

How to keep shoppers coming through the door in the era of Bring Your Own Content

Most major store operators know they must focus on making omni-channel retail a reality if they are to make ground against competitors both online and in the High Street.

Yet it remains a tough battle. UK retail statistics compiled by one of the large accountancy firms show that while online sales rose 11.4 per cent in the year to August, overall High-Street sales suffered a 4.3 per cent year-on-year fall. Part of this was put down to consumers preferring to spend on leisure, holidays and restaurants, proving that the competition for shoppers' pounds is not just about High Street versus online.

Nonetheless, whatever the fluctuations in sales and shopping patterns month by month, all retailers now have to work harder to keep customers coming through the door, making sure the promise of the omni-channel experience is fulfilled. Essentially, the experience of going into a store to buy should match what shoppers find online.

Bring Your Own Content

However, one of the most fundamental requirements for bringing the two experiences together is connectivity, as we are now in the age of Bring Your Own Content (BYOC).

It is an established fact, familiar to all store-owners, that shoppers use their smart devices and phones when they go shopping. They expect to use them in-store for price comparisons, to download product information and to read reviews and news.

The difference is that increasingly, consumers want to consume their own content and have full access to their own apps and social sites when they are on retail or hospitality premises. Many shoppers want to be able to log on to a retailer's Wi-Fi so they can save themselves money and so retailers who fail to offer such facilities will soon lose out to competitors.

For example, shoppers waiting for an order to be fulfilled or for a relative to make a big decision on which product or service to buy, will want access to their social media or to a streaming service such as Netflix, so they can entertain themselves during the wait. Equally they may be interested in some of the products or services in-store and want the chance to do some research. Retailers must recognise such requirements as the new realities of the BYOC phenomenon and make sure they can facilitate it.

A customer or a business-visitor grabbing a cup of coffee at the in-store restaurant, for example, should be able to log on to Wi-Fi quickly and easily. The information about how to do so should be prominently displayed. Then once they have made the connection, the store operator can push apps to their phone, including a menu

that allows them to order without having to get up from the table and worry about the bags or their laptop. If they log on via their social media, then so much the better—the store has access to their profile, likes, dislikes and links.

The overall aim is to encourage the shopper to stay in-store for longer, even though they may be accessing their own content. The longer shoppers linger, the more likely they are to be captivated by what they see in-store and make a purchasing decision. In a hospitality context, that means greater likelihood of them ordering more to eat and drink.

Digital direction

One tool that is being used to attract the attention of shoppers as they browse, is digital signage. This is now provided on high-definition TV screens, giving management complete control of content via robust, high-quality broadband.

What is shown can be matched to the audience in the store at different times of day, using demographic information derived from customers' Wi-Fi interactions and footfall monitoring.

Equally, in large premises, retailers can vary content between individual screens, adapting it to the demographics that are attracted to particular product ranges.

A retailer wanting a more complex display can divide individual screens, so that for instance, a news ticker streams across the bottom while product and company information are displayed in other segments.

Although the head office will be in control, local managers should be allowed to display content relating to their premises, since studies have shown this can boost viewer attention considerably.

Digital signage also has an important back-office function—that of educating staff. It is important that staff dealing with the public are well-informed about a retailer's products and services, since studies show that lack of knowledge is a major irritant for shoppers. Digital signage in a rest-room or office gives personnel, especially part-timers, the chance to absorb the latest product details and offers very quickly, with a minimum of effort.

If a store is intelligently laid out, using the footfall information and analytics derived from tracking customers' phones that have their Wi-Fi switched on, then digital signage has every chance of not only giving customers the information they want, but of stimulating their interest in products and services they had not previously contemplated.

Ensuring the system works

Of course, this smart use of Wi-Fi and digital signage has to be underpinned by proper installation and maintenance. This means having an expert installer that is entirely flexible in its approach and will not burden a retailer with a system that has blind-spots or is prone to down-time. The best solution for any store operator is to engage a managed services provider that has the depth of experience and the commitment to ensure the right system is always up and running.

It is worth considering that when connectivity fails, it is not the system that gets the blame, it is the retailer.

Wi-Fi, digital signage and robust connectivity have to be at the heart of any store operator's strategy to bring the online and in-store experiences closer together. Although this task can seem daunting, it is readily achievable when a provider with the requisite expertise is engaged, freeing the retailer to concentrate on what it knows best: selling.

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