

# In search of great customer experience



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“There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down simply by spending his money somewhere else,” Walmart founder Sam Walton once said.

As that quote demonstrates, the idea of a customer-first business is hardly new.

But, as those dealing with the sheer breadth and volume of entries to *Retail Week's* inaugural Customer Experience Awards this week will testify, what that means to modern retailers is on a scale unimaginable only a decade ago, even to a visionary such as Walton.

Customer experience is a concept that has crept into the retail vernacular – a product of the digital age, but just as integral to the future of physical stores.

I have seen customer experience defined as the cumulative impact of multiple touchpoints over time between a retailer and a customer, which result in an emotional connection. Or as a blog by Forrester from 2010 said, it is, “how customers perceive their interactions with your company”.

These definitions are helpful but also point to the challenge the sector faces. They demonstrate the expanding complexity of that customer journey and the fact that there is an emotional consequence to each interaction.

It is that emotion that separates service from experience, but it is both hard to define and varies from touchpoint to touchpoint and retailer to retailer.

If the arrival of ecommerce merged

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traditional views of customer service with new digital practices such as user experience, it has really been the coming of age of social media, real-time interactive feedback and mobile that have revolutionised thinking, as consumers expect a one-to-one relationship with retail brands.

Amazon and Selfridges are both renowned for their customer experience, but the way they deliver it could not be more different. Amazon has built an empire on the efficiency of its touchpoints – an almost “anti-experience”, where less is most certainly more.

Selfridges, meanwhile, is famous for theatre and lasting experiences and its Christmas shop at its flagship store in London, unveiled this week, is a case in point. It is home to personalised gifts, an ‘Astrolounge’ space and over 60,000 decorations to browse.

Meanwhile, Tesco's decision this week to silence the “unexpected item in the bagging area” alert at its self-service checkouts in recognition that it irritated customers is a prime example of the level of attention retailers must now pay to the vast array of customer touchpoints.

Retail is an industry that likes to deal in finite numbers – sales, footfall – and the value of customer transactions. But as the competitive landscape intensifies, finding ways to build that nebulous emotional connection with customers, measure it, and understand its relationship with the value of what you sell will be the key to driving loyalty and differentiation.