

It's only a two-hour wait. An ordinary Thursday afternoon at [Apple's](#) flagship UK store in Regent Street, London and a long line of customers snakes across the first floor. The hip technology brand is used to queues for the launch of its latest must-have product, but these people have come carrying faulty iPhones and malfunctioning laptops, desperate for help from one of Apple's increasingly hard to reach "Genius" experts.

When it opened in Virginia in 2001, the first Apple store was hailed as a retail revolution, allowing shoppers to play with expensive technology without any sales pressure. The emphasis on service, with blue-shirted Geniuses on hand to answer queries and fix broken products, has become almost as important to the Apple brand as the aesthetic appeal of its products. But the whole experience is under pressure as a relatively small number of shops struggle to cope with rapidly growing customer numbers. Next week's launch of a new iPad is likely to add to the pressure.

Last week, Apple hired Angela Ahrendts, the respected boss of the British fashion label Burberry, to head up its high street and online shop division.

With a turnover of \$19bn (£11.7bn) and the highest sales per square foot of any retail chain on the planet, Apple's shops dwarf Burberry's. With only around 415 outlets worldwide and retail sales a far smaller proportion of overall revenues than at the fashion brand, there is plenty of room for growth.

Ahrendts has also been hired with an eye to her fashion experience, given that the rumoured iWatch, which is likely to be the first of many wearable Apple technologies, could be launched as early as next spring.

Ahrendts, said to be a big fan of wristwatches, will undoubtedly have ideas about how such a product can best be displayed and marketed. She also faces the challenge of helping Apple keep its shops at the cutting edge in terms of service and design.

The Regent Street outlet, for example, employs at least 120 Geniuses. Each sees up to 30 customers a day but it is impossible to

book an appointment less than a week in advance. If the problem is urgent you can turn up and queue, but it could be a very long wait. This week, a gaggle of well-trained, polite and friendly staff worked their way along the line trying to answer simple queries and advise people on alternatives to queueing. But it is hard to redirect people when every nearby shop has its Geniuses fully booked for days on end.

The problem is not limited to London. In Apple's Paris flagship store there were no Genius appointments available for 10 days. In New York, the SoHo outlet is so busy that local residents complained a few years ago "no bar, nightclub or construction site comes close to ruining continually our quality of life like Apple SoHo has".

There is hope that Ahrendts, who has helped make Burberry a world leader in tech-driven shops underpinned by high quality service, will help to bring change. Some argue that Apple needs to take itself further upmarket, so it can serve fewer customers more effectively. That could be an option.

The former Dixons boss John Browett, Ahrendts' predecessor, who was sacked after less than six months, is thought to have clashed with Apple's most senior executives over plans to make the shops more efficient. He looked at ways to use fewer staff and produce a similar kind of outlet more cheaply. That may not be the route Apple wants to take but if it is to cope with growing demand it needs to open more shops and come up with clever ways of tackling overcrowding.

Jeff Kindleysides, of the store design group Checkland Kindleysides, said Apple should follow the trend towards handy local outlets: "The problem is accessibility. They could have specialist stores that just deal with iPhones, for example, where customers know why they should go there."

In Santa Monica, California, Apple has experimented with a completely different approach to improving accessibility by holding workshops outside its shops. Apple experts use a new app to talk to customers while they are on the move. That approach might be more difficult to employ on a wet and windy afternoon in Manchester than in sunny California, but it demonstrates creative thinking.

Ahrendts' expertise in linking the online and physical retail worlds at Burberry might also produce other ways of helping customers without the need to visit an outlet. There's certainly a need to improve on a service where you may have to wait for hours for a reply to an email query.

David Daziel of the store design firm Daziel & Pow suggests Apple could also open up more "dead" space within its existing shops. But Ahrendts will have to move carefully, he said. "Every one of our clients talks about Apple as the benchmark. There is no one else that has the conviction and clarity that they do in their stores."

He points out that, even though it is a cutting edge technology company, Apple doesn't do fancy interactive presentations in its stores. The store environment is straightforward and sparse, with computers, iPads and iPhones laid out simply on tables.

The company often selects buildings that are beautiful in their own right and highlights the architecture rather than relying on the kind of glitzy gadgetry employed in Burberry's most recent London shop.

"Burberry is a completely immersive digital experience, which is completely the opposite of what Apple does. They use the product and there is no other distraction," Daziel said. "If Apple tries to be like Burberry it might find itself losing some of its uniqueness."

The move into wearable technology will also present a new challenge. Such items may not look so appealing laid out on tables. Tim Kobe of Eight Inc, the company that helped come up with the original Apple store design, reckons the format is beginning to date. He told the Dezeen website: "I think the design is getting a little long in the tooth in terms of just continuing to roll out the same type of solution. My sense is that retail is a competitive environment, and I think Apple's ready for that next shift."

Ahrendts' job is to manage that shift, and she will need all her experience of using social media and other interactive tools to help blur the boundary between the physical and digital world in a way that reduces the queues without losing the magic of the original Apple stores.

New products

Apple's latest iPhones, introduced late last month, remain resolutely high-end despite all the talk before their launch of a cheap version.

The iPhone 5C, the source of those rumours, is around the same price as Apple would probably have dropped the iPhone 5 to now, had it not decided to discontinue it when it launched the latest models.

The top iPhone 5S retails at the same price as the old iPhone 5 when it was the most advanced model.

The impression that the 5C is no more than a 5 in a plastic case has apparently led to disappointing sales. Apple is cutting orders from suppliers just a month after launch and increasing production on the 5S.

Taking the two phones together, it's clear the company has another hit on its books. It revealed that 9m were sold worldwide in the first weekend, a combined revenue of at least £4bn.

The company is now looking ahead to the new iPad. It is expected to reveal the fifth generation of its tablet next week, with a thinner enclosure, faster processor and better camera. The second generation iPad mini is also expected to be launched at the same time.

Lest we forget its roots, Apple is also likely to announce a launch date for its new Mac Pro desktop computer, and for the Mac OS X Mavericks operating system