

Competing, Connecting, and Winning in Today's Distribution and Merchandising

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Abstract

While being in a hurry to complete tasks, both customers and customer professionals are valuing when things are done better and quicker. The necessary data science skills of the customer professionals have become a must have, their operations and future strategies being guided through the application of analytics on these data, the challenge remaining to translate customer insights into business operations. Retailers are seeing how the less distinct line between online and brick-and-mortar is becoming more and more evident, and how Amazon is putting more pressure on traditional retail than ever, while Walmart is working on the way of bringing the physical store directly into consumers' homes. And facing the continuous challenge of building brand loyalty and advocacy retailers are also focusing on improving their stores' value proposition and their stores' merchandising, on enhancing Omni channel customer experience by defining accordingly their digital supply chain vision, without forgetting to successfully managing collaborative initiatives to improve shared supply chain processes that benefit all members. They really need to struggle to prevent friction in their customers journey, to identify where breaks are in this journey and to make consumers seen the benefit in having a personal link with a brand, what involves, among other aspects, to know the most critical brand equities and touchpoints for that battleground called the "moment of purchase", making distinction between the initial consideration and the final consideration, having actionable data (pre-store, in-store, and post-store).

Keywords: Distribution and Merchandising; Stores' value proposition; Omni channel CX

JEL Classification: L81, L86, M31, Q55

While being in a hurry to complete tasks, both customers and customer professionals are valuing when things are done better and quicker. The necessary data science skills of the customer professionals

There is a real need today to build decisions on top of Big Data insights (this kind of analysis allowing a better understanding of the customer base and a better focus of the marketing efforts accordingly) so as to better identify the audience, connect to it, affect their opinions, and communicate with to reach the company's desired goals (that is why the prestigious Forrester, for instance, build connections between the data-enabling technologies, the data and the applications for it). (Piletic, 2016) Even more so people are today in a hurry to complete tasks,

rushing from one task to the next, valuing when things are done quicker (see below, for example, what happens on Internet every 60 seconds with so much social media activity).

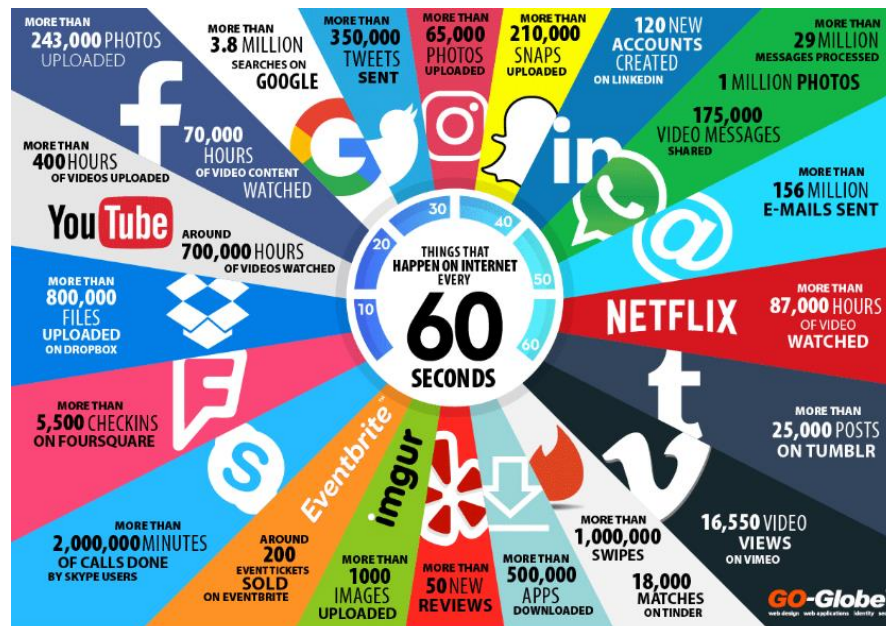


Figure 1: Things That Happen On Internet Every 60 Seconds, Go-Globe, 21 Aug 2017

Source: <https://www.go-globe.com/blog/things-that-happen-every-60-seconds/>

A report conducted by Forbes Insights and Criteo revealed that over 70% of top brand and retailer executives saw pooled data as a way to compete, connect, and win. (Cheng, 2017) It is known that if panel data are referring to samples of the same cross-sectional units observed at multiple points in time (a panel-data observation having two dimensions -Xit, where i runs from 1), pooled data are occurring when it is used a “time series of cross sections,” the observations in each cross section do not necessarily referring to the same unit. (reed.edu/economics/parker/) In other words, while panel data are corresponding to data with large numbers of cross-sections (with variables held in single series in stacked form), pooled time-series/cross-section data are referring to data with relatively few cross-sections (where variables are held in cross-section specific individual series). (eviews.com, 2017)

According to Criteo (which built a powerful and open Commerce Marketing Ecosystem) there are three trends which make necessary for brands and retailers to innovate and collaborate in order to successfully navigate in “The #VibrantFuture”: *the connected shopper* (knowing, reaching, and inspiring shoppers it is essential); *the collaboration imperative* (accessing more and current shopper data, intelligent technology, and large scale becoming imperative); *the offline advantage* (linking store experience to the web and mobile and winning the hearts and minds of shoppers as a favoring circumstance). (www2.criteo.com, 2017) This picture below from Criteo is relevant in this regard:



Figure 2: Trends of the vibrant future of commerce marketing, Criteo

Source: Welcome to the vibrant future of commerce marketing, retrieved from: <http://www2.criteo.com/vibrant-future?>

In the U.S., the less distinct line between online and brick-and-mortar is becoming more and more evident, recent research from Slice Intelligence (which tracks online receipts from a panel of 5 million shoppers) showing a significant % change in the 2017 holiday season retail ecommerce sales growth by retailer compared to the same period of 2016. The physical retailers such as Costco, Target and Kohl's have recorded consistent results, as shown in the figure below (but the combined market share of the nine major online retailers is still more than 12 points below that of Amazon): (Cheng, 2017)

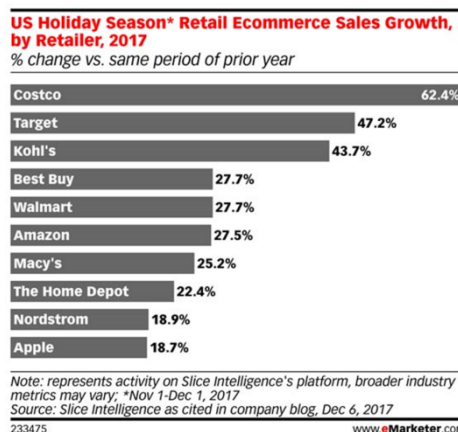


Figure 3: Holiday season retail ecommerce sales growth by retailer, Activity on Slice Intelligence platform, Nov 1- Dec 1, 2017

Source: eMarketer, cited by Cheng, A., in Brick-and-Mortar Retailers Score Holiday Online Gains, December 6, 2017 (cited work)

It is also worth mentioning within this framework that – according to an analysis of the acquisition, investment, and research strategy of Amazon (nearly 90 business entities held across the world) made by CB Insights – Amazon, which is involved in retail (accounting for 5% of all retail spending in America), logistics, consumer technology, cloud computing, and media and entertainment, could be help to provide more frictionless commerce by fintech (the experiment with Indian market expected to become the world's fastest-growing e-commerce market; the launch of Amazon Cash allowing users to add to their Amazon.com balance by showing

- the significance of Amazon's new B2B products (such as AWS, the newest pillar and AI-as-a-Service), and presented a graphic with Amazon's open jobs listing which allows to see where Amazon is adding human capital:



Source: Amazon Strategy Teardown: Building New Business Pillars In AI, Next-Gen Logistics, And Enterprise Cloud Apps, CB Insights, April 2017 (cited work)

- that if a large part of Amazon's strategy to expand its Prime Air logistics network are the aerial drones (announced by Jeff Bezos in 2013), a recent application for a patent called an "Airborne Fulfillment Center" (AFC) and described as "an airship that remains at high altitude" is suggesting the intention of creating a flying warehouse that would dispatch package-laden drones to the ground, while details about a drone mesh network which alerts all other drones about their surroundings or about the use of robotics by the Amazon's fulfillment centers to assemble orders by tossing items through the air are appearing in other patents.

Coming back to the expertise of data it is useful to show that through the application of analytics on their data companies are trying to achieve better results, by guiding day-to-day operations and future strategies, creating a competitive advantage (as shown in the figure below). Bob E. Hayes, PhD introduced in September this year the new customer analytics survey "State of Analytics in Customer Programs" conducted by "Business Over Broadway" (which surveyed 80+ companies), and revealing, among other aspects that customer professionals (who are competent in business knowledge and technology) are unable to translate customer insights into business operations (because of lack of proficiency in or access to programming, mathematics, and statistics; their teammates also lacking this expertise). (Hayes, 2017)

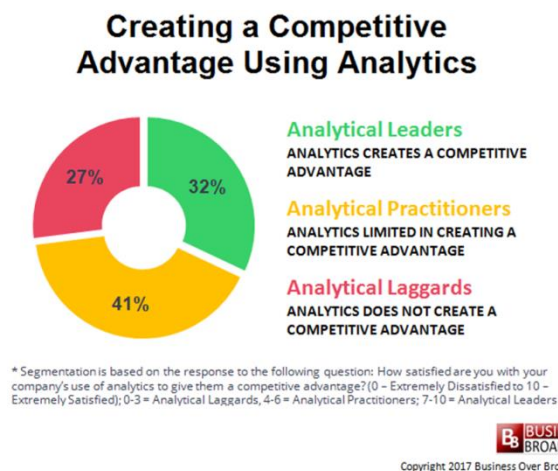


Figure 5: Creating a competitive advantage using analytics, Business Over Broadway, 2017

Source: Hayes, B., *State of Analytics In Customer Programs: Customer Loyalty Focus, Machine Learning Adoption and the Data Science Skill Gap*, Sep 21, 2017 (cited work)

Hayes explained how: to deliver automated insights less than half of the respondents used a customer data platform (even fewer reporting that they are using machine learning to gain insights); in order to improve how companies govern, collect and analyze customer data (from customer surveys, CRM systems, Web analytics and support systems etc.) customer programs need to include this type of efforts, what involves the analytical rigor in extracting insights from these customer data; a customer program has to start with understanding the specific practices that define the program (by incorporating practices moving this program and the company involved forward).

The store's value proposition and the importance of store merchandising, while facing the continuous challenge of building brand loyalty and advocacy. Enhancing Omni channel customer experience by defining accordingly the digital supply chain vision

In November 2017, McKinsey's representatives argued that shopping trends and consumer spend still favored the brick-and-mortar stores, retailers having the opportunity to find growth by focusing on the battlegrounds which are still up for grabs. (Gregg, Robinson, Huang and Kohli, 2017) McKinsey's representatives identified many areas where stores can still compete and win, starting from the specific reasons why customers go to a store, as shown in the figure below:

The store's value proposition: Shifting battlegrounds		
■ Defensible area of opportunity ■ In danger—Amazon has made inroads ■ Conquered by Amazon		
Elements	Value to consumer	What Amazon is offering
1. Value & price	"I can get good-quality products and services for a good price."	- Consistently low prices, matching prices on high-volume products and loss leader Prices 5–13% lower than the top five retailers - Dynamic algorithm-based pricing and free shipping
2. Convenience & ease	"I can easily buy and get what I want."	- Simple shopping, one-click buying, "click and collect" delivery - State-of-the-art supply chain (warehouses, planes, air hub) can reach 91% of US population in one day
3. Breadth & depth of assortment	"I can find any product I want."	372 million products - Reliability of selection that has made it the no. 1 search engine for someone looking to buy
4. Omnichannel at scale	"It's easy for me to shop online or in person (e.g., returns, price check, pick up)."	- Scaled brick-and-mortar presence across US through Whole Foods acquisition - Eight Amazon Books brick-and-mortar locations (five coming soon)
5. Product vetting / touch & feel	"I can try the product to see if it is a good fit and the quality that I am looking for."	- No-questions return policy, reviews, and buyer-sourced fit indications - Prime Wardrobe free home trial of 3+ products at once and easy returns
6. Consultation & styling / authority	"I have access to credible advice and customer service."	- Echo Look allows consumers to use voice to take full-length photos / videos with a hands-free camera for personal look books - Consultation through Style Check, a service combining machine learning algorithms with specialist advice
7. Experiences & community	"The store and brand give me access to a community and set of great experiences."	Launch of Amazon Spark social media site that aims to aid in discovery through connecting shoppers to a community with similar interests and likes

Figure 6: The store's value proposition: Shifting battlegrounds

Source: Gregg, B., Robinson, K., Huang, J. and Kohli, S., *Where stores can still compete—and win*, McKinsey, November 2017, p.2 (cited work)

According to the opinion of these McKinsey's representatives retailers have to keep pace with the wave of innovations in the digital age (not just to respond to Amazon), building up

specific capabilities, partnering with vendors and businesses to build new capabilities and access new markets. And in order to improve the value proposition of the store itself retailers need to articulate a committed strategy and take adequate actions such as: focusing on continually optimizing their stores' efficiency (analyzing in-store customer experience); differentiating their offering (on the basis of a deep understanding of their customers' needs); doubling down on the open battlegrounds of the value proposition (product vetting/touch & feel; consultation, advice, authority; experience and community).

Keeping customers coming back is not so easy in our days, taking into account the various experiences which can alienate a customer from a brand in this age of social media full of pitfalls necessary to be avoided by brands by preventing friction in the customer journey, as documented by Euclid. The recent Euclid commissioned consumer survey underlined the importance of store merchandising, revealing among other aspects that: over 50% of respondents (1,500 U.S. consumers who own smartphones - surveyed in September 2017) don't buy in-store unless they find what exactly they want; consumers sometimes (46%) just browse or wait for the product to go on sale (what presupposes for retailers to know who visits their physical locations and try to influence their purchase through more personalized marketing); other time consumers (almost 2/3 of respondents) even if they did not make a purchase during a store visit (which is likely to be an influential step in their customer journey) were "very" (25%) or "somewhat" (41%) likely to buy from the brand (what involves for retailers to better understand how to maintain the relationship and nurture the path to purchase by adequately engaging with their customers and prospects).

According to the above mentioned report retailers also need to pay a special attention to the relation between the online shopping and the customer experience which may be not positive, considering respondents' several complaints about online shopping, such as: too high shipping and delivery fees (55%); the fact that returning a product was a "hassle" (45%); the products they received did not look like what they saw online (30%). All of these can be remedied (learning from the Amazon Prime, offering free or reduced shipping while taking a page from Amazon's book etc.). But either online or offline shopping finally what matters for retailers is knowing where breaks are in their customer journey and ensuring the "getting personal" with a brand by making seen for them a benefit to doing so, such as: deals and coupons, loyalty programs and product updates (considering of course the differences between men, women, and younger consumers to provide personal details to get product updates).

There is no doubt that today's retailers are challenged to enhance Omni channel customer experience by defining the supply chain vision in relation with their customers' first visit to a store or digital channel to the moment when these customers receive exactly what they ordered, and the last but not the least when retailers promised it. On the way of their digital transformation planning (considering how digital applications can improve service, cost, agility, and inventory levels, and driving operational excellence by implementing process and organizational changes which use these technologies), retailers should articulated their vision in

terms of business and technical capabilities (including machine-learning systems, automated operations, end-to-end customer engagement, innovation and talent) and should provide a comprehensive assessment of the supply chain's business and technical capabilities (identifying capability gaps in: data, analytics, software and hardware, talent, processes). And finally, retailers need to identify operational improvements and digital solutions (which will build on its existing capabilities so as to produce the capabilities described in the above mentioned vision), prioritizing the established possible changes (while weighing, for example, the expected value of a change – in terms of agility, service, cost, and capital – against the ease of implementation), and organizing them into a multiyear road map, updating of course the vision according to the complexities of digital transformations, and never forgetting that the supply chain management (SCM) is a collaborative endeavor. (Gezgin, Huang, Samal, Silva, 2017)

Starting from the reality that SCM is a collaborative endeavor, it is worth remembering a recent interview conducted by Barr Seitz (global publishing lead for McKinsey's Marketing and Sales and Digital practices) with McKinsey's partners Dave Elzinga and Bo Finneman (we already had the opportunity to approach the McKinsey's research into shifting behaviors of the consumer decision journey/CDJ presented in February this year in the article entitled "The new battleground for marketing-led growth") (Court, Elzinga, Finneman and Perrey, 2017) about the most important battleground for companies trying to win over customers and drive growth. McKinsey's researchers, who looked at data from more than 125,000 consumers, across 350 brands in about 30 categories, have observed that only three of the 30 categories considered were "loyalty driven" (repurchasing the same brand without really shopping for others, when there is a purchase occasion), consumers shopping were primarily/switching brands, what means that the battleground where the brand that is most often selected enters is the "initial consideration set" (ICS - approached for the first time in 2009; consumers having most often about two brands in this ICS, drawing on their past biases and experiences and what other people have told them, advertising they have seen, then adding and subtracting brands as they move through the journey), as shown in the figure below: (Seitz, 2017)



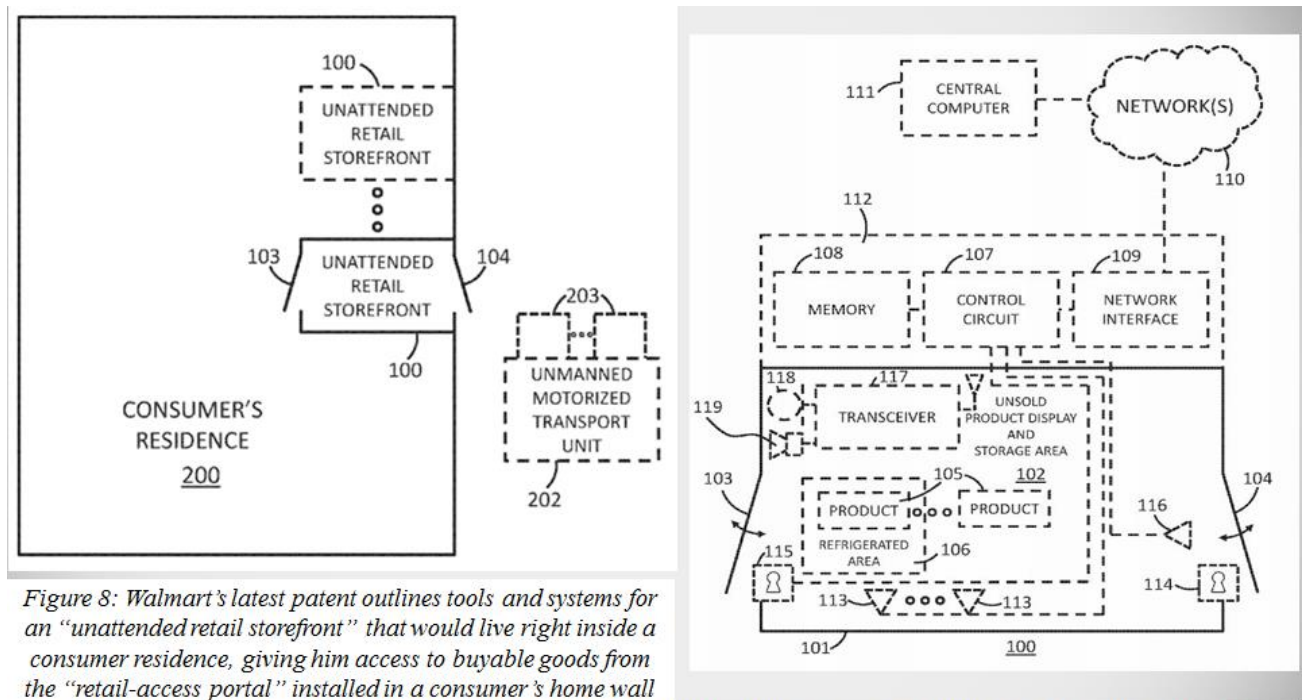
Figure 7: The four key battlegrounds of the consumer decision journey

Source: Seitz, B., Driving business growth by zeroing in on the consumer decision journey, McKinsey Podcast December 2017, interview with McKinsey's partners Dave Elzinga and Bo Finneman

McKinsey's partners explained: how much harder it is to get initially considered beyond just having a consumer be aware of a brand, and how they developed the "customer growth indicator" (CGI), by taking the percent of time that a brand is in that ICS, then dividing that by the brand's current market share, and multiplying by 100 to create the CGI (as they did this in about 17 categories they found that ten of those categories had a 60 percent of the variance in growth, meaning a very strong relationship with future growth); that a brand cannot lose sight of the other parts of the CDJ (getting into ICS doesn't mean a brand stay there, because brands come in and out of the consideration set as consumers go through the active part of the shopping process), in order to avoid to be vulnerable it needs having the right kind of messages and experiences, both online and in store; even after being purchased a brand needs to continue to do the right job in the post purchase experience so as to be putted back into ICS and to can drive growth; that it is important to make distinction between the initial consideration (the collection of brands that are there when the marketer experiences a trigger) and the final consideration (the final group of brands, often two brands, that the marketer is actually going to make a decision between as he make the purchase); that the only way to make sure that the marketer experiences that purchase and drives growth is making sure that you know what brand equities and what touchpoints are most critical for that battleground called the "moment of purchase"; that the metric proposed by McKinsey is useful in managing a brand portfolio to understand where it is necessary to invest.

A physical store built right in your home?

On November 30, 2017, CB Insights let us know that the physical store is brought directly into consumers' homes (the delivery gaps being eliminated entirely) thanks to the newly published patent by Walmart (see the figure below) which allows: the access to buyable goods from the "retail-access portal" installed in a consumer's home wall (an end-to-end system for an unattended retail storefront that would be restocked by a retail establishment or delivery service/drone/ "unmanned motorized transport unit"); the loading of goods into the machine from outside the consumer's residence through an "inventory-loading portal"; the working in tandem with other Walmart's connected home and e-commerce innovations to date; consumers both to submit choice and preference data to the retailer regarding desired goods, and to return items by placing unused goods back on the shelf; the replenishment of a stock of desirable inventory without ever clicking a button.



Source: Forget Online Shopping. Walmart Patents A Store Built Right In Your Home, CB Insights, November 30, 2017

Instead of conclusions

In the previous 2017 issues of our journal we underlined the obvious transformation of managing and organizing distribution within the business context's changing conditions, supply chains needing to master micro segmentation in order to excel in individualization and customization, and brands needing to focus more on overall experience (both online and in store), listening and pro-actively adapting to the customer's expectations of fulfillment and delivery options, better understanding the difference between unified commerce and Omni channel, recognizing the need for a holistic customer experience that transcends channels. We show that there are significant priorities for retailers facing both customers' more pressing expectations and their unmet buyer journey needs, retailers being forced to constantly innovate in providing a better shopping experience, faster adopting digital strategies while giving their customers a strong sense of value within the context of trying to choose the best experience of the digital and brick-and-mortar environment. We also highlighted retailers' need of bringing continuously in-store innovation, of investing in CX and Omni channel efforts, giving more attention to the entire shopper journey, adequately matching their customers' expectations across key areas. A review of the above lines made us recall other relevant things, such as:

- the invitation – for working together to build the foundation for the "Road Map for the Store of the Future" Project (see the figure below) – launched by us at Expo Milano 2015, as a Speaker to Shop 2015: The Store of the Future between connectivity and convergence; Technological innovation, applications and success stories in retail; (Purcarea, 2015)

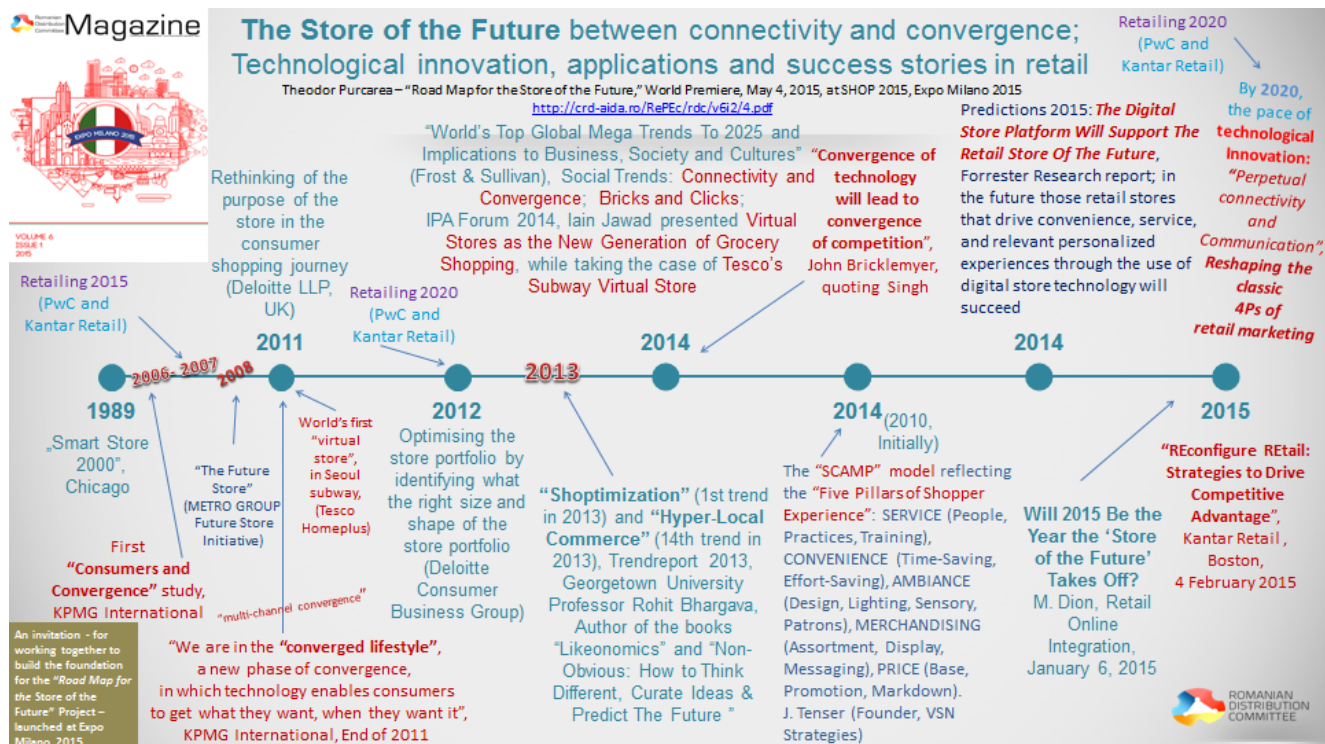


Figure 9: Road Map for the Store of the Future

Source: Theodor Purcarea, Road Map for the Store of the Future, World Premiere, May 4, 2015, at SHOP 2015, Expo Milano 2015, Romanian Distribution Committee Magazine, Volume 6, Issue 2, Year 2015 or Theodor Purcarea, Shop 2015, Il Negoziato del Futuro Oggi, Atti Dei Convegni

- Accenture's "2016 Global research: Customers are shouting, are retailers listening?" (a survey of global shoppers underlining, among other aspects, that: retailers capabilities which were nice to have are becoming must haves, shoppers want an improved CX without being invade in their privacy, and that their lifestyles have been influenced by only a few brands);
- the innovation consulting firm PSFK's 10 pillars for leveraging technology to create a seamless journey, putting the consumer back in the middle of the experience (create confidence, eliminate obstacles, democratize access, recognize and personalize, promote transparency, perfect partnerships, optimize ownership, cultivate community, encourage advocacy, deliver delight); (Berry, 2016)
- even Airline Distribution systems are challenged to be configured to interact with natural language interactions, to program apps to understand various gestures for "hands free" (also considering both initial and post-booking purchases), to evolve their user interfaces and commands to accommodate interacting with wearables etc. - because of technologies playing key roles; it is considered that by 2021 the current era of rigid distribution will be replaced by "Active Distribution" (which will ensure more flexible flight shopping experiences and more

personalized results), airlines' desires to become true retailers being supported by "Full Retailing Platforms" (airlines adding a "Distribution Channel Manager"); (Harteveldt, 2016)

- if retail execution starts with setting a solid retail merchandising foundation, addressing store execution (recognized as the Achilles heel of the category management) involves to add to the store-management teams a manager of merchandising execution and to know including to apply digital in merchandising, considering shopper monitoring and category performance; (Deloitte, 2015)
- as consumers' behaviors and preferences (considering also how, when, and where consumers make purchases) are shaped by disruptive forces, retailers are challenged to offer product uniqueness, feeding instant gratification, utilizing analysis of the in-moment engagement to improve the customers' journey, reduce friction and enhance the brand experience, pulling shoppers via engagement techniques, enhancing the customer's brand experience by targeting relevance, selection, convenience and enjoyment; online may be disrupted by the social networks which are expected to evolve to retail channels, retailing being more than brick and mortar, click and mortar, and point and click; (Deloitte, 2017)
- the critical first step to a winning retail customer experience is to have actionable data: pre-store, in-store, and post-store (as confirmed by a recent study of retail decision makers issued by Velocity Worldwide and Sapio Research, and shown in the figure below); (McShane, 2017)



Figure 10: How brick-and-mortar retailers are engaging with their customers, Velocity Worldwide

Source: McShane, E., Are Retailers 'Retail Revolution Ready'? My Total Retail, October 23, 2017 (cited work)

- Zappos, the leading online retailer for shoes and clothes, launched in November 2017 “The_ONES”, a new retail concept (a way to create a community of people who celebrate the classics) partnering with Curalate (on-site) a new online hub featuring galleries of shoppable lifestyle content (allowing to easily find Instagram content tagged with #WeAreTheOnes, make a request for rights, bring the content on site and make it shoppable); the new account The_ONES on Instagram dedicated to classic sneakers shares inspirational imagery and engages with fans, who have the opportunity to easily discover new products and shop great with the help of a so-called “Curalate Like2Buy” converting the “link in bio” into an intuitive, shoppable experience; (Shelly, 2017)
- the “Global Mystery Shopping Study” of Astound Commerce, a global digital commerce agency, uncovered the online and in-store features dominating the market, common pitfalls in shopping experiences, and the brands that are coming out on top (ranking brands by 206 metrics across customer service quality, ease of purchase, availability of information and more), and revealed, among other aspects, that *merchandising is improving* (86% of brands highlighting products with “what’s new” features; 54% using themed/seasonal promotions; 40% showcasing top sellers; 22% offering loyalty programs – as more brands prioritize retention’s role in revenue generation this percent is likely to grow). (Freedman, 2017)

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