

Five retail technology trends you should know about

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Here are some of the retail marketing trends that might just help you create a standout customer experience.



Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

B&Q is a good example of a company doing brand journalism right, one of five retail technology trends you should know about.

Brand journalism

To keep the brand front of mind between purchases, retailers are turning to journalism. Brand journalism has been prevalent in the travel industry for years (think of in-flight magazines) – but the opportunities for this in retail have exploded with more channels available through which to drive content directly to customers.

B&Q is a good example of a brand doing this right. For anyone searching for home building or eco news, they will likely stumble upon B&Q's video how-to guides and expert interviews. This doesn't just deliver brand reinforcement; it gives the customer additional value to keep them returning to the content (and products) throughout the year.

In this content battleground, retailers are looking at simple ways to source this content and give it character. Customers are a really excellent source for this. Why not crowdsource content via social channels or bespoke tools like Scoopshot and ask for votes, photos or views?

For a retailer such as John Lewis that sells itself on customer service, it's also effective to crowdsource internally. There's always a rich source of ideas and opinions hiding within the team, such as mums with a keen interest in blogging, or university students with a creative writing specialism.

This extra content is particularly effective outside of the sales cycle for that customer, as a way to drive continual engagement. For perfume shops this may be during the first half of the year; for clothing retailers this may be in between seasons; and for automotive retailers this may be over several years.

Brand journalism should be an ongoing commitment for retailers, to hit consumers with relevant information continuously, so that when the time is right for that next purchase, the retailer is in the best possible position.

Engaging customers in real-time

All retailers have the ability to engage a consumer in real-time, and serving data back to customers generates a more interactive experience. The travel industry is the star performer here, with most hotel booking sites now showing real-time information such as how many rooms are left, or when the last room was booked. Publishers and events websites often show how many people are on the website at that time, to give the viewer a sense of community within the website itself.

Retailers are embarking on real-time by replicating the best of all channels. If someone is shopping they'll buy the item that's nearest. Through live information shoppers can quickly compare online prices by location and availability. Providing tools to see where products are located nearest or cheapest can satisfy the customer and counteract the much-feared danger of showrooming (shopping and comparing online while in store).

Recognising small anomalies in data

Sometimes small irregularities can deliver the biggest opportunities. Those are often the customers who are searching for something particular, and are more likely to be in purchase mode than a casual browser.

If a shopper clicks on the swimwear section of a fashion retailer website in November, there's a good chance they have a holiday planned. Leading the follow-up email with information on the bikini range – even if it's just in the subject line – can generate rich returns. Retailers are starting to pick out the smaller, out of place results from huge data sets to yield greater returns.

Rewarding customer curators

There is a major movement towards individual customers curating their own collections of products. Any consumer can become an affiliate, and a number of tools have been launched that enable consumers to aggregate their favourite or recommended content.

Self-affiliates are, in the most simple form, those people who are bookmarking your site, or building wishlists and Google shortlists. These principles extend to sophisticated affiliate platforms such as import.io, which allows you to mix results from multiple retailers and refine your own virtual "department store" through which friends can make purchases. Retailers are facilitating these brand advocates by offering more social icons and shareable links to products.

Questioning local marketing initiatives

Overseas online sales are set to soar sevenfold to £28bn by 2020 (OC&C and Google). This forecast may have UK retailers imagining complex multi-language website infrastructure builds, but this doesn't have to be the case.

Some brands are finding that simply replicating what they do in the UK for a different geography doesn't give the levels of return they would require. The cost of implementing website and marketing content in a relatively small market doesn't always provide the anticipated return on investment.

Another option is to channel sales through partners with a local presence in that market. Retailers can achieve in-store and online placement in local department stores to host international growth.

The fact is that data shows a lot of this international growth is happening through home websites and retailers choosing to ship internationally. So retailers need to think carefully before making a major investment in local language websites and content.

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media-network/media-network-blog/2013/may/10/retail-marketing-trends-customer-experience>