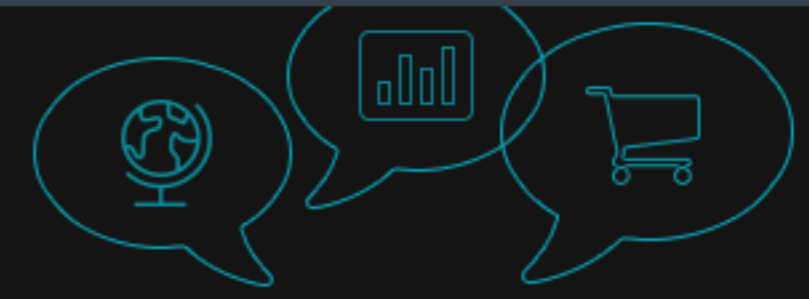


Blog



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Fulfilling the Promise of Omnichannel Retail



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Shoppers increasingly demand a retail experience that transcends the barriers between shopping online and in store.



All the rage right now is talk of omnichannel retail. It's a concept that promises to bring retailers closer to their customers by meeting heightened expectations of shopping immediacy, convenience, and ubiquity. It also recognizes an inevitable reality: shoppers increasingly demand a retail experience that transcends the barriers between shopping online and in store.

But how does it all translate into practical strategies for brick-and-mortar retailers? What can you do to realize the potential, meet the demands, and fulfill the promise of omnichannel? The answer lies in five steps for transforming the shopping experience. Taking these steps will help you to maintain your relevance in a retail world that's rapidly changing and threatening to leave behind those who don't evolve with it.

1) Emphasize and Enhance Service. A key aspect of the in-store experience that differentiates it from online is service. Quality service has always meant being present for the customer and sensitive to his/her concerns. But these days, also means being informed about the products you offer, updated on their availability, and savvy as to whether and how they can fulfill the customer's needs. And that's where technology comes in. Connection to the cloud through your store's wireless network enables shoppers to discover and redeem discounts, and sales associates to check inventory and access product information—all in real time. The result is service to the customer will feel both *proactive and interactive*. With that, customers are more likely to feel connected to the overall shopping experience.

2) Offer Guest Wi-Fi and Develop Mobile Apps. Shoppers nowadays are continually online with their mobile devices—a reality that further drives the demand for omnichannel retail. As such, they increasingly expect the freedom and flexibility of being online even while in your store. And that means offering them guest Wi-Fi. Meeting this expectation was once seen as encouraging the practice of showrooming (viewing a product in store and then buying it online at a more competitive price), but retailers are now using it to everyone's advantage. By providing shoppers with guest Wi-Fi, you open up opportunities for marketing and enhancing the overall shopping experience. What's more, if you develop your mobile presence with a bespoke application, you increase customer engagement with your brand. Used in conjunction with guest Wi-Fi, your mobile application can provide a conduit through which you can offer discounts, incentives, and services like price-checking and mobile checkout.

3) Deploy Mobile Analytics and Personalize Shopping. Another way to achieve omnichannel retail is to analyze the information that customers provide (through your guest Wi-Fi or mobile app), and then use the insights gained from that analysis to *personalize* their shopping. That last aspect is key. Shoppers increasingly demand that the retail experience be customized. Already an integral part of shopping online, personalization addresses customers in a way that's timely and relevant to them, increasing their loyalty and engagement with your brand. This can be done by targeting customers with offers for products in which they've already expressed interest or have a buying history. Implementing mobile analytics will also enable you to quantify the impact of showrooming by revealing where shoppers browse online while in your store. You can then use this information to make changes in pricing, merchandising, or inventory to remain more competitive with ecommerce retailers.

4) Synthesize the Brand Experience, In-Store and Online. Integrating online activity with in-store operations recognizes that for shoppers, the lines between the two are blurred. When customers see a single brand, they expect a unified shopping experience. For the retailer, that means having consistent promotions, packaging, pricing, and policies across all your channels. If a certain price or discount is offered on your ecommerce site, it should be honored inside any store of your chain. And if an order is made online, it should be returnable at a brick-and-mortar location. Customers don't care about the logistical challenges involved, nor should they. Fulfilling this part of the omnichannel promise means integrating and coordinating your operations so that the entire experience feels cohesive. Conversely, a lack of consistency across channels confuses customers, causing them to be dissatisfied and less likely to want to shop your brand.

5) Integrate and Streamline Supply Operations. Another way to implement omnichannel retail is to extend the practice of seamless shopping to your supply chain. This means having a product always available to the customer, in one way or another. If a particular style, size, or color isn't stocked in the store, then a sales associate should be able to instantly locate the product at another location or from a central warehouse, and then offer to have it shipped to the customer's home. This requires a fully integrated supply chain that's able to meet the logistic demands of product fulfillment. With it, you'll never have to turn away a customer with the disappointment that a requested item is out of stock.

There may soon come a day when the term "omnichannel retail" will be considered redundant. And that's because, quite simply, advances in technology and retail together will make commonplace the convergence of brick-and-mortar retail with ecommerce. Until then, these five steps will offer your retail operation a real-world strategy for maintaining relevance in an industry that's rapidly moving in that direction.

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