NRF 2018: Technology, Innovation, and Retail Transformation, Oh My!

by Chad Markle

This year wasn’t the first year that these themes resonated at NRF: Retail’s Big Show, but it was the first time that the industry was able to see tangible results attributed to digital innovation. In 2017, holiday retail sales saw the largest increase in several years, ending on a high note for the first time since 2011. Many tech concepts and innovations presented this year weren’t shiny and brand new, but rather focused on being solutions to the retail industry’s business opportunities while attempting to stabilize and optimize the marketplace.

Here are some key themes we saw, and some examples of game-changing digital technology on display.

**In-store experiences are not dead…**
Digitizing the in-store experience has been in practice for a few years, but this year these concepts are going a step further. Retailers are focused on engaging and promoting customer loyalty by way of multi-channel shoppers. Using in-store near-field communication (NFC) and radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology can help to personalize the in-store experience from the moment the customer walks through the door.

Facenote introduced a system that takes this a step further by using artificial intelligence (AI) and facial recognition to automatically notify sales associates that a customer is entering the store which then accesses their shopping history and preferences.

**…But e-commerce continues to thrive**
For those shoppers who dread the mall or just don’t have time (myself included), online shopping continues to be the fastest growing sector of the retail industry. Retailers and vendors alike shared how they are making it easier for shoppers to forge the digital marketplace. From 3D body scanning to augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) shopping experiences, apparel and footwear as well as home décor retailers are helping their customers make more well-informed decisions while shopping online.

Volumental has partnered with footwear brands such as Ecco and New Balance to use 3D scanning technology to create foot avatars to find the best fit without physically trying on a shoe. For those looking for that perfect piece of furniture for their home, Lexset uses AI and AR to allow you to envision how it will complement the room before purchasing the piece.

**Tech innovations don’t stop at customer experiences**
Multi-channel, omni-channel, or whatever you want to call it, has changed how products get to customers. Gone are the days of store-to-store transfers, catalog ordering, and out-of-stock merchandise – shoppers expect to have their purchase right then and there (or at least within two business days, thanks to Amazon Prime). To fulfill the instant gratification that shoppers seek, cycle time and inventory management must be nimble. Retailers are moving toward AI and machine learning solutions to process inventory data so the right products are in the right places at the right times.

**So what should I take away from all of this?**
Don’t fret, the all-powerful Amazon will not be the end of the traditional retailer. This year, more than ever, retailers are embracing technology to personalize shopping experiences and optimize backend processes. As showcased this year at Retail’s Big Show, opportunities for innovation in the industry continue to prosper.

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About the Author

Chad Markle
chad.markle@kalypso.com
Chad has over 25 years of experience working as an executive and advisor at Fortune 1000 companies to deliver results by combining strategic thinking with the transformative business impact of technology.