

The following guest article has been written for InternetRetailing by Suptasree Roy, Associate Partner at digital transformation agency TH\_NK. The agency works with retailers including Shop Direct, New Look and House of Fraser.

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# The omnichannel store of the future

*Suptasree Roy, Associate Partner at digital transformation agency TH\_NK shares her thoughts on the steps omnichannel retailers could be taking to improve the physical store experience.*

**D**ONE WELL, an omnichannel shopping experience can deliver far greater pleasure than its lonely, single channel colleagues. We all know that customers don't see channels, they see a brand. However, businesses are still operating in channel siloes, reflecting the hastened addition of ecommerce to the retail operating model in an effort to keep up with customer demands, and expecting customers to bridge the gaps generated by this mode of growth. The physical store of old is losing custom to its faster, newer, more convenient online counterpart. So what could bricks and clicks retailers be doing to make their physical store offering more attractive?

On its own, online offers the convenience of shopping on the go, discreetly at your desk, or in the comfort of your own pyjamas. It offers the breadth of the retailer's product catalogue at your fingertips, an endless stream of scrolling discovery. It saves you from having to tell well-meaning staff that you don't need help, that you want to be left alone to wander through the aisles. Shopping online means you're only a click away from finding out what other customers are saying about it and whether there's a better option available. Online access enables anyone with an internet connection to shop till they drop, on their terms. So why would anyone bother to visit a store?

Easy. Because shopping in store gives you an entirely different experience – an experience that, if done well, will keep

customers coming back. Stores can be loud, sociable, hectic, vibrant and unpredictable – but many of us still love that aspect and it can't be experienced online. Conversely, it can be tranquil and calming and provide a haven from the onslaught of daily life; an escape on a Wednesday lunchtime. Shopping in store satisfies the impulse buyer who wants to try on or test and take home their purchase there and then, without having to pay for the privilege of having it delivered. Some of us value expert advice before buying, and don't want to part with our hard earned cash until we know exactly what we're getting. Shopping in store can be a social activity, a chance to dress up and preen with friends and fellow shoppers. Shopping in store can be a fun and rewarding experience. So then why are visitors to physical stores in decline?

Because shopping in-store doesn't do what online does; and even though online doesn't always do what the physical store does, people are learning to forgive online for its weaknesses.

## CREATING SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN BRICK AND CLICKS

So, physical store, why not let your guard down and let online in? Talk to one another. Find out what the other one knows that you can benefit from, lean on each other, collaborate and combine your strengths to build a super-channel customer experience where the sum is greater than its parts.

Physical shopping is a multi-sensory experience: give customers a reason to visit your store by giving them an experience they can't get online. Give your customers the freedom to play, test and enjoy your products and services in an environment that excites and befits your brand. The new Sonos store in New York is kitted out not like a traditional retail store but with kitchen and living room spaces and furniture, all designed to mimic the type of environment you might actually listen to Sonos speakers in. An even simpler example, Dixons Carphone has installed mirrors on its walls so that customers can actually see what headphones look like whilst they're wearing them.

Make it easy for your customers to shop with you: for every brand this will be different, and amongst your customers this will also differ, but the journey of searching, comparing and selecting can happen via multiple channels, mediums and at different times, so the easier you make this for your customers, the easier it is for them to buy. The key is to start small and iterate from there. Smaller



change is easier to implement and easier for your customers to adopt. New Look is a great example of a traditional store retailer understanding the shopping behaviour of their time-poor customers and successfully introducing multichannel change iteratively. They were early to mobile ecommerce, swiftly following up with click and collect and have since gradually expanded their convenience offering with collect from convenience stores, from Duddle stores at train stations, evening home deliveries and most recently one-hour delivery slots.

Elevate the role of your in-store team: they are your product experts and brand ambassadors so showcase their talents and connect them to your customers wherever they are. Your store staff are your front line, often bearing the brunt of issues that have arisen elsewhere in the chain so training them to think and act omnichannel is incredibly important, even if your systems and processes aren't. With the right amount of knowledge of the ecosystem they operate in, your staff can deliver exceptional service without needing to know your customers' inside leg measurements. Majestic Wine keeps customers informed of store wine testing events and showcases both local stores and staff profiles on its website. John Lewis' omnichannel customer case management allows its Partners, whether in stores, contact centres or distribution centres, to easily collaborate on resolving customer queries whilst retaining full visibility of the progress of each case and therefore the ability to keep the customer informed throughout.

Don't forget to learn from what your customers do: we comfortably analyse what customers do when they shop online, measuring and optimising conversion to within an inch of its life, but we don't always do the same in-store; partly due to the challenges of measuring physical behaviour without being intrusive. However, the value of seeing your customers shop and interact with your product is huge and can all be achieved through simple observation. Use insights gleaned from online to test out products in stores and vice versa.

But respect your customers' boundaries: not everyone wants to be recognised and acknowledged whenever they shop. Sometimes you want something irrelevant, random and unpredictable. Sometimes you just want to be left alone. And sometimes when we leave shoppers to make their own



Four candles or fork 'andles – do you know what your customers really want?

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decisions, they make the right ones. So, in this age of hyper targeting and personalisation, where every move is tracked in the pursuit of an ever more relevant experience, remember that anonymity is still treasured by some and should therefore form part of your customer experience strategy.

The rise of conversational commerce: just when you think you're as omni as you can be, with a seamless experience across your brand, along comes another channel. The rise of conversational commerce will take more power away from brands and place it firmly with the artificial intelligence of chatbots. The consumer states what they want via a messaging interface and gets a response moments later from a chatbot that has learned about that user through the natural language of dialogue. It's short, direct and personal and satisfies in the instant. It's close to the human conversation you might have in store, and brands need to start preparing for it.

The time for siloed channels and ways of working is over. Retailers need to offer experiences that reflect what their customers are doing now, and also what they want to be doing in the future. Old formats no longer serve new needs, new needs demand new thinking, and new thinking demands change.

Prioritise the questions that are important to your business, before jumping on a latest bandwagon that may never materialise. Narrow your focus on the key changes that need to be made now vs what's needed in the future. Too much choice can result in indecision and inertia. Digital moves at a rapid pace, and it's easy to get lost in the trends. But crucially, we need to remember that at the heart of all of this is the age old pastime of, well, shopping. 