

COLUMNS

How mobile changed bricks-and-mortar shopping – for better or worse

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Remember approximately ten years ago when consumers would go on the hunt for a particular electronic device or appliance? Rather than spending hours traveling from store to store, comparing prices and product specs, they would oftentimes settle for a well-known brand purchased through a store they trusted.

Thanks to today's mobile-heavy environment, that traditional idea of the consumer shopping experience is as good as gone.

Show grooming

A 2013 report by Pew Research shows that 56 percent of U.S. consumers own a smartphone, giving them instant access to the Internet and every product that can be found online.

With that kind of accessibility to pricing, product specs and customer reviews, mobile devices have created the showrooming effect – a phenomenon where bricks-and-mortar stores become glorified showrooms for huge online retailers such as Amazon, providing a place for consumers to look at a potential purchase before buying it elsewhere for less.

Mobile has turned products into commodities and online incentives such as home

delivery and next-day shipping have taken away any incentive for a consumer to purchase a product in-store, creating an environment where shopping is no longer about the store loyalty, or the in-store experience, but about price, convenience and customer benefit.

However, this shift towards online retail does not spell the end of traditional bricks-and-mortar commerce.

If anything, mobile's immersion in our everyday lives actually provides retailers a valuable opportunity to embrace mobile as an asset and use it to foster the biggest advantage a bricks-and-mortar store has to offer: personalized, superior-level customer service.

Talking shop

With the explosion of mobile, retailers have been forced to rethink how they do business at a store level, and effectively compete with online retailers.

Through this process, many bricks-and-mortar shops have returned to their roots, cultivating an environment of exceptional customer service and providing a greater degree of efficiency to customers' lives, which in turn tilts the customers' "What's in it for me" scenario in favor of in-store retailers.

These retailers can also use mobile to their advantage. Here are three ways are bringing success to bricks-and-mortar locations:

- Social retailing. Some stores have found ways to make in-store shopping a more social experience and connect it to a consumer's digital world.

Macy's is a fantastic example of this. As a way to connect with its digital-savvy customers, Macy's developed a "Magic Fitting Room" that made it possible for in-store customers to virtually try on the latest styles on Macy's Hot List and share their favorite looks to their social channels instantly.

In just six weeks, Macy's saw more customers in-store, with more than 16,000 customers participating in this social retailing experience

- In-store pickup. One way to provide efficiency and utility to a consumer's life is by allowing her to make purchases online while at the office or running errands and pick-up in store. This is something Walmart has been doing for a long time, and with immense success.

- Just-in-time advertising. Once a customer enters the store, whether to showroom or shop, mobile gives retailers a way to keep her there.

Through CRM tools, retailers have the ability to recognize customers with an affinity for their brand – perhaps they have downloaded your mobile application – and use targeted special offers to drive positive purchase intent in the store.

WHAT IT BOILS down to is what your bricks-and-mortar store can offer a potential customer that an online retailer cannot, and how you can use the existing tools that

customers have at hand to your store's advantage.

My advice: make mobile your friend rather than your enemy.

Embrace the changing shopping model and mold it to your benefit, but never forget to maintain strong customer relationships through service and personalization.

Through this, you may just find your customers embracing a loyalty to your brand that mobile almost made them forget.

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