

SHOPPING TALK

How the retailer–customer dynamic is an ongoing learning experience

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Information is everywhere today. It can be overwhelming for consumers to find and review the information they need. As the retail industry continues to evolve, it is challenging to stay in tune with the latest and greatest trends and behaviors. When new product release “rumors” circulate, how do you know what is valid? How do you sift through the noise to get that golden nugget your business needs?

I was fortunate enough to recently attend the first Shoptalk conference in Las Vegas – an intimate gathering of top dealers and manufacturers discussing the future of in-store and online shopping. Along with compelling keynotes from the likes of Facebook, Hudson Bay Company and Jet.com, there were also highlights that resonated for the consumer technology sector at large:

Think before acting on the voice of the consumer. Is the customer always right? Ivy Chin, senior vice president, eCommerce & Omnichannel Digital, Belk, said it well: “They are always right in what they want, but they don’t always ask for it in the right way.” Many times consumers say what they want, but their behavior tells us something completely different. By maintaining the mindset that there is always something to learn about your consumers, they will discover something new. For those reasons, it is important to take into account the explicit and implicit information given to you by consumers.

Exponential changes in consumer expectations have raised competitive stakes. As technology brings more possibilities to life, consumers expect more. They used to be impressed with same-day delivery – but now it’s delivery in one to two hours that wows them. Brands and retailers will need to keep up with these demands, even if the difficulty to fulfill them is extremely challenging to execute.



Shopping has transcended websites and apps. Commerce is everywhere. If you can think it, chances are you can buy it. From Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest to Amazon Echo, these companies are transforming their platforms into shopping opportunities for consumers. The proliferation of personal tech devices has given rise to new shopping opportunities via social media and AI. At the same time, Centennials and Generation Z are giving brick-and-mortar stores a thumbs-up because they want to touch, feel and try products before spending their money.

Bot-human interactions must drive engaging experiences. Dan Herman, CEO of Welcome, sees the increased use of bots in customer service as a huge new trend. AI bots, the ‘Holy Grail’ of bots, are a great tool, but there is ultimately no replacement for human-to-human interaction. “The second the degree of confidence in the understanding of intent or ability to provide a response falls below a certain level, kick it over to a human immediately,” said Herman.

Shopping needs to be re-imagined, not just re-created online. The rise of omnichannel has made it a necessity for

brands and retailers to be available to consumers anywhere and everywhere. It’s not enough to just recreate in-store experiences online. Retailers need to use data and new customer service technology (like the bots) to improve the experience, or they will fall short of consumers’ expectations. Amit Sharma, CEO of Narvar, said it best: “It’s not reactive. It’s proactive.”

Bridging the offline physical world with the online digital. Long story short, Shoptalk was all about bridging the physical world with the digital one. It’s not just one or the other – both must be implemented and executed successfully to create a complete experience for the consumer. Through mobile, social media and in-store shopping, we need to break down the silos that make it difficult for consumers to shop across touchpoints.

Reports on the “death of stores” are grossly exaggerated. Jerry Storch, CEO Hudson’s Bay Company, said, “90.2 percent of sales are still in stores...Amazon still only controls 1.5 percent of U.S. retail sales. Most transactions are directly influenced by digital interactions, and 82 percent of online retail interactions involve stores at some point.” Meanwhile, “70 percent of digital interactions create a store visit.”

The consensus? Brick-and-mortar stores are still relevant and still performing well; they just need a new strategy that capitalizes on the technology available. But it’s not enough to go with the technology that is handed to you - do the research, and find that technology that fits your business’s specific needs. That way, the right technology will work for you, and not the other way around.

Some great examples I have come across are Narvar, Welcome, StellaService and Birst. These companies and the seven key points above are a great starting point to re-imagine shopping as we know it. ■