

RETAIL

## 76pc of shoppers prefer technology-wielding sales associates

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*Consumers prefer sales associates who are armed with technology. Image credit: Hugo Boss*

By SARAH JONES

Rather than focusing on the cool factor behind in-store technology, retailers should prioritize touchpoints that streamline the purchase path to build loyalty, according to new data from SOTI.

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About two-thirds of consumers would rather use self-service technology than interact with a sales associate. While luxury retail is centered on a high-touch atmosphere, consumer tastes are evolving, and SOTI's report hints at a future where a high-tech environment is more sought-after by shoppers.

"As a result of our survey data, it's clear that consumers are having better and more rewarding in-store retail experiences when technology is integrated but not necessarily because it provides a cool' or wow' factor," said Carl Rodrigues, CEO of **SOTI**, Mississauga, Ontario.

"The in-store customer experience is transforming to meet the demands of the digital consumer, which means it's critical for retailers and luxury brands to integrate technologies that allow the consumer to be efficient and save time during their shopping experience," he said. "Examples of this we can see are retailers appealing to the digital generation by using technology to turn physical locations into 'showrooms,' more retailers interacting with their customers via their mobile devices, beacons being used to push relevant messages at point-of-sale and sensors being used to provide a better in-store experience and track patterns to develop better in-store layouts."

SOTI conducted a survey of 565 U.S. consumers ranging in age from 18 to 60.

Retail tech

Sixty-seven percent of respondents in SOTI's survey said that retailers with mobile technology woven into the store experience save them time.

While consumers prefer that sales associates be armed with technology themselves, they also favor self-service features. The most popular of these services is self-checkout, which 53 percent of consumers have a positive view of.

Customers are also interested in touch points such as scanners or kiosks for price checks, but their popularity pales

in comparison to self-checkout, with only 23 percent interested in the scanners.

SOTI's research paints a picture of a future potential for limited or no sales associates, as 77 percent said they would be very or somewhat comfortable in an environment with solely self-checkout available.

Currently, self-service checkout is primarily an option at big box stores, grocery stores and pharmacies. However, SOTI expects more smaller retailers to implement the technology this year.

Physical retailers differentiate themselves from online counterparts through lower price points, a wider assortment of goods and unique experiences, but as ecommerce is priced to match and product selections expand, bricks-and-mortar sellers are defined only by experience.



*Consumers prefer that sales associates are armed with technology. Image credit: Printemps*

Engaging with customers on the shop floor is one of the best ways of improving that experience and mobile technology can help sales associates accomplish that goal more effectively. But a report from NewStore found that only 51 percent of brands empower their associates with smartphones or other mobile devices to help customers ([see story](#)).

While technology may be replacing some sales associate services, frontline sales staff are far from obsolete, according to results of a survey conducted by InMoment.

The bricks-and-mortar shopping experience no longer exists in a vacuum, with consumers arriving at a store armed with information from research conducted before or even during their trip. However, while shoppers spend about twice as much in-store when they navigate to a brand's Web site while shopping, their expenditures grow to four times more if they interact with both an associate and the brand's Web site while in-store ([see story](#)).

"The rapid proliferation of technology is having an undeniable impact on the roles and responsibilities of the retail sales associate," SOTI's Mr. Rodrigues said. "While some may insist that the role of the retail associate is becoming extinct, the facts speak for themselves."

"Nine out of every 10 dollars are still spent inside the physical store. It makes more sense to adapt the role of the in-store associate than consider closing shop," he said. "In fact, it is the traditional role of the 'sales associate' often associated with driving sales on the shop floor, that has been pushed aside in recent years. Savvy retailers invest in improving the customer experience and building long-term customer loyalty."

"As more tech is integrated into the retail experience, the next generation retail associate will undoubtedly be tech savvy and empowered by their managers through enhanced trainings and new technologies. In return, those retail associates will be equipped with tools that will allow them to access critical data in real time, leading to more effective interactions with customers and a positive impact on sales."

#### Digitizing delivery

Outside of the store environment, consumers are open to technology to facilitate the ecommerce delivery

experience, according to SOTI's survey.

Six in 10 survey respondents said they are open to new shipping methods. The most accepted form of tech-enhanced delivery is drones, with 29 percent comfortable with the devices bringing their packages.

While Amazon first talked of drone delivery in 2013, the service may be nearing as aerospace companies are working to build cargo-carrying drones, according to [Popular Mechanics](#).

Autonomous vehicles are supported by 28 percent, while a third of consumers are comfortable with in-home delivery, such as Amazon Key.

Even though 60 percent are comfortable with these new innovations, retailers will have to get the other 40 percent on board.

"For brick-and-mortar luxury retailers fighting to target and capture the in-store consumer, they will need to make key investments into improving the in-store experience by giving consumers richer context-based information, automating their shopping experience, and making their shopping decisions easier," Mr. Rodrigues said. "While ecommerce has grown as a buzzword in the retail industry, luxury retailers looking to amplify their omnichannel operations must understand that mobile applications and Internet of Things (IoT) will play a significant factor in future success."

"Retailers need to invest in new IoT technologies like beacons, smart mirrors and shelf sensors, to keep up with evolving consumer behaviors while also being able to increase efficiency and create new, impactful customer experiences."

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