

Don't mistake having an online store for true omnichannel retailing

The age of the mall is waning. That phrase sends property fund managers into a cold sweat. But it's not just the lower foot traffic as a result of Covid that is to blame for the pressure on brick-and-mortar stores.



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Businesses that have refused to embrace the benefits of omnichannel retailing are sacrificing the opportunity to engage with their customers in the way they want. And the solution is not simply offering an e-commerce store, according to Africa's largest payment service provider, DPO South Africa.

The rise of e-commerce and mobile commerce has fundamentally changed the retail business landscape. More than that, the ongoing digital disruption of the retail space is forcing business owners to rethink how they view what it is they are offering.

Multichannel versus omnichannel

"Far too many retailers mistake multichannel strategies for omnichannel offerings. While maximising in-store, web and mobile channels is a great step forward, omnichannel offers so much more," explains Brendon Williamson, CSO at DPO South Africa.

“An omnichannel approach means accepting that mobile and social media have enabled customers to not only quickly flick between channels but actually use these channels - often simultaneously. Omnichannel retail means putting the customer at the center of your strategy, and using transformative digital marketing to attract and retain customers.”

Williamson believes that with a few changes, physical stores can benefit from the opportunities offered by digital retail practices.

“Enabling your channels so there is a seamless experience across physical and online iterations of your offering is key. Give me a digital experience in your store. If I can do something online, allow me to do it in-store as well. Let me read a review or watch an instructive video on a store-provided device so I can get more insight on a product. This is especially important since many retailers now have fewer staff on the floor due to downsizing,” he advises.



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Catering to informed in-store shoppers

Williamson goes on to say that what is often lacking in-store is the expertise of the staff who interact with customers on the shop floor.

“In an omnichannel world, I would have researched the product I want to buy and, if I haven’t already bought it online, I would be in-store to double-check the physical aspects of the product - and maybe compare it to another competing product which I would have also researched online.

“Unfortunately, the floor staff are often not as well informed as I am about the two products and, even if they know the stats, may not have read the reviews I have. We need to train staff to match the knowledge of the new, informed customer,” he says.

Value-adds and collaboration

Value-adds are also important when it comes to attracting customers. Williamson says collaboration between stores inside malls could make a real difference.

“If I need to buy a pair of shoes, but know that I can go to the mall, try them on to be sure they are right for me, and I know I am going to get a free coffee from a partnering store, it will influence where I shop. The same applies to parking. Physical stores should never underestimate how much of a grudge purchase parking can be.

“Getting creative with loyalty, vouchers and inter-store collaboration can make a real difference and apps to manage this will be game changers. What’s more, connecting all of this to your social media platforms is a wonderful brand building exercise,” he says.



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Delivery services offered offline

Logistics is also something that Williamson says is often consigned solely to the realm of the e-commerce offering.

“If I walk into a store in a mall – especially the larger malls – and buy a number of products, but I don’t want to carry them around with me as I continue my shopping, why can’t I have them delivered later that day or at the very least, the next day in the same way as we do when shopping online? If I am a loyal customer of your store, both online and offline, you should have all my details including my delivery address.

“Malls should have a concierge service which offers home delivery services as a value-add or even for a small fee. Drop your parcels off and have them delivered when it suits you. The malls could really get creative and work with retired people to create self-driver delivery services,” he suggests.

Williamson says downsizing of physical stores may be inevitable but he says with good omnichannel offerings the shopping experience does not need to be less enjoyable.

“Digital disruption is inevitable. But by weaving digital services into your offering, and more importantly, connecting online with offline and building a cohesive, integrated omnichannel strategy, physical stores won’t just survive, they’ll thrive,” Williamson ends.

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