

In retail, Wi-Fi is influencing where consumers spend their money

Anyone who operates a retail chain needs to start thinking seriously about the business value of customer Wi-Fi.

A recent survey conducted by Hughes revealed that the availability of free Wi-Fi is a major factor for 46 per cent of consumers when deciding which shops to enter. With their smartphones constantly in use, shoppers not only expect to be granted access to Wi-Fi whenever they shop, they expect it to work perfectly regardless of where they are on the premises.

It is time for retailers to overcome their long-standing fears of “showrooming” in which consumers browse in-store, compare prices and then shop online or go to a competitor. As smartphones are so prevalent in everyday life, store operators need to use Wi-Fi to get to know their customers better, keep them on the premises for longer and make more effective use of targeted, near-real-time marketing. The vast majority of shoppers in the survey (69 per cent), for instance, said they always have their smartphone Wi-Fi switched on when they are out shopping. This is a trend that retailers need to regard as an opportunity.

Frustrations to be eradicated

This is still not the case, however, as the current lack of availability or poor quality of Wi-Fi is still a common annoyance for customers. Research published this year by digital agency, Head London, found that only 29 per cent of the top 50 High-Street retailers in the UK were providing free Wi-Fi, which suggests that the 53 per cent of respondents who said free Wi-Fi should be more widely available in stores is probably speaking from experience.

The quality of connectivity is also a big problem, with 47 per cent of shoppers suggesting that retailers should make it easier to access. In addition to this, many respondents said the most annoying problems were either slow speeds or not being able to get any connection at all.

What emerges from the survey is the importance of having Wi-Fi that has the capacity and resilience to meet customer expectations. Retailers have to ensure they have Wi-Fi that is reliable, secure and always available at optimum speed. The problem is that in many cases, the technology is selected, installed and managed without proper expertise and focus, making it a source of frustration for customers, and more so for staff who may be using it for their own work applications. With the increased use of mobile devices for sales, stock-taking and report compilation, staff are now highly reliant on in-store Wi-Fi.

Wi-Fi will deliver

The one fundamental principle with Wi-Fi is that it should be installed and managed by providers that know what they are doing, are not tied to specific manufacturers and have the experience necessary to build a solution that matches the retailer's requirements precisely. Only then will it deliver.

For example, retailers will be able to take advantage of all the technological developments in Wi-Fi that ensure they can send shoppers big data graphics illustrating products and eye-catching, timely offers. Consumers shopping in-store for big-ticket items want access to the same level of detail about specs that they can obtain when shopping online. The only way to deliver this in a user-friendly manner is through Wi-Fi.

For the retailer, requiring customers who want this information to log on to Wi-Fi via social media accounts such as Facebook, Twitter or Google+ opens up hugely valuable demographic data, such as buying habits and personal interests. This profile data can be employed to shape more personalised and precisely targeted push-offers and achieve far better outcomes from smarter marketing campaigns.

More insight, big dividends

Besides meeting customers' hunger for information, retailers can also use Wi-Fi to learn more about how their floor-space is used, using technology that tracks smartphones from Wi-Fi access points.

Above all else, the survey has shown how Wi-Fi is a vital necessity for retailers who want to keep customers coming in through the door to spend money. That means using an experienced managed services provider to install and maintain the technology best suited to each retailer's needs, with upgrades as required.

By attracting more customers, meeting all their data requirements and keeping them on the premises for longer, free, resilient Wi-Fi will deliver multiple benefits, not least to the bottom line.

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