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How retailers must evolve the bricks-and-mortar experience with tech

April 21, 2017



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These days, many people consider bricks-and-mortar to be a dying concept, with traditional retailers such as Macy's closing a significant number of stores.

While the decline of bricks-and-mortar may seem inevitable, given the popularity of online shopping, many consumers actually prefer the in-store shopping experience. This begs the question of what bricks-and-mortar retailers are doing to lose these customers, or perhaps what they are not doing to retain them.

Many bricks-and-mortar retailers lose out to the convenience brought on by the ecommerce boom. To stay relevant, stores must use new technologies to evolve and innovate the in-store experience.

Here are three ways that retailers should evolve the bricks-and-mortar experience with technology at the forefront.

Enhance the shopper journey

In the ongoing evolution of bricks-and-mortar, creating an innovative shopping experience for customers is paramount.

Although ecommerce continues to grow, 70 percent of consumer purchasing decisions are still made "at the shelf," meaning bricks-and-mortar retailers must find creative ways to entice shoppers to make a purchase.

Retailers can accomplish this with demo displays, in-store presentation or innovative aesthetics anything that takes a new spin on what is considered a traditional store layout.

Apple is one noteworthy example of a retailer employing this tactic.

The electronics company is pioneering the modern retail experience with attractive architecture, an open layout and on-hand demo devices.

Shoppers who visit an Apple store have several ways to familiarize themselves with products before making a final decision to buy.

Another company that is innovating around bricks-and-mortar is eyeglasses retailer Warby Parker. The company has designed its store's interior to emulate a library.

An Ad Age article describes the store as "tall, carefully stacked shelves with hand-picked literature, vintage issues of Paris Review and comfortable midcentury chairs that invite weary SoHo shoppers to take a load off and sink into a book."

Also taking the in-store experience to new heights is Samsung's experiential flagship New York location.

According to Shopify, this location boasts a "digital playground" that is derived from the concept that the modern customer prefers interactions over transactions.

Leverage new digital technologies

Retailers must research and develop fresh technology-based approaches to improve the shopping experience.

Lowe's and John Lewis have begun offering in-store 3D models for shoppers to create a replica of their home and test different colors, patterns and finishes. This implementation of technology is useful to the consumer and will ultimately lower the number of returns and overall dissatisfaction in their locations.

Also, fashion and luxury retailers in 2017 are trying out several new technology-based trends to improve the customer journey, including one-to-one relationships, bots, voice and digital realities.

With its new tablet-based experience, Crate & Barrel is another example of a retailer implementing useful in-store technology.

The retailer has recently launched a tablet-based experience that bridges the gap between online and in-person shopping. It allows customers to use tablets as a mobile tote, scanning product bar codes in-store to get more information about the products in which they are interested.

Customers can also use the tablet search items and create shopping lists.

Improve existing technology

In addition to emerging technologies, retailers benefit from perfecting already-proven retail solutions.

One example is buy-online, pickup in-store (BOPIS).

BOPIS blends the online and bricks-and-mortar supply chain to provide consumers with a better grasp of inventory per location. This adds value to the consumer while reducing potential for abandoned purchases.

But this method is far from perfect.

On the bright side, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers, "69 percent of shoppers who used [BOPIS] during the 2015 holiday season purchased additional items while picking up in-store."

On the other hand, more than half of the customers who have used BOPIS experienced some sort of problem relating to their order, underscoring that BOPIS still has a long way to go.

Radio frequency identification (RFID) is a technology that retailers can use to enhance the bricks-and-mortar experience by more accurately tracking inventory.

The main problem with the technology is high cost for integration at scale. However, it does have the potential to show some impressive results.

Lululemon, for example, was able to increase inventory accuracy to 98 percent by implementing RFID technology across all stores, allowing them to track product movement from the time it arrives in-store and is displayed on-shelf, to when it is eventually sold.

EVEN IN A world where online shopping is the new norm, bricks-and-mortar shopping experiences still serve a purpose, and remain the dominant option for most shoppers.

If retailers take innovative, technology-focused measures to improve the in-store customer experience, they stand to take market share from those who do not.

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