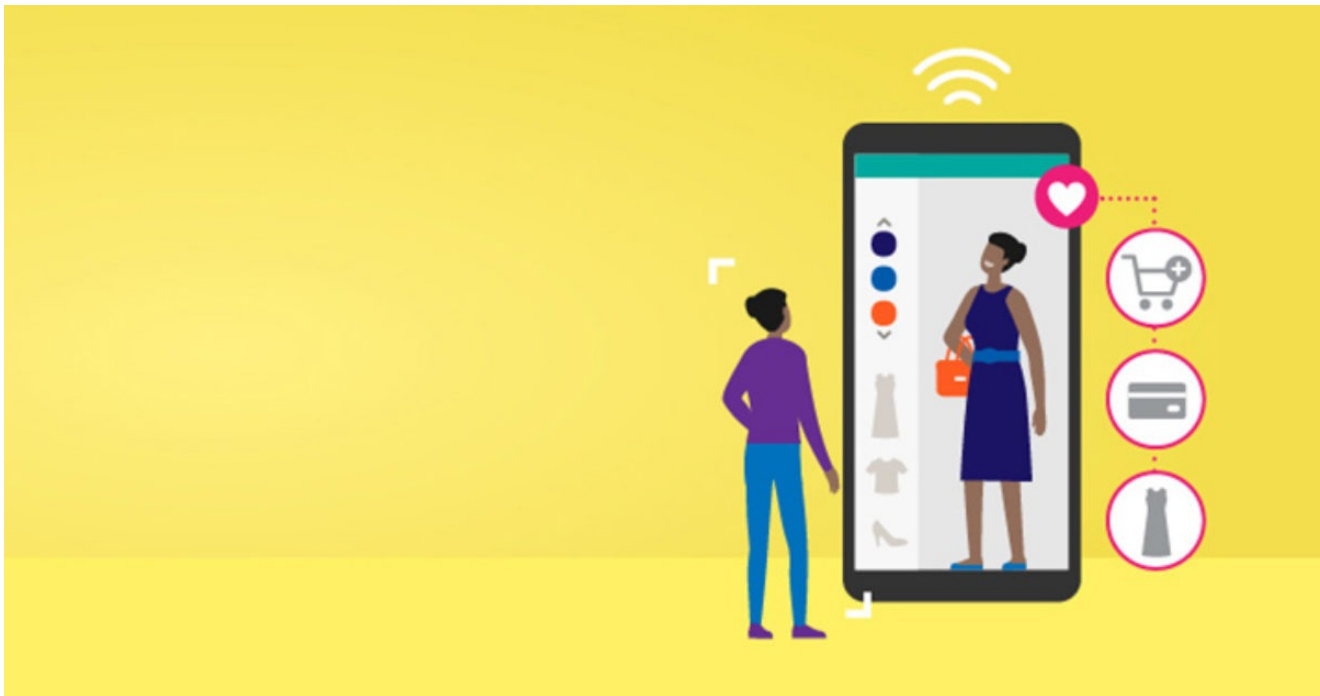# How to create the best retail customer experience: 3 trends to know

the-future-of-commerce.com/2021/01/29/best-retail-customer-experience

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Growing up in the 1980s, big-box toy stores were my favorite places to shop. In those stores, you could touch things and play with cool new products – the best retail customer experience for a budding young consumer with a weekly allowance to spend.

Since the pandemic, it's become much harder for retailers to deliver great customer experiences. Store closures and social distancing restrictions mean that fewer people can shop in person. Many companies quickly shifted to online shopping and curbside fulfillment, some more successful than others. Creating a seamless experience isn't easy.

I recently met with three industry influencers to get their thoughts on how the retail industry can build on lessons learned from 2020 to reshape the retail experience for today's consumer.

Draw on new behaviors to create the best retail experience

Retail research from The Economist Intelligence Unit provides insight into how COVID-19 has impacted shopping behavior. The global research surveyed 4,000 consumers of all ages.

==Not only have consumer shopping behaviors changed during the pandemic, with more people spending more online, but those behaviors are going to continue,== says Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership consultant.

People across all generations cited the ability to shop anywhere at any time as their top reason for enjoying online shopping. But this benefit was highlighted by 59% of Baby Boomers, 51% of Gen X respondents, and only 42% of Millennials and Gen Zers.

Industry Experts on Creating a New Retail World

A panel of industry thought leaders convened to discuss how to deliver experiences customers value. You can watch a replay HERE.

Our team of influencers attest to this trend. "My parents just put a bid on a home online," says Tara Nolan, founder and CEO of The Conscious Connoisseur. "They haven't even seen it in person. That's not traditional retail, but it's an example of the impressive potential of online transactions."

I can certainly relate, as members of my family also developed new shopping preferences. My mother, for example, chose to use an online grocery provider to deliver essential supplies.

Looking ahead, 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they will maintain some of their new online shopping habits after the pandemic ends. The specific expectations differed by age, however. Millennials and Gen Z respondents said their online shopping would decrease by 4%, Baby Boomers said they would do 9% less shopping online, and Gen X expects to reduce digital buying by 6%.

Unify operations for the best retail CX

One of the key themes I heard at NRF 2021, a virtual event sponsored by the National Retail Federation, was the need to create a seamless customer experience, regardless of channel.

Minda Harts, CEO and author of "The Memo," explained how a lack of cohesion can ruin CX. She experienced it firsthand.

"I recently purchased something online that I needed to return. I was going to be near one of the retail outlets, so I thought I'd exchange it in person," she says. "But the store told me that I couldn't exchange an online purchase in the store. That's not seamless at all!"

Buying behavior after COVID-19: e-commerce boom will remain

Once difficult to explain, digital transformation has been clearly defined by the pandemic. Buying behavior after COVID-19 will still rely heavily on e-commerce, and retailers need to be ready for that.

Many shoppers may be unable to go inside stores for months yet, but they still want to have that experience. "I want to feel that all of the store's channels are interconnected, operating hand-in-hand," says Harts. "Customer service still needs to be at the forefront of the experience, even in a pandemic."

It wasn't too long ago that retailers had all of the leverage. Now the power is in the hands of consumers.

To address this change, retailers need to embrace "modular commerce," says Nuno Pedro, head of the SAP Digital Commerce group.

"Because customers expect to have flexibility and lots of different options, retailers need to stitch together the customer journey," says Yohn. "The idea of the customer experience is not just a marketing play anymore. It's about transforming the entire business and bringing it all together."

Above all else, innovate and adapt

At NRF 2021, retailers shared how they found innovative ways to cope with the pandemic. Their stories highlight the importance of agility and flexibility for retailers today.

The Entertainer, the United Kingdom's largest independent toy retailer, found itself with a week's worth of online business in a single day last spring, not long after lockdown began. Rob Wood, head of online, said the company had to figure out how to fulfill all the orders, and learned many valuable lessons along the way.

How to improve retail customer experience: Listen to The Youth

To improve the retail customer experience, top retailers are turning to their young employees for fresh perspective.

Tractor Supply Company enabled same-day delivery to all of its stores. Arts and crafts retail chain Michael's launched same-day delivery within a few weeks of lockdown and curbside delivery within just days.

Book distributors added a personalized approach, delivering physical and digital copies depending on the customer's preference. Some restaurants began offering full family feasts for pickup or delivery. Others began selling and distributing specialty ingredients, such as pasta.

Retailers willing to adapt and experiment with e-commerce innovations clearly made the greatest strides in delivering engaging, rewarding customer experiences. But it's not too late for companies who want to participate in the new retail world.

"As the data shows, consumers recognize the convenience of online shopping," Nolan says. "The brands and businesses that take the initiative to figure it out right now are creating a playbook for their future."

*2020 drastically changed
shopping behavior.
How much?
Download the report HERE.*