meat, produce, dairy and other necessities to neighborhoods that would otherwise be known as food deserts; and driverless vending machines are currently being piloted in the United States after Pepsi tested its self-driving Smart Cart during last year's STEP conference.

But despite their current novelty, mobile shops will likely not fizzle out in relevancy any time soon and, with some businesses finding themselves next to entirely too many competitors—or in neighborhoods where their products go ignored—a mobile option may be exactly the boost they need. ■

Gabriella Bock contributed to this story.