

Making the retail theatre a reality

E-commerce may have revolutionised the way that we shop, allowing us to buy with speed and ease from the comfort of our sofas, but retailers with bricks-and-mortar stores are fighting back, adopting innovative technologies to lure customers back through the doors.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) are proving powerful in the evolution of the “retail theatre” that is increasingly seen as vital to reviving the High Street. This is where omni-channel retail meets Sci-fi to provide consistently exciting, fulfilling and informative experiences. It combines the technological advantages of e-commerce with the kind of exhilarating physical shopping experiences that make shoppers spend more time in stores. Provided, that is, if store operators have considered how their infrastructure can support it and who will manage it. Without top-quality connectivity, the retail theatre will be nothing more than an ineffective sideshow.

A reality check

There is no question that VR is advancing into retail. It has proved popular in automotive showrooms with the likes of Lexus and Volvo utilizing headsets to offer test-drive experiences of vehicles that are not yet in stock, while other retailers, such as North Face, are offering customers a virtual journey through Yosemite National Park.

It already seems a long time since Topshop caused a stir by using VR at London Fashion Week in 2014, allowing customers to pull clothes off a virtual rack, not too dissimilar to the augmented reality mirrors that artfully show how an individual customer will appear experimenting with different looks.

With the introduction of this technology, the Augmented Reality (AR) mirror can start making personalised recommendations to the individual customer, based on their history and preferences.

Of course the use of AI in-store is likely to go beyond this, as customers begin asking their smartphone to navigate stores, listen to information about products and availability, and pay—all using a previously downloaded app.

Everything depends on connectivity

It is true that some VR and AI applications will remain unrealisable in the rough-and-tumble reality of everyday retail. Many will be viable, and to make them work will take a good deal of attention to more fundamental matters such as the IT infrastructure and bandwidth management.

Failure to plan for their implementation is likely to leave a retailer with a network that suddenly slows down, preventing the use of payment applications or basic back-office technology. All those smart devices in a store, whether owned by the consumer or the retailer, will require high-performing and resilient Wi-Fi that doesn't leave everyone frustrated when it crashes.

Without excellent connectivity, customers will not investigate all the expensively designed, innovative services that are on offer. VR or AI applications all demand high bandwidth, which makes expert installation and management of connectivity essential. Older systems and their solutions will not have the granularity to give a complete and accurate picture of where and when bandwidth use is highest, yet it is vital that bandwidth is monitored and the right solutions are in place to allow for prioritisation of certain applications at certain times of day. The alternative is either costly downtime or unnecessary investment in expensive and superfluous bandwidth.

If bricks-and-mortar stores are to become retail theatres, they must plan ahead and give connectivity and bandwidth management the attention they deserve. Otherwise the show may well have to close much earlier than anyone intended.

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