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In-store mobility: What are the next steps?

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According to a new study by Accenture, more U.S. shoppers plan to make purchases at bricks-and-mortar retail stores in 2014, which is good news for retailers. At the same time, however, 40 percent of survey respondents said that retailers need to improve the shopping experience in their stores — and that is exactly where enterprise mobility can make a difference.

Enterprise mobility can vastly improve the in-store customer experience by enabling sales associates to work with customers in the aisle, creating an Apple-like store shopping experience. To date, however, enterprise mobility has focused primarily on mobile point of sale: a good beginning, but one that only scratches the surface of mobile's full potential.

While mobile POS represented the first wave of enterprise mobility, we are now seeing retailers focus on cross-channel, customer-focused capabilities that represent the next wave of mobility. These capabilities can help a retailer provide a clearly differentiated shopping experience.

Fulfilling cross-channel orders. Most retailers want to be able to locate and source a

product from anywhere in their organization — whether at another store, a warehouse, or a supplier location — and deliver it anywhere the customer needs it.

Mobility plays into this scenario because retailers want to meet the customer's needs in the aisle, and to close more sales they have to be able to make the sourcing and delivery a seamless part of that interaction.

Enterprise inventory visibility is essential to this process. Being able to answer questions such as, "Do you have this item in stock?" and "Where is it?" and "How long will it take to ship it?" are essential for fulfilling cross-channel orders and improving customer satisfaction.

With access to enterprise systems, mobile devices allow retail stores to become a focal point for omnichannel selling, helping prevent lost sales and increase revenue.

Informed customer engagement. Retailers are also focused on bringing better customer insights into the selling process.

Store associates can use their mobile devices to help facilitate the customer's decision-making process with access to purchase histories, preferences, loyalty program status and tailored recommendations.

With mobile access to product preferences and purchase histories on the shop floor, retailers do not have to restart the conversation every time a customer comes into the store.

Mobile bridges the gap between the customer's online activity and the store visit, making shoppers feel like they have a personal relationship with the store.

Detailed product information. Adding rich product content to the selling process brings another level of detail to the shopping experience that customers will appreciate.

Having immediate access to content such as images, comparisons and ratings and reviews is especially important in segments such as consumer electronics, recreational equipment and many other hardlines.

Delivering this level of information means that retailers will need to carefully assess their technology infrastructure and keep the following technology requirements in mind.

First, retailers need a reliable Wi-Fi network that conforms to the highest security and encryption standards. This ensures that associates have access to the data and capabilities they need from anywhere in the store to create a personalized, high-quality customer experience.

Next, retailers will need a high performance wide area network (WAN) to serve up the needed data that exists outside of the store. Most enterprise data is housed somewhere other than the store, so retailers will need the bandwidth to deliver it on demand.

The investments, however, are well worth it.

The next wave of enterprise mobility can enable retailers to deliver the kind of rewarding, engaging shopping experience that their customers are demanding.

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