

# Digital Store

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## Linking in the store

The store remains the centre of the retail operation but it's often the last place to be connected to the multichannel network.

**Chloe Rigby** considers how merchants can use the store to understand customers

EVEN FOR THE most advanced multichannel retailers, most sales still take place in the store. But the store is often the final piece to be added to the multichannel jigsaw. Traders that can place their shoppers' in-store behaviour within the single view of the product and of the customer get a greater understanding that enables a more consistent and seamless shopping experience. Extending the commerce hub into the store, along with CRM (customer relationship management) and inventory management systems, is the first step.

Leading Top500 retailers build on this by enabling in-store services that make the shopping experience easier, faster and more convenient. Upmarket fashion retailer Burberry has, for example, enabled in-store stock checking for sales associates so that customers can order from any point in its network for convenient delivery or collection. More recently, it added mobile checkout to its customer app, meaning that shoppers no longer have to queue, while the retailer can collect the data from these transactions to deepen its knowledge of each customer.

Health and wellbeing retailer Holland & Barrett has enabled in-store ordering across its 700-strong store estate, making up to three times as much stock available to customers, depending on the size of their local store.

There are other ways that information from unified commerce and content systems can be used in the store, whether that's through reviews, digital shelf-edge information and pricing, or through larger screens that channel social and other web content. Thomson, for example, streams information from social media onto screens in its digital stores, while B&Q is using its website as a single content management system to supply content and information across channels as diverse as its contact centre and its store. Speaking ahead of InternetRetailing Conference 2016, Mike Durbridge, omnichannel director at B&Q, said it was important for the customer experience to be consistent between the website and the store. But it was also important "to have one back-end system rather than lots of repositories of customer data, and of product content and other attributes. We have one source of data that feeds everything, from our shelf-edge labels in the store to the till descriptions we use in the retail checkout, to the printed output that goes into leaflets and press ads."

### Future developments

As well as powering online research and sales, centrally-held inventory information can be used to

power store-based click and collect services. General merchandise retailer Argos has a hub-and-spoke approach to logistics that enables collection and delivery of around 20,000 products as quickly as same day. This underpins a digital store format that is live at locations including underground stations and branches of Sainsbury's, the retail chain's new owner.

In the future, expect to see order-and-collect focused digital store strategies become more widely used. Sainsbury's itself plans to double the number of in-branch digital Argos stores by Christmas. It also aims to have its own digital collection points in 200 supermarkets by the end of the year, where shoppers can pick up their Argos, eBay and Tu clothing orders along with DPD parcels. It's a move that both extends shopper choice and makes buying from a physical store more convenient – boosting, it is hoped, shopper loyalty.

Digitally enhanced smaller format stores have also been used very successfully by retailers who sell larger items and it looks likely such uses will expand over time. Carpetright, for example, has rationalised its network of stores, opening new format stores where shoppers can take forward their online research by seeing, touching and feeling carpets for themselves. More recently, Sofa Brands International, the company behind brands such as Parker Knoll, has launched The Lounge Co with showrooms where customers can see 15 sofa models, using digital

technology to configure their own individual choices from a potential 18,500 models on offer.

The use of mobile also looks set to expand as the number of retailers offering in-store functionality, such as barcode scanners or stock checking, in their mobile apps continues to expand.

That may feed into a wider use of beacons, currently used by shopping centres including the Swan Centre in Eastleigh, Hampshire, to connect individual retailers within the centre to its visitors. Using the data that these give, retailers can gain an insight into how customers walk around the centre, sending them messages when they are heading in the store's direction. Some traders are already thinking ahead to in-store analytics, such as floors that measure pressure, in the hope that they will offer further understanding of how customers behave inside stores, helping retailers decide how to organise their wares and services.

## In summary

The store is still where most retail sales take place. Customers best understand and relate to the shop when it is a clear part of the retail brand but can also offer some kind of value that websites can't deliver, such as the ability to touch and feel products or to pick up orders quickly.

## Ten issues to consider

**1 THINK OMNICHANNEL:** By extending the commerce hub to the store, retailers learn more about the customer and have fresh insights into stock levels and location.

**2 UNDERSTAND CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR:** How shoppers use stores now may well inform how they would use them in the future. How can digital make their current journey easier and more convenient?

**3 SECURE PAYMENTS:** Mobile payments in the store can help take the faff out of transactions. But it's important to stay safe, so any solution should meet existing PCI standards.

**4 THINK STRATEGY:** Is the store a showroom, where shoppers can touch, feel and see, or perhaps a stockroom, for click and collect in minutes? Different digital solutions are available for each.

**5 TEST, TEST, TEST:** Small-scale trials establish what works before the most successful elements are rolled out more widely. Holland & Barrett piloted in-store online ordering in 22 stores before introducing it across its 700-plus store network.

**6 MEASURE RESULTS:** Are new solutions continuing to boost sales, or is further tweaking required? KPI-based evidence can help retailers judge progress.

**7 CULTURAL ISSUES:** B&Q's omnichannel director Mike Durbridge says that rewarding staff for online sales remains important to ensure their buy-in to new technology solutions. Staff can also advise, in the light of their experience, on what solutions would help them sell more.

**8 BUILT TO LAST:** Expensive hardware should be protected if it is to stay the course, otherwise knocks, slips and spills in-store could prove very costly.

**9 REMEMBER THE BASICS:** Good, free wifi underpins in-store digital solutions but don't forget to plan in a well-designed electricity supply that enables devices to be charged.

**10 LOYALTY ACROSS CHANNELS:** Loyalty cards that work in-store and online have proved to be a useful way of following the customer's journey.

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