

# RetailWeek TECH & ECOMM



## Customers and colleagues

Retail Week's Tech & Ecomm conference took place last week, bringing together the best retail minds in IT, marketing, and retail.

**Suzanne Bearne, James Wilmore and Matthew Chapman** analyse the key themes from the day

### Black Friday

Black Friday looms close on the horizon and much discussion at the conference centred on how retailers are racing to prepare for this year's promotions extravaganza.

Oasis plans to reduce its Black Friday activity after it was "caught off guard" last year when return rates reached 50%.

Speaking on a panel discussing fulfilment, the fashion retailer's director of digital Briony Garbett said the business underestimated the popularity of the event.

She said due to the high level of demand, Oasis was unable to fulfill every order as promised, making some irate because they did not receive items in time for a particular occasion, such as their Christmas party.

The retailer will take a more cautious approach this year.

"This year we will do something but it won't be near the scale of last year," said Garbett.

Shop Direct chief information officer Andy Wolfe emphasised

the importance of preparation, maintaining that the retailer has "tested the hell" out of its systems ahead of the event.

"Preparation is absolutely critical," advised Wolfe. "It's critical you use all the trading information you have from the previous year."

On Black Friday last year Shop Direct, which owns fashion brand Very, attracted record traffic, with 8 million site requests in 60 minutes at one point of the day. Orders rose 134% on the previous Black Friday.

The amount of traffic recorded was eight times the amount anticipated, said Wolfe.

Although the retailer was able to maintain trading capabilities last year, Wolfe said it had kicked off planning for this year's event straight after Cyber Monday in 2014. "We take incidents and logs of every bit of data. We look at what our customers say online."

He said the retailer used social media during the event, to glean

"real insights" into what its customers say about the retailer.

### Customer insight

Several speakers focused on the importance of applying customer insight to all aspects of multichannel retail.

House of Fraser's chief customer officer Andy Harding heralded the retailer's restructure to a more customer-centric approach, but admitted there is still work to do.

The department store group unveiled an overhauled structure in July, centred around bringing together its brand, CRM, product and multichannel functions into a unified customer insight team, designed to "future-proof" the business in the face of fast-changing customer habits.

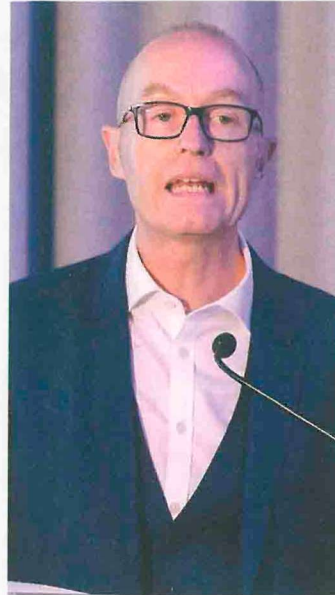
Harding said 15 new positions were created and around 30 to 40 roles "fundamentally changed" in the "biggest ever reorganisation of the business".

Harding said: "This is not job done, the idea of changing the

► For complete coverage of the event, including video highlights, visit [Retail-week.com](http://Retail-week.com) and for more from Maplin and Net-a-Porter see Retail Lab, p34



**"If a great idea comes along, then why wouldn't you do it?"**  
**Andy Haywood, N Brown**



**Andy Harding**  
detailed House of Fraser's restructure



The keynote panel discussion explored the ways that retailers can collaborate with start-ups

# ues take centre stage

business, it doesn't end now. We will see the process happen over the next 12, 24 and 36 months."

However, despite the focus on analysing customer data to inform decisions, Harding said there is still space for instinct.

"We can't have layers of decision making, you sometimes have to do things with a gut feel," said Harding.

Meanwhile, N Brown chief information officer Andy Haywood revealed plans to launch an overhauled ecommerce platform in November, adding that the retailer would become a "new business fuelled by the customer".

The platform will give the group a single view of its customers across all channels and brands, which include Simply Be, Jacamo and Figleaves.

"We spotted a brilliant opportunity to get one view of the customer at no extra cost or extra time," Haywood told the audience. "If a great idea comes along and you can accommodate it

within the timeframe, then why wouldn't you do it? We did it almost by accident."

Ao.com boss John Roberts stressed the importance of using customer data to personalise the online experience for shoppers.

He said: "Most of our customers have told us exactly what they want before they come in. We just don't give it to them – we take them to a homepage."

Roberts argued that retailers should use CRM to show they are always thinking about the customer, rather than just attempting to sell them products.

For instance, Roberts said Ao could use data on whether customers are living in a hard or soft water area to ascertain when they should be sent emails with a video advising them on how to descale their machines.

## People focus

Despite the focus on technology, many speakers in attendance were quick to point out that digital

solutions should not be allowed to overtake human interactions.

Roberts stressed that the "single biggest thing in any business is the people" and some businesses can be guilty of introducing "technology for technology's sake".

He said: "Businesses quite often get quite consumed with what is the next cool thing and don't necessarily join the dots.

Roberts said Ao.com has applied technology to its hiring process in order to find people who are the correct fit for the job.

Dixons Carphone chief marketing officer Julian Diment explained that one of the mistakes Carphone Warehouse made when introducing its Pin Point tech into stores two years ago was forgetting the human element.

Pin Point is a price comparison tool that allows Carphone Warehouse staff to find customers the tariff best suited to their needs using tablet computers.

He said: "What we forgot was at the end of the day it is still a

human interaction. The technology facilitates that and should not overtake it."

Carphone Warehouse sales staff were initially rated on their Pin Point performance by data gathered from the tablets, including dwell time and sales made, but it was soon decided they should be judged by secret shoppers in order to make sure the human interactions were not lost.

Diment revealed Pin Point had been a great success both in terms of sales and profit margins.

In the past 12 months over 2 million customers have experienced a Pin Point journey and during the period there has been a 6% increase in conversion and a 5% uplift in margins.

Diment added: "We believe it really cements the value of bricks and mortar. It brings that theatre back to the stores.

"It captures all the experiences whether we sell or not. It has given us a more rounded understanding of the business."