COLUMNS

4 factors to sharpen the holiday mcommerce experience

June 26, 2013

By Kevin Carlson

While it may seem like a crazy question to ask at the beginning of summer, the reality is that the 2013 holiday season is a mere five months away. And while that may seem like a long time in some industries, five months might as well be a half-week in technology time.

So the time is over for celebrating this past year's holiday's record-setting ecommerce and mobile commerce sales, up 24 percent and 14.4 percent, respectively. The fact is that total retail sales were still down approximately 1 percent.

Chances are, many retailers will recognize the opportunity available in the growing mobile commerce channel, and double-down on their technology efforts in an attempt to compensate for sagging bricks-and-mortar returns.

So if you are thinking of competing with a mobile commerce presence for holiday 2013, the time to start innovating is now.

To help you on your way, here are four things that both online and bricks-and-mortar retailers can do to round-out their mobile commerce experience just in time for the holidays.

· Establish user experience (UX) strategy

· Unleash the power of context

· Embrace new consumer behavior

· Provide real-time information

Establish user experience (UX) strategy

The mobile experience should never be an afterthought. This is one of the most common mistakes I have seen companies make when introducing a mobile commerce channel.

Simply forcing a full browser Web site into a mobile device rarely makes a positive impact. You absolutely must offer a positive mobile experience if you truly expect a positive response from your visitors.

The key to making intelligent mobile UX decisions is to ignore how people interact on traditional Web sites.

Throw out all you have learned about traditional ecommerce usability and focus solely on how a user will interact with your brand on a mobile device.

The most successful mobile implementations start when you focus entirely addressing what should be presented in a mobile context, down to minute details such as gesture implementations and controls that make a Web experience looks like a native application.

The 2013 holiday mobile commerce success stories will most certainly be headlined by companies who chose to move beyond the traditional Web experience practices, and towards an entirely different thought process that leverages the available native device features that were created to enhance the mobile browsing experience.

But before you start convincing yourself that you absolutely need a native app, spend some time figuring out exactly what functionality you want to put in front of the user in a mobile context. And as always, prioritize appropriately.

Unleash the power of context
While it has been said that content is king, context is queen in my book – and she provides useful counsel to the king, especially during the holiday shopping season.

Mobile consumers are looking for quick access to critical product information on their device, not in-depth detail.

And while there may be times when detail helps, it is rarely worth the effort when you consider the limited screen real estate available on most smartphones, and even some tablets.

Speaking of context, what better way to present your brand to a consumer in the perfect context than to tailor an experience for each visitor by leveraging the information you already know about them?

Mobile analytics and geo-location, for example, are an easy way for you to make a good

impression by presenting the most relevant and personal experience possible.

For example, if a customer visits your site via a mobile device, and then allows her browser or app to share geo-location information, you as a retailer can check to see where she is. And if she happens to be showrooming in one of your bricks-and-mortar locations, you can instantly offer her an incentive to "buy now" while she is still in the store.

Alternatively, you can use an approach I call "epoaching."

Here is how it works: Carefully monitor mobile user activity. And if you happen to notice that a customer is browsing your mobile site from a competitor's bricks-and-mortar location – whether she is comparing price or availability – you can offer her a bigger incentive on the spot if she leaves your competitor's store and buys from you, whether online or in-store.

Similar tactics can be employed using data collected from mobile site or app use.

Embrace new consumer behavior
To further build on the examples above, showrooming is a behavior that many retailers should start to embrace, rather than discourage.

After all, the smartest consumers have always comparison shopped, so why not attract these shoppers by encouraging it?

There are so many ways to embrace showrooming. You can use mobile technology to direct consumers to review sites and price-comparison sites. Show them that you are not afraid to compete.

Then, even if your price is higher than the competition, you can use technology that is already enabled on most mobile devices to offer incentives to get customers moving towards checkout.

Provide real-time information
Perhaps the most important, yet most overlooked part of implementing a mobile experience is a properly integrated back-end system.

Using a mobile app or Web site to tell a customer that you have a product in stock is great.

But you better be sure you are retrieving that information from a timely updated inventory management system. Otherwise, you will wind up disappointing customers even more than had you simply told them it was unavailable from the start.

Also, if you are considering generating on-the-fly coupons for comparison shoppers and showroomers, then your POS system absolutely must know about those coupon codes.

And while it will take real-time updates between your mobile infrastructure and POS system to complete this model, the ends will most definitely justify the means.

FOR THOSE SEARCHING for the 2013 holiday ecommerce edge, these four points can

help you take the first step towards rounding out your mobile experience.

Educated decisions about content and context, consumer behavior and user experience should drive all conversations.

Mobile platform discussions and integration requirements gathering needs to start now. And since 90 percent of all mobile users keep their device within arm's reach at all times, you may want to buckle your seatbelt as we head towards late November.

Because if you do not start your planning now, it may very well be a bumpy sleigh ride for your mobile commerce numbers this year.

Kevin Carlson is vice president and chief security officer of Optaros, Boston. Reach him at kcarlson@optaros.com.