

Ones to watch

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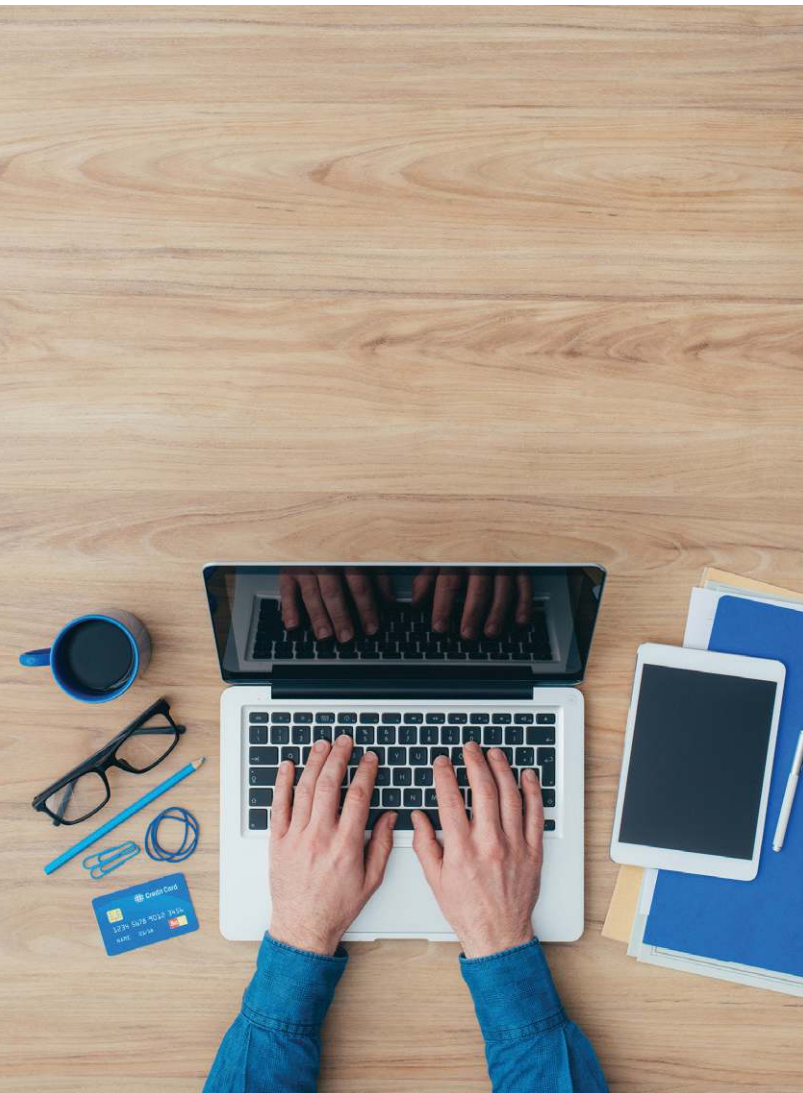
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P F S

A service economy

As the cost of new technology comes down and service agreements become the norm, customer service is going to become a key differentiator. **Jonathan Wright** reports



VIEWED FROM THE outside, it sometimes seems as if the retail sector hardly changes. That's because the basic task of selling the right goods to a receptive customer at the right moment never fundamentally alters. Yet as the adoption of mobile technology by customers, the pace of which exceeded all but the most optimistic predictions by mobile evangelists, proved, retail can stay the same while *everything* changes.

More recent developments may lack the visual symbolism of smartphone-distracted people suddenly becoming ubiquitous on the nation's high streets, but they're no less profound. In particular, the rise of service-based offerings is transforming the retail landscape.

Ten issues to consider

- 1** **MANAGING DATA IS KEY:** In a data-driven economy, the weight of information can overwhelm the unwary. Work with suppliers or build the in-house expertise needed to prevent this happening and make the data work for the company.
- 2** **SECURITY IS KEY:** Customers think badly of retailers that mishandle personal data. Don't do it – or risk losing access to personal data.
- 3** **RETAIL IS PERSONAL:** Speaking across to customers in ways that suit them, whatever the medium used, is always better than pumping out marketing messages.
- 4** **DATA SCIENTISTS:** How good are the data scientists a retailer employs, either in-house or employed indirectly by a supplier? This will become a crucial retail skill, expect to pay for it.
- 5** **OWNERSHIP IS SO 20TH CENTURY...** increasingly, retailers will buy in services from partners via the cloud and customers won't be so set on the idea of owning objects that can be delivered digitally. Adjust to this new world.
- 6** **NOT JUST NEW FOR NEW'S SAKE:** When investing in cutting-edge technology and techniques, don't be scared of failure, it goes with the territory, but equally don't throw money at vanity projects because "that looks cool".
- 7** **SCALABLE DEVELOPMENT:** Allied to the point above, make sure that initiatives can be scaled up if they genuinely show promise.
- 8** **THE INTERNET OF THINGS (IOT):** This is on the horizon. Think about laying the foundations for IoT-based offerings now, or risk having to play catch-up later.
- 9** **SMALL CHANGES:** These can have big effects. Keep a weather eye for developments in areas such as payments and fulfilment that may radically change customer expectations.
- 10** **GO BACK TO BASICS:** Once in a while, and certainly before investing serious money, remember to check that new initiatives fit with brand values – or genuinely help to change perceptions if that's what's needed.

There are two sides to this development. Firstly, retailers are facing competition from new kinds of businesses that are taking traditional retail models and offering them via the internet. Netflix is essentially a virtual video store. From a different angle, a company such as Harry's in the US sells shaving "plans" where customers pay a monthly fee to have foam and blades delivered to the home.

From the supply side, retailers are increasingly augmenting enterprise-level systems with software and bandwidth accessed via the cloud. Indeed, the recent deal that saw customer relationship management (CRM) specialists Salesforce buy Demandware to create Salesforce Commerce Cloud, a deal between two companies that base their offerings on the flexibility of a cloud-based approach, suggests it's increasingly realistic for retailers and brands to dispense with the idea of 'owning' software at all.

Integral to these new models is the idea of nimbleness, of being able to react to changes in the market. Yet this in itself raises a question: what information is the retailer using when it seeks to make the most of a perceived opportunity? Modern retail is driven by data. Interpret the data wrongly, doing something as simple as assuming that everyone will be wearing red this year when it turns out it's blue that's popular, and the bottom line takes a hit.

Leading retailers make this kind of mistake less frequently because they invest in data analysis. Shop Direct, for example, has spent heavily on combining big data analysis with more traditional AB testing in order to make its offering more personalised. "Our customers want the products and messages that aren't relevant for them to be removed, and those that are right for them to be placed front and centre," group ecommerce director Jonathan Wall told InternetRetailing in July. "We want to tailor everything – from the shop they visit to how we engage with them before, during and after they've shopped."

Future developments



If Shop Direct's initiatives are, in many respects, built around merchandising, that doesn't mean this kind of approach will only be relevant at the front end of retail operations. Another theme in the year ahead will be increased interest in machine learning algorithms that can continuously adjust pricing and stock levels, automating processes that can soak up staff hours. Machine learning already plays a critical role at Amazon.

Again, an underlying theme here is being quick to react, nimbleness. But this won't be enough in itself. Over the coming years, as everyone gets access to these kinds of techniques and costs come down, retailers will need to differentiate themselves from competitors.

This is why Shop Direct's approach is canny. It's one thing for retailers to dial up cloud-based software or to get an AI system to run inventory, it's quite another

to optimise such techniques to improve the customer experience – and, in a world where everything is available all the time to the point where switching on Netflix can induce a strange combination of ennui and panic as you try to decide which series to watch next, customer experience and customer service are going to be key differentiators.

Indeed, we would argue that retailers looking at suppliers that are offering cutting-edge services and technology should start by asking a straightforward question: is there potential for this service or

 In building services around customers, it may be unwise to assume customers will continue to share personal information freely 

technology to improve the customer experience? That's not to say every initiative will succeed, but there's no point, for example, in stuffing a flagship store with shiny and whizzy tech just because it's shiny and whizzy, the store should be testing techniques and technology that can potentially be rolled out elsewhere. From a different angle, John Lewis's JLAB start-up accelerator initiative is designed to identify the most interesting new ideas out there.

Looking further ahead, retailers should certainly be keeping an eye on such developments as the Internet of Things, with its promise of devices talking to each other. Amazon's Dash Button initiative, which allows customers to reorder products with one press, is an early initiative here – albeit one that will seem hopelessly quaint when the long-promised fridge that orders milk *finally* arrives.

More subtly, personalisation can be spooky. We've heard of initiatives within the mobile space where customers retain far more control over how much data their phones broadcast. It's early days here yet, but in building services around customers, it may be unwise simply to assume that customers will continue to share personal information as freely as they do today, at least not without incentives to make the deal worthwhile.

In Summary

Making predictions is foolish, but we may be at a point where what we might call the service economy and retail collide. This will lead to the creation of new business models that will probably appear to emerge slowly from the perspective of the workaday world, but which will be no less profound for that. Ideally, look for suppliers that can both adjust to this new landscape and have a vision for where they will sit within it.

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Electio is the new generation delivery management platform designed to help retailers compete. Its resilient Service Orientated Architecture (SOA) offers carrier integration in as little as three weeks, significantly lower set-up costs, a lower total cost of ownership and the ability to present personalised delivery options in the checkout. Unlike other solutions on the market, Electio's SOA has been cheered by developers, who see the potential to transform their operational efficiency and customer experience. The powerful combination of RESTful APIs, 99.5% uptime and a market-leading Software Development Kit (SDK) mean simple set-up followed by fast realisation of benefits.

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Pay4Later's smart technology connects lenders and merchants so that consumers can spread the cost of their purchases. It's the fastest and easiest way to offer finance and is proven to dramatically increase sales and average order values. An entirely paperless process that's mobile-optimised and touch-screen friendly makes it quick and easy for customers and is a great competitive advantage. It's simple for merchants to get started and our flexible, innovative solutions can deliver results in just a few days. Pay4Later was founded in 2008 and is based in London. We provide services to over 1,400 merchants and have a broad panel of strategic lending partnerships which, along with our innovative technology, ensures the highest acceptance rates.

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11 The Green
Richmond TW9 1PX
Telephone: +44 (0) 208 940 5392
Email: hello@wearepentagon.com
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Pentagon is a market-leading service and technology provider that helps retailers accelerate their online growth through international marketplaces. With offices in Europe and Asia, we support more than 30 marketplaces worldwide in countries such as Brazil, Russia, India and China, and are continually expanding our global reach. Our team of more than 200 ecommerce experts has extensive experience in optimising and automating data, integrating to new channels as well as launching and managing online stores. Whether you need a robust technical integration to one marketplace or fully managed online stores across multiple international platforms, we can tailor our solution to meet your needs.

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Qubit is the pioneer in delivering data-first customer experiences. Our digital experience hub integrates analytics, data and experience management with the Visitor Cloud, a customer data platform that connects data across all your brand touchpoints through an elastic customer record. Our infrastructure lets your engineering team extend the custom experiences they are already building, then deliver them at scale using multiple data sources. Qubit is trusted to deliver real impact to the bottom line for the biggest brands in ecommerce, including Topshop, Uniqlo, John Lewis and Net-a-Porter. To date, we have received over \$76m in funding from Goldman Sachs, Accel, Sapphire Ventures, Balderton Capital and Salesforce Ventures.

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Search Laboratory is an international digital marketing agency founded ten years ago by Ian Harris as a reaction to a gap in the market for culturally sensitive and linguistically faithful PPC campaigns. Search Laboratory is now able to provide clients with integrated campaigns spanning paid search, technical SEO, content marketing, online PR, social media management, programmatic advertising, analytics and data science, as well as bespoke consultancy in all these areas. It can create global campaigns through the utilisation of native linguists who work in-house, or through a network of partners who have received tailored training to the business' requirements.

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Salesforce Commerce Cloud powers commerce operations across all points of sale, including web, social, mobile, in-store and more. The leading enterprise cloud commerce solution, it allows the world's top retail brands to continuously innovate in the complex, consumer-driven world. Now, as part of the world's #1 CRM platform, Commerce Cloud is uniquely positioned to empower companies to deliver a consistent brand experience throughout the customer lifecycle. By leveraging Salesforce's leading sales, service, marketing, communities, analytics, IoT and platform solutions, brands and retailers can ensure every engagement, no matter the channel or device, is completely unified.

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Andrew Hill
Commercial Director



What does your company do?

Electio is a delivery management platform from software pioneers MPD Group.

What is your USP?

Unlike other solutions on the market, Electio's Service Orientated Architecture (SOA) has been cheered by developers, who see the potential to transform their operational efficiency and customer experience. The powerful combination of RESTful APIs, 99.5% uptime and a market leading Software Development Kit (SDK) mean a simple set-up followed by fast realisation of benefits.

What new functionality does the latest version of your system give to retailers?

Along with Electio's core functionality, our customers have access to a number of modules to get extra from our technology. This includes a Dashboard which allows operations teams to see exactly how they're shipping each day. With the ability to actively manage carrier spend, volume by carrier and balance loads, along with resolving service exceptions, all in standardised terminology, this makes shipping seriously simple.

Electio's User Interface also guarantees user engagement. Its dynamic allocation engine automates the allocation of parcels based on business rules you set, meaning there is no need to call upon expensive developer resource. And new carrier services can be added at the click of a button.

The InTouch module provides tracking data to automate proactive communications with your customers, reducing expensive 'Where is my order?' calls and improving the customer experience. And our Basket Hero module goes even further by personalising the checkout for each of your customers. Retailers can quickly

ELECTIO IN BRIEF

Electio is the new generation delivery management platform from software pioneers MPD Group. It allows retailers to:

Compete: With rapid access to hundreds of delivery services from the world's leading carriers, all through one cloud-based SaaS platform, Electio helps growing retailers compete.

Deliver on your customer promise: Electio enables you to offer a range of personalised delivery options at checkout to each of your customers. Giving choice and convenience means fewer baskets abandoned.

Speed up new carrier integrations: You don't have to wait months to get new carrier services added to your operations and checkout. With Electio, new carrier services can be integrated in as little as three weeks.

Proactively manage carrier performance: Warehouse operations can actively manage carrier performance, including load balancing, predicting spend accurately and handling exceptions, all from one simple dashboard. And coping with volume increases is plain sailing.

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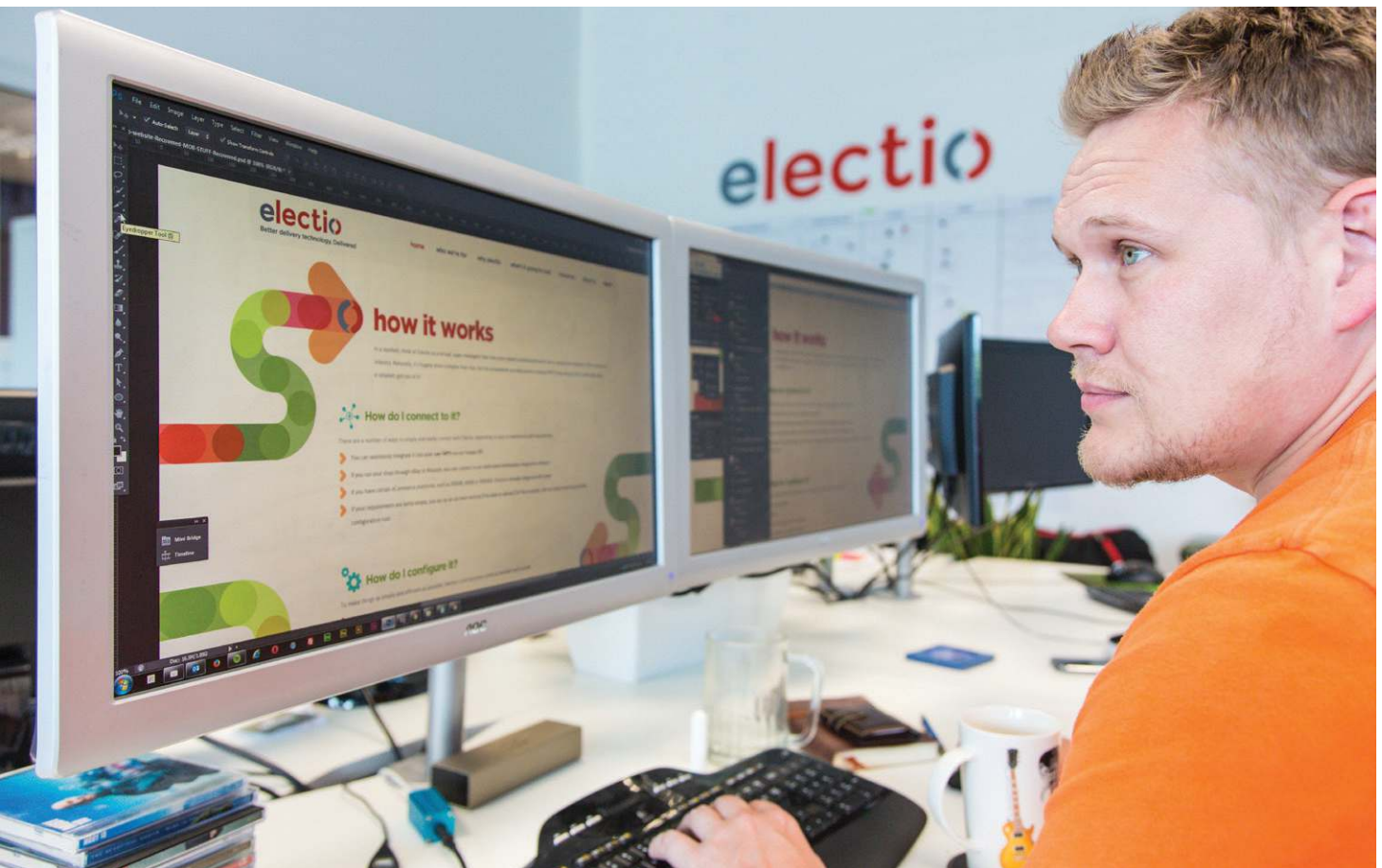


and seamlessly connect to our library of leading carriers and personalise delivery options available based on a customer's location and the time of day they are ordering. Our Return IT module makes returns plain sailing for the customer and the retailer.

The Insight module offers a suite of customisable reports for unrivalled insight into carrier performance. With this insight, users can analyse the percentage of shipments delivered within SLAs and understand financial performance and variance between expected and actual costs. Finally, the Invoice Reconciliation module gives true cost management, removing the need for manual invoice reconciliation.

When did the company start and why?

Developing Electio in 2015 was a response to retailers searching for faster, more modern and resilient delivery software to fulfil their needs. Electio can help retailers meet the ever-increasing delivery expectations of the 21st century shopper.



How would you describe your company's vision?

To become the preferred choice logistics technology company, enabling deliveries around the world.

What is your market positioning and what gap are you filling among the UK competition?

Our market positioning is focused on enterprise retailers, 3PL companies and channel partners.

The gap we are filling comes with the superior quality of our technology and the faster speed of integration we offer.

Who are your customers?

Top500 retailers.

What do you see as challenges in the coming year and what are you doing to meet those challenges?

Keeping up with the demands of customers is a challenge for retailers. Customers want more and more convenience. With Electio, retailers can quickly and easily integrate new carrier

services and offer personalised delivery options to each and every customer.

Customers are also demanding more when it comes to returns and the cost of dealing with this is a challenge. Electio's Returns portal can offer more choice for customers with returns.

Electio also gives retailers scalable, resilient technology, dealing effortlessly

with spikes in demand, such as on Black Friday.

Next year, emerging tech will further drive down the cost of last mile delivery. Brexit and its impact on the logistics and supply chain industry will also continue to cause concern.

