

# How to improve retail customer experience: Listen to the youth

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January 26, 2021



Wondering how to improve retail customer experience? Some of your best advisors can be found in your young talent.

Today, one in four Americans works in retail – that’s 52 million people. These retail workers are overwhelmingly young. According to a [U.S. Census study](#), more than half were ages 16 to 34.

The retail industry is the nation’s largest private-sector employer, contributing \$3.9 trillion to the US gross domestic product. It’s also one of the sectors that’s most focused on improving the customer experience.

That task is always challenging, but it has certainly been further complicated by the changes created by the pandemic – everything from product shortages and supply chain disruption to the meeting new and ever-evolving consumer shopping preferences.

## **Retailers flex their flexible fulfillment muscles: BOPIS defined**

Flexible fulfillment is a requirement today. Ship-to-store, ship-from-store, and BOPIS (buy online, pickup in store) options rule the retail experience.



But top retailers are finding new ways to improve retail customer experience by turning to their young workers.

## Improving retail customer experience: It's all about your people

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If you think about the individuals who have been nothing less than heroes throughout the pandemic, the list certainly includes retail workers. So many of these incredible people have made sacrifices for our comfort and safety, making sure we have what we need to help us cope with the challenges of COVID-19.

[NRF 2021](#), a virtual event sponsored by the National Retail Federation, provides insight into [how the industry is moving forward](#). The annual conference is the industry's largest.

Afterwards, I chatted with three industry influencers to get their thoughts on the conference and retail trends: **Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership consultant**; Minda Harts, CEO and author of "The Memo"; and Tara Nolan, founder and CEO of The Conscious Connoisseur.

## Industry Experts on the Harnessing the Power of Young Talent

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A panel of industry thought leaders convened to discuss the future of retail. You can watch a replay [HERE](#).

Listening to retail leaders share their experiences from the past year was intriguing, informative, and inspiring. Especially interesting was a renewed focus on talent management as a way to improve the retail customer experience.

**"We're at an exciting moment in retail, because there is so much possibility in new technologies around data and analytics," Yohn said. "But success still comes down to people and how retailers bring in workers to fill both corporate and front-line roles. Talent is what drives retail, because it's about people serving others."**

## Fresh eyes bring new ideas for improving retail CX

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One large retailer, PetSmart, emphasized the focus on talent in an NRF session about helping its younger, more diverse, and technologically savvy population of consumers connect with the brand.

To meet this need, the company is recruiting and hiring young workers across the organization – and empowering them to drive change.

PetSmart hires interns from the Terry J. Lundgren Center for Retailing at the University of Arizona. At NRF, several spoke about listening to the concerns of “pet parents” and working with company leadership to develop new opportunities to improve the customer experience.

With a perspective not colored by traditional retail practices, the students were able to offer new possibilities in a true entrepreneurial manner that improved PetSmart’s operations. We’re talking multimillion-dollar initiatives – – how’s that for truly moving the needle?

“Youth brings new ideas,” Nolan said. “There’s less of a fear of being told ‘no,’ which opens up opportunity to take more risks. The entrepreneurial mentality generates new ideas that we all need.”

## **2021 CX retail trends: How to defy the decline of brick-and-mortar**

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Discover four 2021 CX retail trends that are crucial to adapting your sales for seamless e-commerce and customer experiences.



“Listening to those amazing students, I was struck by their access to leadership,” Harts said. “I like the intentionality behind exposing them to leadership early on in their internships. It’s also important that senior leaders actually listened to their ideas, because their younger associates are closer to the customers.”

PetSmart’s receptiveness to new ideas proposed by the students is a good sign that change is being encouraged from the top. And, even more important, that business leaders are listening and acting on these new ideas.

For Yohn, Stacia Anderson, the executive vice president of merchandising and customer experience at PetSmart, put it best: “If you’re not learning in retail, you’re not winning.”

“Being curious and wanting to learn and grow is so critical in retail, especially in a season when there’s been so much change,” she said.

## **Building brands by humanizing the experience**

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An internship program like PetSmart’s is clearly a best practice for today’s retailers. Companies can’t just rely on transactional relationships with their talent pipelines by showing up on campus and conducting interviews. They must choose to invest in talent development and big-picture partnerships.

There’s an important payoff. By creating world-class employee experiences for their interns, retailers can develop incredible ambassadors for their company. And the praise of younger employees can help a company become an employer of choice for the next generation of workers.

“I really love the focus on making work *work* for everyone,” Harts said. “We need to humanize the workplace, remembering how important it is to be empathetic and hear people out. Those people who are closest to the customers have ideas that can support innovation. Everybody is a leader, even those without the title.”

With the accelerating pace of change, retailers may feel pressured to focus on forward momentum. But improving customer and employee experiences during the pandemic and its aftermath can’t be just an analytical exercise.

“Everything is in flux, so there’s a need to be nimble and try new things to connect with consumers,” Nolan said. “Just don’t forget to be human. These are crazy times. But brands need a sense of empathy to connect on a human level with both customers and employees. We’re all in this together.”

***2020 drastically changed shopping behavior. How much? Download the report [HERE](#).***

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