

COLUMNS

How mobile is transforming the retail industry in stores and online

May 20, 2014



Ed Brill is Chicago-based director of mobile enterprise marketing at IBM

By AN AMERICAN MARKETER COLUMNIST

By [Ed Brill](#)

The retail customer experience is a shifting collection of moments that occur while shopping online, in-person at a store or while resolving an issue via a contact center.

Today, all of these channels involve mobile to varying degrees whether customers are comparing prices or checking product reviews, making a purchase using a mobile wallet, or receiving personalized promotion offers via text or through social media channels.

With mobile, customers are empowered like never before.

In fact, 45 percent of consumers use their phone for in-store price comparisons, and 65 percent of consumers have retailer applications on their phones. So it is no wonder that there are heightened expectations for consistent interactions, timely and accurate responses, and a positive overall shopping experience.

To help retailers address growing customer expectations and improve in-store experiences, there are three key areas where mobile can drive greater differentiation and value.

Securely analyzing data for improved customer insight

Transactions, multichannel interactions, social media and syndicated data from loyalty cards and other customer-related information have increased the ability for retailers to create a consolidated, constantly updated view of customer behavior and preferences.

Capitalizing on these volumes of information requires the ability to securely manage and access it in the cloud, and perform meaningful analytics so that retailers can quickly create greater, more accurate context for mobile interactions that improve the customer experience.

From understanding where the customer is located in near real-time to analyzing recent purchase history, retailers can more accurately deliver relevant, personalized and timely offerings via a mobile device and improve both the mobile and in-store shopping experience.

For example, by being able to quickly access up-to-date inventory detail stored in the cloud, consumers searching for specific products through a retailer's app can be more well-informed and efficient when walking into a store or speaking with a sales associate creating a positive overall impression of the brand.

Empowering sales associates

Empowering sales associates with mobile devices can help them provide a better customer experience and increase sales.

Equipping employees with modern mobile technologies, whether company owned or personal, enables retailers to improve productivity, customer service, merchandising and sales.

Using mobile capabilities, sales associates can provide better, more personalized customer service through a number of actions such as the ability to check availability and locate products for customers in-store in real time, or to leverage customer data to match customer preferences for mobile offers.

For example, a store associate can easily up-sell or cross-sell, or create targeted personalized offers based on real-time information collected while interacting with customers in-store to enhance the customer experience.

Mobile technologies empower associates to become the ultimate customer advisor by helping them to streamline manual processes and improve in-store operations.

For example, sales associates can benefit from an app that features an in-store performance dashboard to track productivity and view store maps to analyze in-store foot traffic to prioritize customer service.

Cognitive systems and the convergence of the digital and physical shopping experience

Today people expect companies to know who they are, how to engage with them and how to exceed their expectations.

Through cognitive-based mobile apps, retailers will be able to better engage with their customers and, most importantly, learn from each interaction to provide a seamless digital and physical shopping experience.

The availability of highly intelligent cognitive systems can take retail data analytics a step further.

Using natural language processing and machine learning algorithms, cognitive systems help make key decisions using enormous volumes of fast-moving big data.

Cognitive systems learn from each customer interaction to provide a real-time integration of digital and in-store physical customer experience.

As data continues to grow rapidly and customers interact with stores through a variety of different channels, retailers will be able to turn to cognitive computing capabilities for seamless customer relationships and to provide consumers with informed recommendations according to their expressed needs.

By examining the rise of near-field communications and mobile wallets, augmented reality, in-store marketing, personalized promotion, accurate inventory visibility, price checking and comparison shopping, it is clear that mobile is fundamentally changing the way retailers and consumers interact.

And it is happening now. Combined with the benefits afforded by cloud, social and, big data and analytics, retailers are in an incredible position to reinforce their brand relationship across the customer journey through greater insight, context and sheer opportunity.

Ed Brill is Chicago-based director of mobile enterprise marketing at IBM and author of Opting In: Lessons in Social Business. Reach him at ed_brill@us.ibm.com.