

THE FUTURE IS HERE

Cognitive technology promises to impact practically everything and change retail in ways that we have not even dreamt of..

■ By Shailendra Kumar

Cognitive technology will significantly impact several industries – in fact, none will remain untouched. One of the prime industries that will simply metamorphose is retail. As of today, with the bar-codes, QR codes, fancy packaging, billing, online and on-call customer care services, we are quite content with the way retail works. But is this the limit? Has technology nothing else to offer? Thinking beyond the automated

menus and self-help kiosks where you play with little machines to get information and more — cognitive is going to take retail to another level. All our science fantasies are going to soon come alive. The future holds treasures of technology that we will soon explore and witness!

Technology companies across the world have already started investing in this segment, which verifies that this is indeed promising and soon to become a

reality. The crucial role that will be played by Artificial Intelligence and Internet of Things in the days to come has even been acknowledged by top experts all across the world.

To understand what's going to happen in the future with the grace of the dear cognitive, let's divide our retail experience in steps:

1. When we realise we need a product
2. When we shop for it
3. When we experience the product

WHEN WE REALISE WE NEED A PRODUCT (PRE-SALE EXPERIENCE)

How do we really realise we need something? We see it somewhere — at a friend's place or in an advertisement (print or electronics) and we feel the need to get it. What would you do next? Try to figure out where you can get more information about it and perhaps, where you can get the best deal for it.

Let's assume that you are at a friend's place and you see a washing machine and you suddenly realize that you need one too. All you would need to do is click a picture and input it in the device — be it your cell phone, tablet or laptop. The device fetches all kind of information you need, complete with product credentials and technical specifications.

Being advanced, modern and particular — you would like to research about it next. No need to bother anymore as your device does this too. It finds YouTube videos, shows reviews and tells you what people on social media are talking about the product you want.

Going further, technology will understand your needs and will become your guide. It will ask questions in your preferred language so that the best possible product can be suggested. For instance, with ref-

erence to the washing machine, it will ask you:

- 'How many people are there in your house?'
- 'What kind of fabric you mostly wear?'

The human touch will be imparted in a very subtle manner without any human being involved.

Not only this, the device will also advise you where you can buy it — the place that is nearest and at a price that is cheapest. Of if you are not in a hurry to buy, it will suggest online places to buy it from. The best part about is before sharing the information with you the computer will have already checked if the particular washing machine was in stock. There will be reviews for you to check out too.

→ Going further, technology will understand your needs and become your guide. It will ask questions in your preferred language so that the best possible product can be suggested. Human touch will be imparted in a subtle manner without any human intervention.

Apart from what people talk on social media, there are experts available who give genuine and credible reviews about it. You are going to get it all, right in front of you — what any expert in any corner of the world is talking about the washing

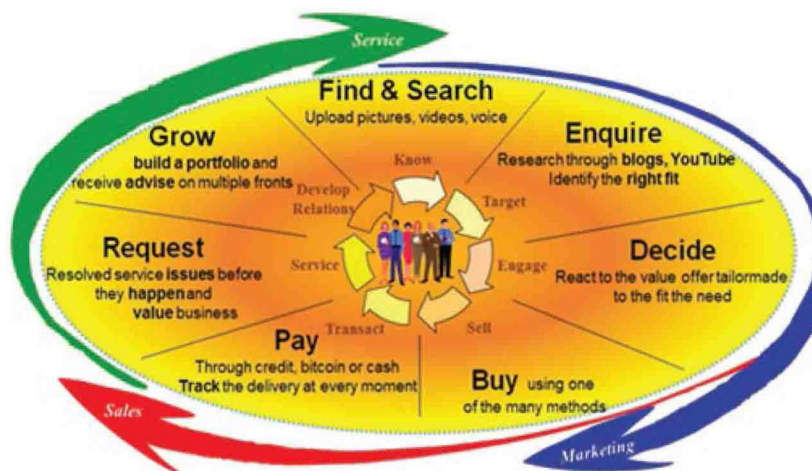
machine that you have your eyes on.

WHEN WE SHOP FOR IT (SALES EXPERIENCE)

Next comes when you want to actually buy the product. If you decide to buy it from a store, within seconds, the directions along with traffic status will be made available to you. You don't feel like driving till there? The bus numbers and metro routes will be shown and if it is just a walk away, the computer will advise you to walk considering your current health condition.

When you reach the shop and the device helps you find what you want, it can also suggest a list of things that are available and can be bought along. This will be suggested according to your previous buying patterns and the feasible combinations.

Now, while you are buying a washing machine, you



► The shopping journey

obviously need washing powder too and perhaps an iron along with it? And of course, all the offers and combos! The device will give out oodles of information such as the great discount you will get if you buy a water purifier of the same company along with the washing machine. While you are eyeing a washing machine, your device will help you know what similar products you can buy from the same store!

While you have picked up the washing machine and perhaps several other products, how do you want to pay for it? What are the cashback or discount offers that you can avail with all the debit and credit cards in your wallet? Do you also get some extra discount if you use a particular one? Or maybe you have already spent too much from your cards and it is advisable to pay in cash.

Now, the washing machine might need warranty, then what

are the packages that you can go for to have a better warranty strategy for your product? Considering the history of how you deal with machines or products, your device can accordingly suggest the kind of warranty pack you can avail.

While you have ordered it — offline or online — where has it reached? The app on the device will inform the delivery people about the time you are usually at home so that you can receive it yourself. If you have to leave urgently for a vacation or work, it can inform the same to the delivery people and you can always remain well-informed about where the package has actually reached.

WHEN WE EXPERIENCE THE PRODUCT (POST-SALES EXPERIENCE)

The impact of cognitive technology is not just limited to buying a product, but it also amplifies your experience when you start using it.

Do you know how to set it up

and what all the buttons do? Do you have the instruction manual? What language is it in? Do you need help with translation? Do you have the basic skills to set it up or would YouTube videos might prepare you better? In fact, the power of cognitive is that your device would have already read the manual and will provide you with step-by-step instructions on how to use the washing machine for best results.

Once you have started using the washing machine, your device can also prompt you to write reviews about it so that other people can know if you really liked it and cognitive techniques can help them decide better based on their interests. If you write positive reviews, you definitely deserve to earn some bonus points right?

Maybe you shopped from a particular site for the first time and must be rewarded. Your device will seek permission to suggest the product to people in your circle based on their interest and use. And if they end up buying it too, reward you with more bonus points!

How long have you been using that washing machine? The washing machine will inform the company about the usage and before it gets too late, you will have someone at your doorstep to do the basic repairing so that it can function smoothly. If some part of the machine is not working properly, it can be replaced before it gets faulty and stops working.

If you don't like it and in the following days, you are not using it much – your device can actually suggest you to resell it and find people who have been interested in buying similar second hand products. According to your usage, preferences and interest – the device can also suggest what can be bought further to improve the experience further.

INTERNET OF THINGS (IOT) BECOMING IN-CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH!

Now while you have your washing machine, the device itself is observing the frequency with which you use it. Accordingly, it can predict the water consumption, family members and their age groups. Also, your air purifier is observing the level of CO2 and O2 and other pollutants; along with that, your water purifier knows how much water your family consumes. With the help of data from IoT, all these machines can interact and prepare a health score card for your family. If there is any irregularity in the patterns, the device can alert you so that you can check on it.

For example, if the drinking water consumption becomes less, maybe you will be advised to get back to your normal drinking water consumption as it can affect your health. Similarly, if you smoke and the level of pollutants has been increasing, it can again alert you to reduce the smoking and live a healthier life.

To be summed up, whatever you would think, the future of retail is looking very bright and it is definitely going to open new avenues and provide its customers a treat with multiple new possibilities and get a convenient and better shopping experience. 😊



Shailendra Kumar is a partner and Asia Pacific Distribution Leader for IBM Cognitive Solutions based out of Sydney. Over the past 23 years, he has had experience in Business and Customer Analytics across Europe, the United Kingdom and Australia. In the past, he has worked with Coles, Woolworths and Accenture in ANZ. His key mission is to help his clients make money out of data in the distribution sector which includes retail, CPG, travel and transportation sectors.