

RETAIL

Sales associate service still key differentiator for retailers

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AI can free up sales associates' time to better serve consumers. Image credit: Printemps

By SARAH JONES

Almost three-quarters of consumers say that personalized service from frontline staff plays an integral role in shaping their decisions of which retailer to do business with, pointing to the continued importance of human help amid an increasingly independent retail environment.

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According to a report from enVista, both self-service and staff interactions need to coexist in stores, since about half of consumers would choose a store with self-checkout. The bricks-and-mortar store remains an important piece of the retail puzzle, but it needs a makeover to blend physical and digital.

"Retailers need well trained, motivated sales associates to create an environment where customers feel important and cherished," said Gene Bornac, senior vice president of retail at enVista. "Online retailers can compete on price and selection but they lack the personal touch of human interaction."

"Physical stores can differentiate and enhance the customer experience with store associates that provide personalized contact and recommendations that take into account the emotions, expressions and reactions of customers," he said. "This personalized service can't be replicated online."

Personalization priorities

The study found that retailer priorities often do not line up with consumer expectations.

Seventy-two percent of consumers place importance on receiving a personalized experience, and 51 percent believe it is important to receive a consistent customized experience across channels. Seven in 10 consumers also say they would be more apt to shop with a retailer that offers them personalized rewards.

However, only a third of retailers indicate that personalization is a top priority for 2020.

Retailers also have an opportunity to further personalize the in-store experience by identifying shoppers earlier in their visit. Fifty-six percent of consumers are comfortable with retailers identifying them via their mobile device, whether through beacons, WiFi or other means.

The most popular means of discovering the identity of a bricks-and-mortar consumer is through a retailer's mobile Web site, followed by a mobile application and mobile wallet. Increasingly, retailers are also using social media to identify shoppers, with two-thirds turning to social media listening.

Sixty percent of retailers pinpoint who the customer is at the point of store entry or before. But 27 percent of retailers only know who their shopper is at the checkout stage, missing out on opportunities to personalize the rest of the in-store experience.

Additionally, just 44 percent of retailers enable associates access to consumer data ahead of checkout. This prevents them from more effectively serving up tailored offers and product ideas.

For instance, giving associates access to a shopper's purchase history can help them guide clients towards items that fit with what they already own or align with their style or preferences.



In-store technology can be a tool for sales associates. Image credit: Hugo Boss

Retailers also have an opportunity to enable freer sales staff interactions by providing their associates with mobile devices. Particularly, mobile checkout allows salespeople to complete a purchase seamlessly anywhere in the store.

Only 29 percent of retailers say they have mobile POS implemented and it is working well, with 45 percent saying their checkout experience is in place but needs work.

Mobile technology can also be used for consumer-facing activations. About a quarter of consumers use their phones while in-store to reference product information, compare prices or find offers.

Two-thirds of consumers say they prefer retailers that offer promotions, loyalty programs and product details via mobile channels.

Mobile is also increasingly the starting point for consumers' purchase paths, with 56 percent of buying processes begin on mobile.

As consumers take a more fragmented route from research to purchase, 51 percent of shoppers say they are likely to seek out a retailer that offers a shared cart across channels, enabling them to start and finish their transaction in any type of interaction.

Retailers are taking note of this need for a more unified commerce experience, with 95 percent of merchants having either an existing single commerce structure or plans to implement one.

"Leveraging clientelling and localization, retailers can create a more personalized experience for customers," Mr. Bornac said. "The introduction of social media and interactive technologies can also lead to a more relevant and personalized experience for customers.

"Combining technology with motivated associates can create a truly personalized and rewarding shopping experience for customers," he said.

Do it yourself

Despite the remaining demand for sales associate help, consumers are also showing an appreciation for self-service features.

Fifty-four percent of consumers would prefer a store with self-checkout. Additionally, close to half of consumers say they are likely to choose a store with automated returns, allowing them to get a refund without having to wait for a

sales associate.

For instance, Nordstrom's New York flagship store includes the option for self-serve returns. Consumers scan the item they wish to return with their phone and drop it off ([see story](#)).

While a growing trend in retail, augmented and virtual reality are less of a draw for shoppers than some other services, with 23 percent of consumers saying the incorporation of these technologies would sway them.

Augmented reality mirrors have caught on particularly in the beauty space, enabling shoppers to try on product virtually.

A project from beauty group Coty in the form of an AR-powered mirror that interacts with physical products highlights how beauty has embraced augmented reality's potential to a large degree. Luxury brands and retailers that focus on beauty have much to learn from their competitors for whom AR is a versatile and powerful tool for increasing customer satisfaction ([see story](#)).

"Luxury retailers' customers want a high level of service along with exceptional styles and product quality," Mr. Bornac said. "Self-service is not a high priority for luxury retail customers, as with high prices comes the expectation for personal attention and exceptional service.

"Retailers in other categories need to offer customers self-service options to maintain value and speed in customer interactions," he said. "Speed is not as important as service in luxury retail."

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