

COLUMNS

How to meet customer engagement expectations this year

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Technology will play a key role in customer engagement as digital claims a larger share of retail transactions

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Consumer expectations are always on the move, and the one expectation that has undergone the most sizable shift is engagement.

More than **half of consumers** feel that brands should change the way they engage with shoppers. Digital initiatives top consumers' wish lists, largely due to the current pandemic, but engagement was already moving in that direction.

Chatbots handle basic customer questions, stores' apps convert the smartphone into a wayfinding device, and augmented reality is now transforming the path to purchase into a visually immersive experience. And with **40 percent of shoppers** willing to pay more for a product they can experience, digital is definitely worth exploring.

Take Saatchi Art, for example.

The online art gallery's app allows customers to **view art in their rooms** prior to making a purchase. It also can connect customers directly with curators for art advisory services.

With that functionality, customers can do everything from the comfort of home. It just takes a kernel of creativity from brands to leverage technology into an improved customer experience.

Connecting with consumers in new ways

This is not to say that more traditional marketing methods such as direct mail should fall by the wayside, but digital, in all its iterations, provides brands with new ways of connecting with consumers.

Augmented reality (AR) alone has influenced nearly two-thirds of consumers regarding where to shop and can increase conversion rates by as much as 40 percent.

It is no wonder that more brands are adopting extended reality (XR) to ramp up their engagement efforts.

Research has shown that **80 percent of consumers** feel that experiences are just as important as products and

services. Throw WebXR content into the marketing mix, and it is possible to connect with target audiences in more interactive, immersive ways and without an app.

But WebXR content can come up short when left on its own.

Artificial intelligence, machine learning and natural language understanding (NLU) can all help personalize interactions between the brand and consumer.

AI can help brands gain insights into target audiences. Couple these insights with NLU, and a chatbot can engage in actual conversations not to mention make recommendations and offer targeted promotions.

Embracing digital technology to engage today's consumers

This naturally leads to the question: How exactly should a brand use technology to meet expectations for customer engagement?

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, the following strategies are often the best places to start:

Rethink XR

XR is much more than some VR headset. It is a means for allowing the customer to shape and personalize experiences with a brand. Currently, 64 percent of shoppers want brands to offer a combination of AI/AR virtual shopping assistants. Another 20 percent expect brands to provide AR tools.

Consider what you offer in a digital experience: Is it customizable? Is it consistent across platforms? Is the journey seamless as customers move from the digital to physical realms?

Every touch point along the customer journey, from sales and service to marketing and fulfillment, should embody the brand while still interacting with the individual on a personal level.

Leverage 5G technologies

Eventually, 5G will be the norm. This will be a boon for consumers, as it allows them to download content more quickly and experience fewer delays.

For brands, however, its arrival will usher in greater Internet of Things innovations, particularly when it comes to XR.

Consumers can enjoy a richer branded experience, which can take engagement to the next level.

Explore what 5G can do for your XR engagement efforts to get the ball rolling before others in your sector.

Embrace social media still

Social media is not going anywhere, and now brands can "sell" directly from social media posts.

Snapchat, for one, recently announced a \$3.5 billion fund to invest in Snapchat Lens, AR experiences that anyone can use.

Add an element of VR or AR to a branded post, and customers will have the immersive experience they seek. Create and share with users to elicit deeper engagement with a target audience.

TECHNOLOGY OFFERS endless opportunities to connect with consumers. The only real parameter is your imagination.

Explore XR and what 5G means to this functionality, and never forget the power of social media, where consumers spend large chunks of their days.

If you are not present on these channels, your brand simply will not be a part of the purchase decision.



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