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OPINION

Retailers become festive season-ready

Julia Ahlfeldt 8 Oct 2022



Online and offline channels are one and the same to customers, so retailers should maximise both paths to purchase



In less than a few weeks it is the start of the annual retail frenzy. The season kicks off with Black Friday and Cyber Monday in November and is followed swiftly by the festive season, so retailers must start preparing now if they want to capitalise on consumers' shopping sprees.

It's crucial that retailers understand that their on- and offline channels are one and the same to customers, and what happens online often leads to offline sales. In fact, according to the [2022 South African Digital Customer Experience](#)

[Report](#), which I co-authored, consumers' online activities directly influence 25% of their physical sales across core retail categories. In rand terms, this equates to R294-billion of the total retail sales pie.

Business leaders of big and small brands can ignore this at their peril. Yet the fact is, consumers are spending more of their lives online, and we see this playing out in their brand engagement and shopping behaviours. Some 61% of consumers go online to compare products and pricing, while 46% regularly go online to get ideas and discover products before heading in-store to purchase.

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Times have changed

Online exploration is at a true inflection point. Just a few years ago, the digital experience was perceived to be a good website that offered personalisation and an easy check-out. Today it is a medley of facets: social shopping on Instagram and Facebook has grown extensively and retailers are missing a trick if they are not using these tools.

It's also the act of researching, Googling and shopping in-App or via WhatsApp. There

is also the metaverse to consider. While still in its infancy, it shows potential of becoming the next frontier in online commerce. Retailers must become acquainted with these new digital channels or be left behind.

Unfortunately, too few business leaders have grasped this concept – many have shareholders to answer to after all – and continue to operate in silos, when in fact their marketing, customer experience (CX) and IT teams should be working together to improve the overall customer experience, and drive sales. But CX is a long rather than a short game and is why too few businesses have adapted an integrated customer experience journey.

Consumers have much higher expectations

While Covid-19 was a catalyst for many brands to assess their integration of on- and offline, the pendulum has swung back somewhat and landed on a new equilibrium of online and in-store sales, and it's clear that the consumer has permanently changed their behaviour. They have a higher expectation of seamless deliveries when ordering online and brands must ensure that the so-called last mile is as slick as the rest of their experience – else consumers will consider switching.

This becomes painfully obvious when we explore consumers' rationale for cart abandonment. This year, 71% of the report's respondents reported abandoning their shopping carts if the shipping costs were too high, if the delivery took too long, if the payment gateway looked dubious and if the site was too slow.

Among those who have got it right is Amazon. Anticipated to open shop in South Africa in 2023, Amazon has done wonders with its customer experience. From the get-go Amazon's leadership team put the customer at the centre of the purchase path and has reaped the benefits ever since. Retailers must take note and adapt to the new reality of the digital shores. It will quickly show who is ready for the future and who is not, pointing out those that lack the vision and the will to change.

Every business needs

There is no doubt that the competition has heated up among retailers and businesses in general. Consumers have become extremely discerning, demanding and have high expectations of those they intend to buy from.

It's also not only retailers that need to integrate their CX across their on- and offline channels. Businesses like those in insurance, banking and automotive sales too need to change how they do things. Operating traditionally offline, today a consumer can buy a car from the comfort of their home or engage with an insurance broker via chat. **Tesla, for instance, only sells its cars online** and has to date sold 2 645 000 worldwide by the end of the first quarter of this year.

Today, every channel matters and all businesses need to think carefully about how their customers engage with them and vice versa via their integrated customer journeys.

Smart business leaders will be well placed come this year's festive season if they adopt a new way of thinking, one that uses social selling, online reviews and consumers' ongoing digital discovery to their advantage to secure the sale – whether that is on- or offline.

Julia Ahlfeldt, producer and presenter of the **Decoding the Customer podcast, has dedicated her career to helping organisations gain market leadership through customer-centricity.**

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