IRUK TOP 500

DIMENSION REPORT

A Performance Dimension Report as part of IRUK 500 2017
InternetRetailing's UK Top500 Retailers, 2017

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Noelia Guinón

Ecommerce Manager

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From the editor-in-chief

WELCOME TO THE latest IRUK Top500 Brand Engagement Performance Dimension Report. At a time when customers are taking the lead in the way they communicate and interact with retail brands, it makes sense that the way retailers respond is also changing. Indeed, it's important that they do so in order for them to remain relevant to the shoppers they serve.

In this Dimension Report we're looking in depth at where brand engagement is now. We start with the hard data produced by the InternetRetailing research team, working with InternetRetailing Knowledge Partners. They have analysed how retailers set about communicating with customers and gone on to measure how responsive they are when those customers get in touch. From that, we aim to draw real insights into what makes for successful brand engagement, looking at how leading IRUK Top500 retailers develop strategies that enable them to be both engaging and responsive as they open and develop two-way conversations. By being present where customers expect them to be, they encourage shopper loyalty among that group of customers that is most likely to spread the word across social channels. That, in turn, raises brand awareness.

But our focus here is primarily on painting a picture of what is happening, rather than exploring theoretical possibilities. That's why we take a highly practical approach to measuring brand engagement and customer service across channels, illustrated by interviews and real-life case study examples of what works for the stand-out retailers in this Dimension, as well as across the Top500.

This Dimension Report is the first based on IRUK Top500 2017 research. Five more will follow over the year, focusing on Strategy & Innovation, Merchandising, Operations & Logistics, Mobile & Cross-channel and The Customer. As here, in order to share that knowledge with others, we'll be working with Knowledge Partners whose generous input we value highly as we seek to establish the approaches that are working for leading retailers in each Dimension. As always, we want to hear what our readers think, whether you have views on the metrics we've used, how they could be improved, or if you have an innovative approach that's working for you as a retail professional. Please do share your thoughts.

Ian Jindal
Editor-in-chief
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THE IRUK TOP500 DIMENSION REPORTS SERIES

Don't forget that this Brand Engagement Dimension Report forms part of our wider series analysing the performance of UK retailers.

Reports each year that focus on:
• Strategy & Innovation
• The Customer
• Operations & Logistics
• Brand Engagement
• Mobile & Cross-channel
• Merchandising

You can download the latest copy of any of our Dimension Reports, along with the overall IRUK Top500 Report, via www.internetretailing.net/IRUK

Once registered, we will also send you the latest Dimension Reports as they are published, allowing you to keep abreast of the latest developments in the industry.

You can also find information about the IREU Top500, our new index of top European retailers, via the InternetRetailing website.

Editors' comment

IN THIS FIRST IRUK Top500 Performance Dimension Report for 2017, we return to the theme of Brand Engagement. In an era when, thanks to personalisation techniques, customers are impatient of retailers that don't offer them timely and well-targeted offers, it's an area of retail craft that's only growing in importance. But how best to engage with customers? It's a question that we tackle in detail in out strategic overview (page 8), which looks at how shoppers, notably the digital natives of Generation Z, most want to be contacted. Not for the first time in this Dimension Report, we learn that it's a little too soon to write off email, even in the age of multiple social media channels.

To understand why this is the case, read our analysing the numbers (page 12) and new research features (page 32). Each focuses on elements of the original research that go towards compiling the IRUK Top500 and looks at the kinds of communications with customers that are most effective.

In our case studies (page 18), we look in more detail at some of the brand engagement strategies adopted by some of Britain's best-known retailers, Boots, Marks & Spencer, Waitrose and Mothercare. On page 20, there's a two-page interview with David Walmsley, chief customer officer at House of Fraser, in which he outlines how the department store is trying to build a sense of loyalty amongst its most important customers.

We've also brought together some real-life examples of smart brand engagement techniques used by Top500 retailers in the 12 approaches that work feature (page 24).

Our interview around emerging practice (page 29) is with Rob Garf and Jamie Merrick of Salesforce Commerce Cloud. Both have fascinating insights to offer on how brands are moving into the B2C sector and selling direct to customers. Is this a threat to retailers? Undoubtedly, but it's not all bad news. There are huge opportunities for those retailers that successfully adapt to what we've dubbed a new retail ecosytem.

Thanks to all of those who have shared their insights. They've helped us chart a rapidly evolving area of retail craft that we'll be continuing to monitor and returning to as part of the IRUK Top500 2018 research.

In the meantime, we're always reconsidering the metrics that we use to judge Top500 retailers in this Performance Dimension and we'd welcome your thoughts on potential new areas of research. You can share them by emailing jonathan@internetretailing.net and chloe@internetretailing.net

Jonathan Wright and Chloe Rigby, Editors

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Seamless shopping experiences: the key to customer engagement

Benoit Soucaret, creative director of LiveArea, the in-house PFS Agency, argues that developing personalised and seamless experiences is vital as online consumer expectations continue to rise

PFS

TODAY'S DIGITALLY EMPOWERED shoppers expect seamless and relevant customer experiences underpinned by personalised information that extends across channels, allowing them to interact with brands how they want, when they want and where they want.

Such experiences merge channels to provide customers with a convenient service that works for them at any given point, no matter how busy or complicated their days, or whether they're on their mobile phones or at their desktops. When retailers offer experiences that work for their shoppers, they build relationships that last in the long term. When they don't, a lost sale may mean forfeiting a potential long-term relationship with a loyal shopper.

It's important to get it right from the start – and that relies on successful data integration, creative strategies, and connecting with customers at the right time and the right place, as well as successful activation strategies. Brands get it right when they integrate shopper data into the experience. They make sure to personalise the customer's shopping experience – building sales as a result.

It all goes back to data: it's about understanding customers' pain points when they buy from the retailer, and focusing on building a great experience for each one of their customers whether online or in-store. As yet, retailers that do this are the exception, the early adopters of seamless shopping, while others still struggle to recreate their in-store experience online, and as a result fail to convince their online shoppers. The answer here is to find the right balance between those channels that satisfies consumers' demands for a better overall experience.

Just as the use of mobile has changed, with shoppers now much more willing to buy using their smartphones, social media is evolving as a powerful retail channel. It's moving from a simple marketing channel to a customer experience channel. That presents its own challenges. If I buy on your website, I expect to have a positive experience that remains consistent at each touchpoint, whether that's email, on social media or in the store.

Overall, today's customers' constant demand for improvement is creating more experiences that measure up to their expectations. As a result, customer experience has become a new way for brands to gain competitive advantage. This is a good time too, for companies to develop their own brand relationships with shoppers, rather than relying on retailers to act as intermediaries. When they do, they get more opportunities to showcase their full ranges, to engage with their shoppers, and they gain loyalty in return. Customer data gives brands another reason to sell direct to consumers. Those that understand how, where and when their shoppers want to buy can offer them personalised product assortments and promotions, and, using cross-border solutions, reach out to them in new markets.

But it is two-way: just as retailers can now reach their audience through a variety of channels, customers can now constantly have access to their favourite brands. That means it's crucial for retailers to follow up every time, and to personalise their feedback. It's only by doing so that they will offer the consistent service that shoppers demand.

About PFS

A leading global commerce service provider, PFS enables brand and specialty retailers to achieve their commerce goals. As an ecommerce solutions provider, we combine consulting, agency, technology and operations to deliver unique and branded customer experiences, creating Commerce Without Compromise. Learn more about our solutions at **www.pfsweb.com**
Email us at **marketing-europe@pfsweb.com**

Marketing to a segment of one

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From sending welcome emails to tracking shopping behaviour and recommending products, personalised messages help marketers speak individually to their customers, says **Brandon Wilkins**, Oracle Software head of Bronto – EMEA

IT'S THE COMMERCE marketer's unicorn: mass emailing prospects with individually unique messages, offers and incentives. Well, automated messaging to a segment of one is finally here. And, as expected, the potential is limitless – basket recovery, mobile coupons, browse recovery, subscription-based orders and automated product recommendations just scratch the surface of the potential value in hyper-personal marketing.

The great thing about personalised marketing is that you don't always have to initiate the communication. The most successful campaigns are built around reactive messages. Basket abandonment messages are a great example of this. Sent to consumers that have left your site with items still in their basket, these triggered emails are sent after a short delay (maybe an hour, maybe a day). They not only remind the customer of the products in their cart, they also may include an incentive.

Basket recovery emails at our clients average a 40x increase in revenue per email over their typical emails (with some even achieving an 80x increase). Not surprisingly, these emails also perform well in other key metrics. For example, kitchenware brand Joseph Joseph's basket recovery campaigns yield a 60.5% open rate and a 24% conversion rate – without offering discounts. That's the power of personalised messaging.

Another example of the potential of hyper-personalised communications can be found earlier in the shopping journey. Browse recovery emails trigger when a customer leaves their shopping session after having researched a product or category, but before adding it to their basket. Again, these hyper-personalised emails yield more successful results and drive revenue at an amazing rate.

Individual segmentation has just taken another leap ahead with personalised product recommendations – an option that, until recently, was something only very large online retailers could do. Building on recovery emails, product recommendations can have a huge impact on the bottom line. The key is to recommend the right product at the right time. And that means the recommendation engine must examine all available data.

To be most effective, basket and browse recovery emails that include additional product recommendations require more than just the product left in the basket or in the search block. The best messages will draw on all available consumer data over time, including past shopping sessions, purchase history, personal reviews, physical location – even an individual consumer's average order value history.

We have seen targeted personalised emails after abandonment events work well time and again. Our clients' customer engagement, brand loyalty and sales all go up when running personalised campaigns.That's why retailers of all sizes are using hyper-personalisation to get ahead of their rivals and secure the spending of consumers long into the future.

About Bronto

To find out more about how to use hyper-personalisation to create individual marketing campaigns, visit **www.bronto.com**

How to build a sense of connection

Chloe Rigby considers how shoppers want to connect with UK retailers and brands in 2017 – and how retailers and brands are responding

THE WAY UK shoppers buy is changing at speed, and the way that retailers and brands engage with shoppers is also changing to keep up with them.

By 2020, two-thirds of online transactions will take place via mobile devices, according to research from OC&C, Google and PayPal. Their recent report, *The Mobile Mandate*, envisages that just three years from now, 80% of transactions – worth an estimated £57bn – will involve mobiles at some point in the shopping process. Smartphone-wielding shoppers have easy access to social media feeds, ratings, reviews and price comparisons, making it easy for them to research their purchase and engage with the retailer right up to the last minute, even while they're standing in the queue to pay, or pausing before they click to finalise an online transaction.

Shoppers equipped with such powerful smartphones in their pockets now expect fast results to their questions, as well as responsiveness from the retailers they're considering buying from. These days, shoppers are always on – so why wouldn't the retailer be?

Shopper preferences

Overall, people in the UK are now more likely than any other country to use different digital and social channels to connect with people

GenZ are more open to connect with retailers or brands via social media

Tools used to connect with retailers or brands - %

Legend:
- GenZ (orange)
- UK Shoppers (grey)

Categories: Email, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Text/SMS, Pinterest, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facetime/Skype
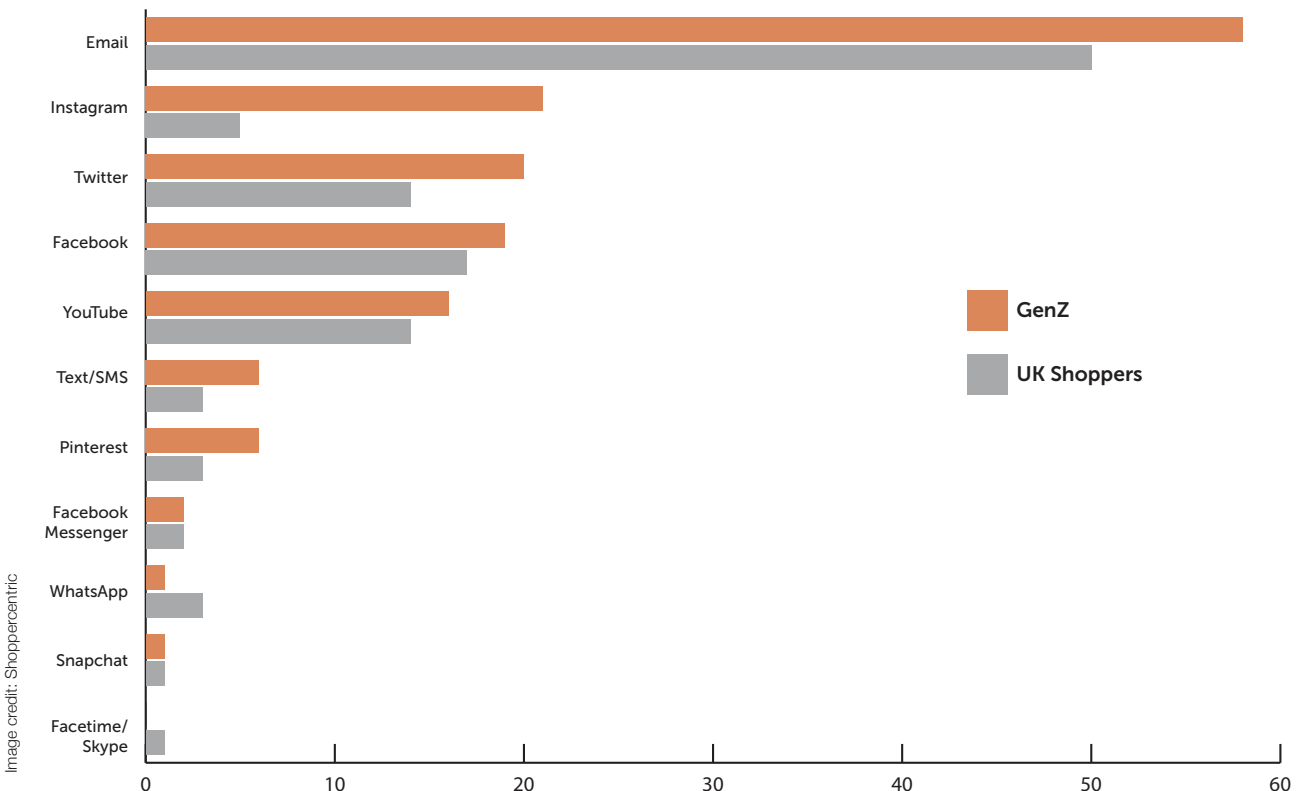
Image credit: Shoppercentric

and information. Asked in Shoppercentric's *Generation Z* shopper report about their use of 17 different digital channels to connect with people and information, just 2% of UK shoppers questioned – and 1% of those that, aged between 15 and 24 belong to Generation Z – said they had no interest in connecting via any of them.

Facebook, text message and email were the preferred channels to connect with people and information, for both the UK population as a whole and for members of Generation Z. Preferences change when it comes to retail, found the research, which questioned 1,040 UK shoppers, of whom 512 were from Generation Z, and went into more depth in fieldwork with 20 Generation Z shoppers.

Overall, email is shoppers' preferred channel to hear from retailers and brands. Half (50%) of the UK population as a whole ranked this as a key channel for connection, as did 58% of Generation Z members. Shoppercentric also detected a growing openness to connecting with retailers via social media – especially among Generation Z shoppers – that contrasts with previous resistance. After email, Facebook was the next most important channel for UK shoppers (19%) as a whole to connect with retailers and brands, while Instagram was second-favourite for 21% of Generation Z shoppers. Twitter came in third place for both Generation Zers (20%) and the UK population (14%) as a whole – although YouTube (14%) was equally popular among the wider UK population. Down at the bottom of the list was WhatsApp, a key channel for 3% of the UK population and 1% of Generation Z shoppers, and Snapchat, favoured by just 1% of each group.

The retail response
Leading retailers appear to be responding accordingly. As the Shoppercentric research shows, half of all shoppers prefer to connect with retailers via email. Many traders send newsletters to those customers who sign up to their mailing list when they have made a purchase. Some also offer significant discounts on first purchases to website visitors who sign up to receive their newsletter. It's a sensible strategy since this regular contact can help to develop and build

> There's always room for improvement – retailers with several million Facebook followers are still very much the exceptions to the rule

long-term relationships. That's especially true when messages are particularly interesting or useful. Email platform provider Bronto says retailers see strong conversion rates when they send regular emails to their customers. They suggests themes such as the 'welcome' email, abandoned basket emails, and messages around key dates such as birthdays.

IRUK Top500 research shows that 90% of IRUK Top500 retailers have a Facebook page, which is Liked by an average of 1.15m shoppers, or a median of 800,000; while 80% have a Twitter account, with an average following, at the time of the research, of 132,056 followers, or a median following of 19,766. These figures speak of a willingness among retailers to engage with customers on key social media channels.

Individual retailers are going beyond to capitalise on channels that, while smaller or more niche, may be important to their shoppers. Upmarket Burberry and Mulberry both engaged with followers on Instagram around London Fashion Week, sharing images and videos from the catwalk, while Burberry has also been active on WeChat (see the 12 things feature on page 24 for more). Topshop, with its millennial focus, is active on Snapchat, where content has included snap stories and videos that tell the story of a photoshoot. Victoria's Secret also uses Snapchat, running competitions and sharing images and videos via the channel. All help to give followers a deeper sense of connection with the brand. Indeed, fostering that sense of connection through engaging content is key to retailers' rationale for using these channels.

For Asos, with its stated ambition of becoming "the world's number one online fashion

▶

destinations for twenty-somethings," social media is very much part of the strategy. That makes sense for a retailer that focuses on mobile, from which 66% of its visitor traffic and 51% of orders come, according to the strategy statement on its corporate website.

Providing an engaging experience and content are other key strategic focuses. For the fast-fashion brand, the number of social media followers on channels including Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr is a KPI, but, it says, it is "great content" that "makes us much more than just a place to shop". It adds: "By becoming a fashion destination offering a unique customer experience, we turn a sale into a loyal customer who returns to us frequently." Indeed, those who download its app go on to use it to shop an average of eight times a month. The content it offers includes themed images that Asos 'hearts' on Pinterest, feeds dedicated to menswear style, fashion and beauty on Google+, plus topical style advice, images, competitions and offers on Twitter and Facebook.

But it's not just at fashion retailers where engagement is a key part of the strategy. Supermarket Waitrose is highly active on Facebook and Twitter, where it promises to be available "whenever our shops are open". It chooses to engage with its customers through cooking, with feeds that include recipe suggestions and videos, live Q&As and competitions. In a recent interactive pancake day feature, with John Whaite from *The Great British Bake Off*, the retailer canvassed votes for different pancake fillings, with a chef demonstrating how to make the winner. Its Pinterest and Instagram

pages feature inspirational food for occasions from Wimbledon to barbecues, picnics and Halloween, while its YouTube channel has food videos alongside others showcasing its supply chain, as well as in categories that include cricket. All are ways to communicate its brand values through useful, engaging information.

For baby equipment, clothing and toy retailer Mothercare, social media and an online blog provide it with relevant ways to communicate to parents with young children. It does so through no fewer than eight channels. Its YouTube channel showcases the latest ranges as well as featuring advice-led information videos on baby care and pregnancy advice that sits alongside buying advice. A range of demonstration videos feature different pushchairs and car seat installation.

Its Twitter feed cross-promotes Facebook events and encourages discussions, while its Facebook page hosts events and videos, and deals with customer queries. Its blog features guest contributors alongside advice answering new parent buying questions, from what to buy for a new baby to what to pack in the hospital bag.

While these leading retailers have different approaches to engaging with customers via social media and other channels, what they have in common is the ability to offer useful advice and information that goes beyond making a sale. Instead, it's about developing relationships that last in the long term. This encourages shopper loyalty but can also deliver data that enables retailers to map customer behaviour and preferences. In turn, this can help them deliver ever more relevant services and develop more relevant products. Customer engagement, in short, can help keep retail brands relevant.

Waitrose uses its website to engage, inform and entertain its customers, relying on this to maintain sales

Image credit: Waitrose

Pic credit: Mothercare
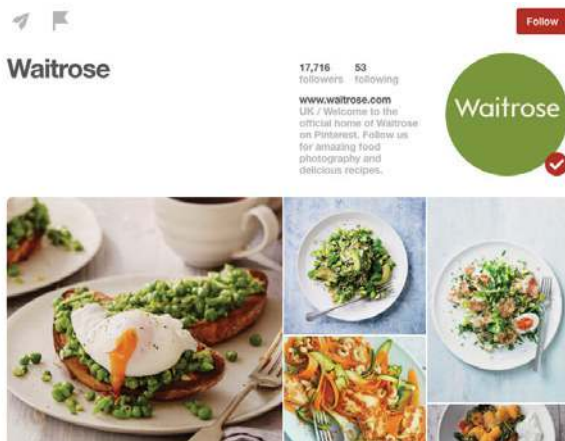
Mothercare makes its website a point of contact for parents during the years they are caring for infants
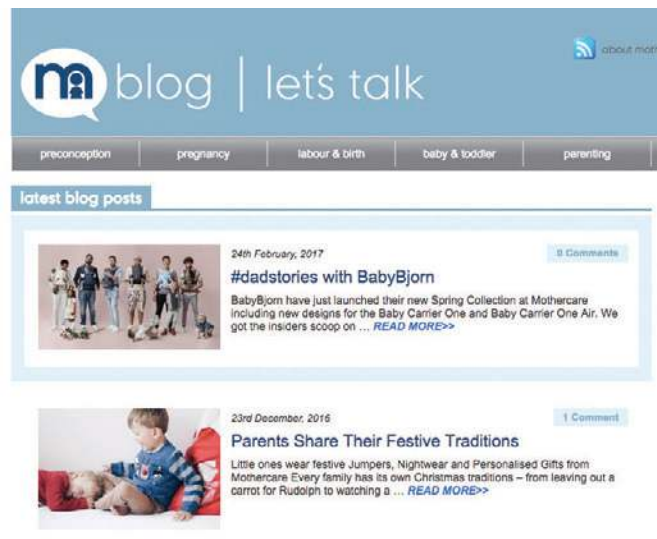
Developing the brand

That may be what is now attracting brands to engage with shoppers in new ways. Brands of all kinds are finding new ways to develop relationships with customers who may buy their products either via retailers or directly from their own websites or flagship stores.

In his Forrester report, *Navigate your Brand to Resonance*, Dipanjan Chatterjee talks of "resonant brands", with strategies that target the most relevant people, deliver on promises and develop emotional connections to create the kinda of brands that become an important part of everyday life. "The best brands create experiences, communities and engagement opportunities that make them an irreplaceable part of their users' lives," he says.

Such brands include Nespresso, which has a relatively small number of stores in cities such as London and Berlin, where it can showcase its brand story. It tells its stories and makes offers via its website and three social media channels – Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – the latter used to showcase its George Clooney ad as well as being home to a range of city guides and other content that chimes with its brand values.

The values at Lego UK may be very different but this is another brand that uses many different channels to connect with customers of all ages, from its digitally connected stores, to videos on its website, to a range of different social media channels. On Facebook, for example, it organises brick-building competitions, showcases unboxing videos, and has Q&A sessions. Lego also has a range of mobile apps featuring games and blog content, including a Lego Life section of the website, where builders can take on challenges and share pictures of their creations in a carefully anonymised forum. This all fosters relationships with those who use their products, regardless of how they buy.

Leif Bode Nielsen, senior omnichannel manager at Lego, explained the strategic thinking when he appeared at the InternetRetailing Conference in 2016. "Between us and our retailers, we want to make sure [shoppers] have great sustainable value in the relationship they have with us, however they touch the brand and no matter where they are on the journey. We want to deliver a consistently awesome Lego experience on every shopping mission. We want to make sure it's a little bit special, more quirky, and more fun." But while leading brands and retailers are finding new ways to engage audiences, there's always room for improvement. Those retailers with several million Facebook followers are still very much the exceptions to the rule. InternetRetailing research shows that the median Facebook following comes in at a more modest 800,000 followers, while the median Twitter following comes in at less than 20,000.

This is despite the fact that social media is close behind email as a preferred way for retailers to keep in touch, according to Shoppercentric research. It could be that as more shoppers develop fruitful relationships with retailers over social media, they become more likely to follow others and to demand engaging experiences in return. At the same time, as retailers watch what leaders in this space do well, they may choose to improve the quality of their content over social media, email, and the new and emerging channels of the future. ▪

The art of conversation

It's more important than ever to initiate conversations with customers. **Martin Shaw** outlines which retailers in the IRUK Top500 are best at this and why

RETAILERS NEED TO reach out to customers. They need to do this not only to tempt new customers to risk a first purchase, but to develop conversations with existing customers. In this way, retailers gain much of the knowledge they need to personalise their offerings, to put their customers at the centre of what they do.

For multichannel retailers in particular, this means handling vast flows of information as customers interact via social media, email, high street stores, the website and customer service. The best of the best, Britain's leading retailers, have not only faced this new reality, but made the most of the opportunities it offers. Where, once upon a time, the idea of continuing conversations across multiple channels on a personalised basis would have seemed beyond most retailers, this scenario is becoming increasingly commonplace.

"Our research shows many trusted, mid-market retailers performing strongly when it comes to email"

Martin Shaw, InternetRetailing

That's not to say it's easy to achieve, as we discovered when we measured, through more than 30 metrics, how retail brands communicate with existing and potential customers. These gave us overarching results we outline in our ongoing research feature (page 32) but here we want to look in more detail at what leading retailers do.

More specifically, what is it that retailers that perform strongly in this Performance Dimension do that other retailers don't? Or, more pertinently, what is it they do well? (It is, after all, perfectly possible to ask an office junior to handle the company social media accounts, that doesn't mean this is advisable.) Here, we first focus on key areas within the Brand Engagement Performance Dimension research: the use of social media and the effectiveness of email communications.

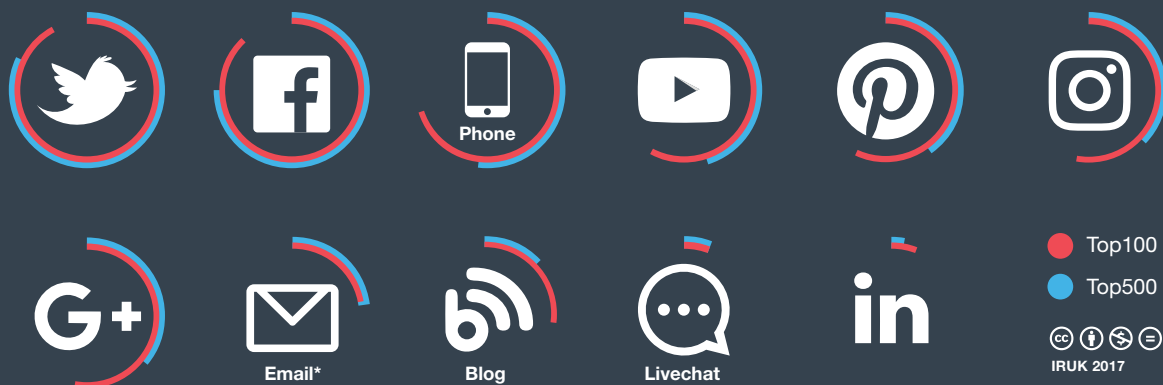## What the leading retailers do in social media

In recent years, there's been much discussion among analysts not just about the effectiveness of social media in a retail context, but even in some cases whether retailers should use social media as a selling tool at all. That debate is surely over. Broadly, our research shows that British retailers have embraced social media as ardently as their customers.

It's easy to see why. A Facebook presence is now the minimum shoppers expect of their favourite retailers. Increasingly, shoppers also expect to see retailers active on such channels as Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, especially when it comes to brands catering to digital natives. Accordingly, it's not surprising that amongst the best-performing retailers in this Dimension, Topshop, Victoria's Secret and Forever 21 all out-performed competitors in key social media metrics.

However, that's by no means the whole picture. The electrical retailer Currys performed strongly for offering social validation, the facility to Like items and share them with friends.

Communication channels offered by the Top500

The fraction of the Top100, and of the entire Top500, that offers a communication channel localised to the UK

Twitter

Facebook

Phone

YouTube

Pinterest

Instagram

G+

Email*

Blog

Livechat

LinkedIn

● Top100
● Top500

IRUK 2017

*Not including web submission forms

Even more revealing in showing what can be achieved is Myprotein. The sports nutrition specialist ranked a truly impressive 397 places above the place its Top500 Footprint would suggest. That's in great part because it enables its visitors to Like products and to validate them on social media, while also offering product star ratings via its mobile app. The wider lesson of Myprotein's approach may be that the retailer has successfully scaled up a traditional strength of specialists: sharing expertise with customers about products that, to the uninitiated, can seem arcane and overly complex.

What the leading retailers do in email

The importance of email communication is sometimes undervalued, as we explore in more detail in our new research feature (page 32). While the channel-hopping behaviour of millennials can make it seem as if email use is declining, it remains the most preferred channel across all demographics. When a 2016 study by Bluecore and NAPCO Research asked consumers how they would prefer to receive brand communications, 68% chose email. Even allowing for this figure being skewed by the attitudes of older consumers, it's a stark reminder that email remains a great way to start conversations.

In this context, it's fascinating to see that our research shows many trusted, mid-market retailers performing strongly when it comes to email. Debenhams, for example, performs strongly in terms of not only sending out emails that aren't treated as spam by recipients, but their emails have a high read rate. Mothercare too sends out emails that its customers are more likely to read than those of competitors, as do Argos and John Lewis. M&S outperforms competitors in terms of sending emails that its customers don't treat as spam. ▶

The complete package

The five retailers we mention above are also interesting in that none of them rely wholly on email to achieve their high rating in the Brand Engagement Performance Dimension. Rather, each excels in a variety of metrics that we measured. Debenhams enables consumers to Like products. Mothercare makes it easy for customers to share product reviews and ratings, especially useful for new parents buying a buggy or cot for the first time, you'd imagine.

Looking outside these five retailers, House of Fraser performs strongly for a combination of offering product reviews and ratings, and sending out emails that have a high read rate. It communicates effectively via email and it's also good at the softer art of getting customers to talk about products. Amazon's emails are more often forwarded than those of competitors. It's rightly noted for its user-generated product reviews and product ratings.

Leave aside for a moment the individual factors – company culture, customer demographics and so on – that may shape where these retailers choose to focus their resources in the disciplines we measure for the Brand Engagement Performance Dimension, one thing united these retailers: they work at scale. In a sense, it would be surprising if they didn't perform strongly.

The outliers

However, it's important to recognise that it's not just larger retailers that perform well in this Dimension. We've already noted how Myprotein drives a strong performance through social media. Other companies also sit more than 200 places above their Footprint ranking in this Dimension. Why is this?

In the case of lingerie retailer Victoria's Secret, it's down to a combination of making products easy to Like, social validation and the way it offers product ratings, not so far removed from the mid-market retailers we've already analysed.

In contrast, fast-fashion retailer Forever 21 has far more in common with Myprotein. It performs strongly for offering shoppers the ability to share items on social media, and for not just letting customers Like products, but persuading its shoppers to Like pages. Here, perhaps, lie the bare bones of a customer engagement strategy for any company aiming at millennials and digital natives.

In conclusion

There isn't one way to do best practice. Top performers in this Dimension have adopted various successful strategies with the common theme that each has built strong relationships with customers.

While this goes a little beyond our research remit, one way to explain the nuances in our findings is to observe that we're entering an era when customers want retailers to initiate and continue conversations through a range of different channels. As we refine our research, we fully expect examples of best practice that are currently at the cutting edge to become mainstream propositions.

Our research will maintain a focus on performance, whatever that means in the future, refining our techniques so that we're looking at new methods of brand engagement. As it becomes easier to link store and digital, for example, will retailers be nimble and technologically savvy enough to help store assistants continue conversations started online? Today, this is difficult. In the months and years ahead, we think it will become increasingly commonplace.

IRUK 500
Brand Engagement Dimension
In partnership with our Dimension Sponsor

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The Top100 retailers of the IRUK Top500 2017 Brand Engagement Dimension, as measured across dozens of metrics for innovative practice in this area

Share your thoughts on #IRUK500 with @etail

Brand Engagement Top50

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Argos
Asda
Bathstore
Bensons for Beds
Blue Inc
Boots
Claire's
Clarks
Crocs
Currys
Debenhams
Dell
Dune London
The Entertainer
eSpares
Everything5pounds.com

Footasylum
Forever 21
The Fragrance Shop
Getthelabel.com
H&M
Holland & Barrett
Homebase
House of Fraser
John Lewis
JoJo Maman Bébé
L'Occitane
Lands' End
Liberty
M&Co
Marks & Spencer
Matalan
Mothercare

Myprotein
Ocado
Overstock
Pandora
PC World
Schuh
SportsDirect.com
Superdrug
Surfdome
Tesco
TK Maxx
Topshop
Toys Я Us
Victoria's Secret
Waitrose
WHSmith

Brand Engagement Top100

Aldo
Asos
The Book People
Bose
Carphone Warehouse
The Cotswold Company
CycleSurgery
Denby
Dolphin Music
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Farrow & Ball
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Halfords
Hamleys
Hotel Chocolat
Jessops

Lipsy
Lloyds Pharmacy
MandM Direct
Maplin Electronics
Musto Ocean Engineered
Next
Nike
Orvis
Pavers
Peacocks
Present Finder
QVC
Radley

Richer Sounds
Screwfix
Simply Be
Slaters
Sofa
Tate Shop
Under Armour
Urban Outfitters
Vans
Very
Watch Shop
Wayfair.co.uk

IRUK TOP 500

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The full rundown of the IRUK 500, 2017, as measured across six Dimensions: Strategy & Innovation, The Customer, Operations & Logistics, Merchandising, Brand Engagement and Mobile & Cross-channel

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Elite

amazon · Boots · M&S EST.1884 · ASDA · John Lewis · TESCO

Leading

Ao.com	Debenhams	New Look	Screwfix
Argos	Halfords	Next	Superdrug
Asos	Holland & Barrett	PC World	Topshop
Clarks	House of Fraser	Sainsbury's	Waitrose
Currys	Mothercare	Schuh	

Top50

American Golf	Early Learning	Matalan	Very
B&Q	Centre	Ocado	Waterstones
Blue Inc	eBay	Office	White Stuff
Carphone	Footasylum	Pets at Home	WHSmith
Warehouse	The Fragrance Shop	Selfridges	Wiggle
Claire's	Homebase	SportsDirect.com	Wilko.com
Dorothy Perkins	JD Sports	Topman	

Top100

Ann Summers	F&F	Littlewoods	Ryman
Apple	Freemans.com	M&Co	Shoe Zone
Bathstore	Game	MajesticWine	Superdry
Blacks	Getthelabel.com	Mamas & Papas	TK Maxx
Bonmarché	Go Outdoors	Maplin Electronics	Topps Tiles
Brantano	H&M	Millets	Toys Я Us
Cotton Traders	H.Samuel	Miss Selfridge	Wallis
Decathlon	Hobbs London	Monsoon	Wex Photographic
Dune London	Hotel Chocolat	Morrisons	Wickes
Dunelm	Kaleidoscope	Moss Bros.	Yours Womenswear
Ebuyer.com	L'Occitane	Quiz	Zalando
Evans	Lakeland	Richer Sounds	
Evans Cycles	Laura Ashley	River Island	

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Top150

Accessorize
Adidas
Beaverbrooks
Boden
The Body Shop
Boohoo.com
Burton
Chain Reaction Cycles
Cotswold Outdoor
Crew Clothing Company
Disney Store
The Entertainer
Ernest Jones

Estée Lauder
Fat Face
French Connection
Gear4music.com
Harrods
Hobbycraft
Ikea
Interflora
Jack Wills
Jessops
Jigsaw
JoJo Maman Bébé
Joules

Lloyds Pharmacy
Lush
Mr Porter
Net-A-Porter
Nike
NotOnTheHighStreet.com
Pandora
Peacocks
The Perfume Shop
Post Office Shop
PrettyLittleThing
Reiss
Samsung

Simply Be
Smyths
Space.NK
Surfdome
T.M. Lewin
Thorntons
Toolstation
Urban Outfitters
USC
The Works
Zara

Top250

Agent Provocateur
Andertons Music
Appliances Direct
Axminster
BonPrix
The Book People
Bose
Boux Avenue
CarpetRight
Cass Art
Cath Kidston
Charles Tyrwhitt
Coast
Countrywide
CycleSurgery
Dabs.com
Dell
DFS
EAST
The Edinburgh Woollen Mill
Ellis Brigham Mountain Sports
Esprit
Euro Car Parts
F.Hinds
Fashion World
Feelunique.com

Figleaves.com
Firebox
Foot Locker
Forever 21
Fragrance Direct
GAP
George at Asda
Goldsmiths
Grattan
Harvey Nichols
Home Bargains
Home Essentials
Hotter
Jacamo
Jacques Vert
Jaeger
JD Williams
Joe Browns
Jones Bootmaker
Karen Millen
Kiddicare
Kitbag.com
Kurt Geiger
La Redoute
Laithwaite's
Laptops Direct

Liberty
Long Tall Sally
Lovehoney
MAC Cosmetics
Machine Mart
MandM Direct
MatchesFashion.com
MenKind
Missguided
Mobile Fun
Molton Brown
Mountain Warehouse
Myprotein
Naked Wines
Nisbets
Novatech
Oasis
Oliver Bonas
The Outnet
Paperchase
Paul Smith
Pavers
Pull & Bear
QVC
Radley
Ralph Lauren

Reebok
Robert Dyas
Route One
Sally
size?
Slaters
SoleTrader
Specsavers
Staples
Sweaty Betty
Ted Baker
Trainline
Uniqlo
Victoria's Secret
Victorian Plumbing
Viking
Warehouse
Watch Shop
Wayfair.co.uk
The White Company
Whittard of Chelsea
Yankee Candle

Top350

Abercrombie & Fitch
Aldo
AllSaints
Anthropologie
Arco
Aria Technology
Avon
bareMinerals
Bensons for Beds
Berry Bros. & Rudd
Blackwell's
Bondara
Bravissimo
Burberry
Buyagift
Calendar Club UK
Calumet Photographic

Card Factory
Charles Clinkard
Chemist Direct
Clas Ohlson
Cloggs
Costco
Crocs
Deichmann
Dr. Martens
Dreams
Dyson
Euronics
Everything5pounds.com
Farfetch
Find Me A Gift
Fitness Superstore
Forbidden Planet

Fortnum & Mason
funkypigeon.com
Furniture Village
Games Workshop
GettingPersonal.co.uk
Google Play
Gucci
Guitarguitar
Hawes & Curtis
Heal's
High & Mighty
hmv.com
Hollister
HP
Hughes Electrical
Hugo Boss
Iceland

Ideal World
Just Eat
L.K.Bennett
Lands' End
Lego
Links of London
Lipsy
Louis Vuitton
Mango
Microsoft
Mint Velvet
Misco
Moonpig
Mulberry
The North Face
Orvis
Overclockers UK

Phase Eight
Photobox
Plumbase
Pret A Manger
Printing.com
Puma
The Range
Rapha
Rohan
RS Components
Russell & Bromley
ScS
Snow+Rock
SportsShoes.com
Sunglass Hut
Swarovski
Tate Shop

Thomas Pink
Thompson & Morgan
Tiffany & Co.
Trespass
Tripp
TTS Group
Ugg Australia
Vans
Virgin Wines
Weldricks Pharmacy
Whistles
WorldStores
Wynsors World of Shoes
YOOX.com
Zooplus

Top500

Abel & Cole
Achica
Aldi
Alexandra
Armani
Art.co.uk
Asics
Aspinal of London
Asus
ATS Euromaster
Banana Republic
Barbour
Barker & Stonehouse
BBC Shop
Belkin
Berghaus
Bershka
Betterware
Bettys
BookDepository.com
Bradfords
BrandAlley
Brandon Hire
Build-A-Bear Workshop
Calvin Klein
Camper

Cartier
CCL Computers
Character
Chums
The Co-operative Electrical
COS
Crabtree & Evelyn
Craghoppers
Create and Craft
Cromwell
Damart
Denby
Diesel
DJI
DKNY
Dobbies Garden Centres
Dulux Decorator Centres
Dunnes Stores
EAT.
Ecco
END.
eSpares
Euroffice
Expansys
Farrow & Ball

Finlux
Fired Earth
Fitbit
FitFlop
Flannels
Fossil
Fraser Hart
Fred Perry
Free People
G-Star Raw
Gabor
GAK
Gant
Garmin
Glasses Direct
Graham & Greene
Graze
Guess
Habitat
Hackett
Hallmark
Hamleys
Harper Collins
Harveys
Hawkin's Bazaar
Hawkshead Country Wear

Hi-Tec Sports
Hornby
The Hut
Intersport
itsu
IWOOT
J Crew
Jack & Jones
Jewson
Jimmy Choo
JML
John Smith's
Joy
Juno Records
Kärcher
Kenzo
Kiehl's
Lacoste
Leisure Lakes Bikes
Lenovo
LightInTheBox
Logitech
LookFantastic
Lyle & Scott
Made.com
Massimo Dutti

Max Spielmann
Merlin Cycles
Moda in Pelle
Mole Valley Farmers
Montblanc
Multiyork Furniture
Nespresso
Notcutts Nurseries
Outdoor & Country
Plumbworld
Poetry Fashion
Prada
Pretty Green
Pro-Direct
Protyre
QD Stores
Rapid Electronics
Regatta Outdoor Clothing
Roman Originals
Rowlands Pharmacy
SecretSales
See Tickets
Sevenoaks Sound and Vision
Superfi

Swatch
Thomann
Thomas Sabo
Timpson
TJ Hughes
Toast
Tommy Hilfiger
TomTom
Toolstop
Urban Industry
Vax
Vente-Privee
Vistaprint
Vivienne Westwood
Wagamama
Warren James
Watches of Switzerland
Wedgwood
Wyevale Garden Centres
YumiDirect
Zavvi
Zulily
& Other Stories

Boots: combining content with data

Image credit: Boots
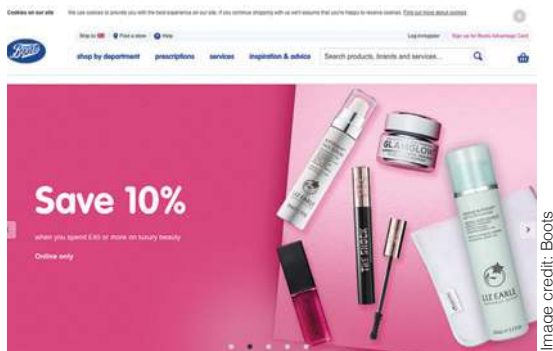
Through its website, Boots aim to address the individual needs of its 15m active Advantage cardholders

IT IS TWO decades since Boots first launched its Advantage Card loyalty scheme. Points were awarded for purchases which had to be exchanged for 'treats' – selected products in-store. In those early days, Boots was content to use the data generated by its card to classify its customers into such broad-brush categories as 'deal seekers', 'stock pilers' and 'loyalists' purely to improve their targeting of promotions. Customer segmentation was very much the name of the game.

Two decades on from that, everything's very different. As Robin Phillips, Boots' former director of omnichannel and development, told us last year, it is no longer about targeted CRM, but "a 'rifle shot' with advice, content and promotions getting increasingly granular". As he said: "We need to track, through analytics, which content shoppers consume and their every event through to purchase. What else did they do around their mission? How can we bring them around to purchase again? We know where you are and what you last did, and we should present you with what you need next."
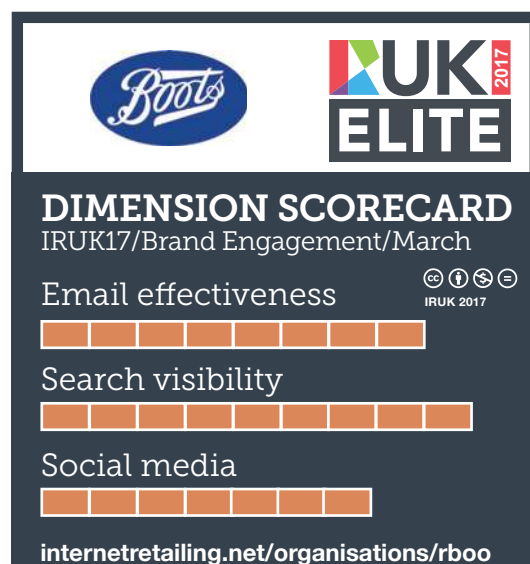
With more than 15m active Advantage cardholders, Boots has plenty of varied, valid and constantly up-to-date information about shopping habits, preferences, health and beauty needs. To further engage these shoppers, the company has been adding ever-more targeted content to its website.

There is 'Beautiful You', for example, a questionnaire which helps identify skin type in order to recommend a personal 'Beauty Cabinet' of products. There's also 'Health Coach', a personalised app based on an in-store consultation, to help individuals maintain a specific fitness or therapeutic regime. Online content and services include plenty of health advice, a link through to BootsWebMD.com which provides more specific medical information, a 'Health and Beauty' magazine, and an online prescription service that makes getting repeat medication a little easier.

Customer reviews – both good and bad – are readily accessible on the site and the Boots app also delivers personalised offers based on Advantage Card records, as well as appointments booking for pharmacy or beauty services. In-store, staff are equipped with IBM's SalesAssistant system – a tablet-based app – which provides access to the full Boots range, even in its smallest outlets, enabling staff to order items for next-day collection as customers require. As Phillips said at its launch: "It allows our colleagues to quickly show product information, ratings and reviews, look up inventory online and make recommendations based on online analytics, all from the shop floor... It's about making big corporate Boots feel more like myBoots."

Twenty years on, using a handful of customer segments as a targeting tool no longer meets customer expectations. By analysing the data more completely and assessing each customer's needs, personalisation and individual offers are what the Advantage Card delivers today.

DIMENSION SCORECARD
IRUK17/Brand Engagement/March

Email effectiveness

IRUK 2017

Search visibility

Social media

internetretailing.net/organisations/rboo

Marks & Spencer: reaching core customers

MARKS & SPENCER has had its problems in recent years, with poor performance and criticism from the fashion pundits. With clothing sales in the last quarter of 2016 showing growth for the first time in two years and an extensive programme of store rationalisation underway, CEO Steve Rowe is determined to achieve a turnaround. "There is lots more to do," he said in January. "This is a self-help story. There is still lots that needs fixing. We are on a journey and the customer is starting to respond but we will stick to our knitting."

That turnaround also embraces a multichannel approach, with M&S now calling itself a "connected retailer". In sales terms, it still has some way to go, with M&S.com UK and international sites accounting for just 8.5% of total sales in its last financial year, an increase of 23.4% year-on-year.

Central to the strategic plan is the company's need to understand and engage more closely with customers. As Rowe put it in the company's latest annual report, "The only time we have stumbled as a company is when we've become introverted, lost sight of the customer or failed to keep pace with modern living."

M&S has now analysed its customer base and found that 54% are over 50. It has also classified shoppers into three groups: 'occasional', 'core', and 'top', the latter being brand enthusiasts who make more than 100 store visits every year. Improving customer engagement and converting more of the 'occasional' to 'core' is key.

Central to this strategy is Sparks – a loyalty scheme introduced in October 2015. "Customers tell us they want to 'be part of something special'," said executive director, Patrick Bousquet-Chavanne, at the launch, "and that's exactly why Sparks is a club. As a member, you are more than a customer and you'll get the most from M&S, with tailor-made offers, priority access and invites to exclusive events."

In its first six months, 4m shoppers signed up for Sparks and the 'club' also helped increase visits to the M&S website, up from an average 6.5m visits per week when it launched to 11.5m per week six months later. While Sparks cards can be picked up in-store, shoppers need an M&S.com account in order to register the card and start collecting. As M&S says, "Sparks helps us to increase members' frequency of purchase, encourages shopping between channels and incentivises cross-buying."
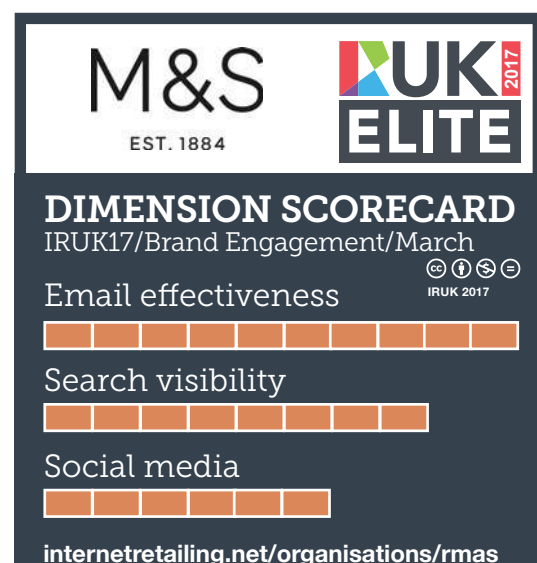
It also increases online activity, since targeted offers can only be accessed via an app or online and card holders can earn 'sparks' (points) not only from transactions but also by posting reviews on the website. Rather than exchanging 'sparks' for the usual loyalty discount vouchers, they need to be saved to access increasingly attractive rewards, from invitations to catwalk shows to visiting an M&S vineyard. Sparks, plus that better understanding of its customers, might just help Rowe achieve his aims for M&S.

Sparks promotes the exclusivity of being in an M&S 'club' over simply offering points-based discounts

Image credit: Marks & Spencer

M&S EST. 1884 — IRUK ELITE 2017

DIMENSION SCORECARD
IRUK17/Brand Engagement/March

IRUK 2017

Email effectiveness

Search visibility

Social media

internetretailing.net/organisations/rmas

House of Fraser: reminding customers we love them

The department store is trying to engage more directly with its key customers rather than talking to different demographics. David Walmsley, chief customer officer at House of Fraser, tells **Penelope Ody** how it's doing this

"WHAT DOES LOYALTY mean?" asks David Walmsley, chief customer officer at House of Fraser (HoF). "The focus is always on how loyal the customer is to us, rather than how loyal we can be to them."

Seven months into his job at HoF, David Walmsley, formerly the digital director at Marks & Spencer, is transforming the department store's view of its customers. Focus groups, analytics and social media have helped identify the chain's core customers as women in their 40s, typically with two children, earning two or three times the national average and likely to have a higher level of education. "Traditionally, department store shoppers divide into two groups: young mums and older women," he says, "but our core

Creating "wow" now extends from the store to online, with marketing targeting each shopper as an individual

Image credits: House of Fraser

customer is bang in the middle. She's interested in fashion and knows her style but dislikes such expressions as 'age appropriate'. She also wants to be challenged and discover new things."

Like many other retailers, HoF used to divide its customer base into six basic segments, which guided targeting for email promotions. Today, the emphasis has shifted. Core customers – who often have both a House of Fraser credit card and a Recognition Reward loyalty card – now receive personalised and well-targeted emails with rich content, high-quality imagery and plenty of style.

"If a customer receives a beautifully crafted email on Thursday from House of Fraser full of the 'wow' factor and highlighting something new and stylish, then she's much more likely to visit the store on Saturday to take a look," says Walmsley. "We know from our focus groups that our customers don't want to keep on receiving emailed promotional offers or money-off deals."

Changing the email approach has meant a fundamental switch in how HoF measures success. Previously, RoI was the key metric for assessing achievement. Send out a discount offer and it was very easy to measure the take-up.

However, the new personalised approach uses an individual's shopping and browsing behaviour to drive a targeted message. This might be, for example, about new ways to wear a simple fashion item illustrated with that "bit of wow". Success may be harder to quantify but the company's record sales figures in the run-up to Christmas 2016 suggest that the approach might be helping.

Asking customers for their opinions is something that HoF has been doing for a couple of years through its Your Say shoppers' panel. Consumers join via the website and then form a readily accessible group for instant feedback. Typically Your Say panellists may be asked for reaction to a new advertisement or which brands they would

Fashion and style are central to HoF's appeal to its core customers, well-educated women in their 40s

like to see in store and, as Walmsley says, panel members are "not shy with their views".

Focus groups, customer panels, loyalty and credit card analytics, customer satisfaction studies, verbatim comments from shoppers and "social listening" have all helped Walmsley and his team to gain a clearer view of customers' needs and opinions. Not only does this enhance engagement, it also helps to "hold a mirror to the business, which is the key role of my team".

Changes are also planned for the company's loyalty scheme. Launched some 15 years ago, the Recognition Reward Card is still predominantly about collecting points that can then be 'spent' in store. "Our core customers like their points," says Walmsley, "but they also like new experiences. We've just kicked off a new project on loyalty, possibly looking at moving towards more of a club concept." The current loyalty scheme also includes the HoF app but that too is under the spotlight. As Walmsley says, "Ask why we have an app and the answer is along the lines of 'We're a retailer and retailers have apps'. But there has to be something in it for the customer."

As with many long-established UK chains, HoF has had its problems in recent years. Its year to 31 January 2016 was the first to deliver profit before tax since 2016, with ecommerce standing at around 19% of total turnover. Despite current trading challenges, as it continues to move away from an emphasis on 'deals', engages

more closely with its core customers and focus on delivering the brands those customers want to buy, long-term prospects look more optimistic.

As David Walmsley points out, today's shoppers are savvy and understand perfectly well that if something is heavily discounted, it is probably over-stocked or is a special purchase to give a low-price offer. By buying it, they're helping the retailer. "They see it as rewarding the retailer, not rewarding themselves," he says. "We need to remind our customers that we love them rather than shouting about deals." Typical of this approach – perhaps not unconnected with Valentine's Day – was to send a gift of chocolates to the company's best customers. "That is how we engage with customers," he says, "by telling them that we love them." ▟
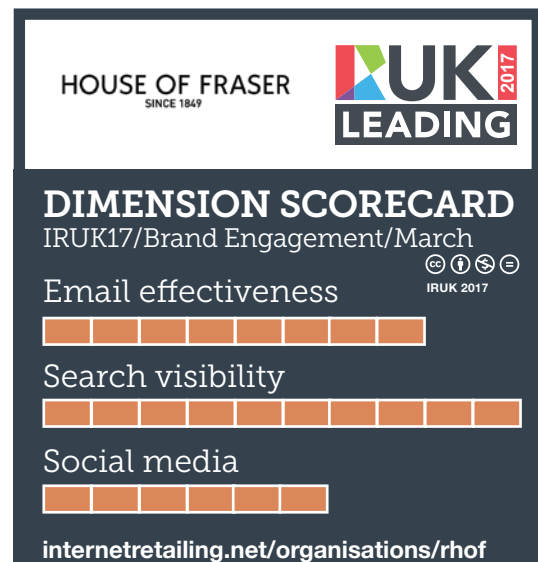
Waitrose: rewarding loyalty

Image credit: Waitrose

Waitrose promotes its foody image via myWaitrose

WAITROSE CAME LATE to loyalty schemes. Back in 1999, Mark Price, then Waitrose's marketing director, dismissed loyalty cards as "intrusive and expensive". But 12 years later, by then managing director Price had clearly changed his mind and was fully behind the 2011 launch of the company's myWaitrose scheme.

By 2016, the company was able to report 6.4m cardholders – an increase of 7.5% between March and September that year – while its annual report recorded that: "The myWaitrose scheme deepens relationships with our customers and... 70% of sales are to cardholders".
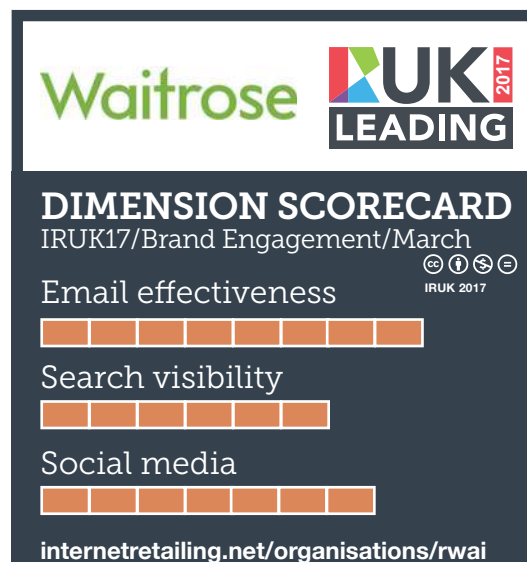
Unlike many loyalty projects, myWaitrose does not offer points for purchases. Instead, there are targeted discounts – competitions, magazines, access to the 'Quick Check' self-scanning system and free newspapers, tea or coffee when you shop. The 'pick your own offers' scheme allows customers to select 10 products for a 20% discount whenever they buy them. In keeping with Waitrose's 'foodie' image, cardholders can also claim a 10% discount on courses at any of Waitrose's cookery schools.

The impact of the myWaitrose scheme has been significant: more than a million cardholders joined the 'Pick your own offers' scheme in the year following its launch in June 2015. Waitrose has also used the card data to make targeted offers. Working with Monetate in the run up to Christmas, for example, the company identified shoppers who had previously bought their Christmas turkeys at Waitrose but had so far failed to do so that year. A million cardholders were targeted with a special turkey discount offer, which produced a 20% increase in promotional conversion rates.

Waitrose has also used the card data to examine online shopping habits, finding that once a customer has bought online five times, they are more likely to become a loyal regular. Again, working with Monetate, Waitrose developed a scheme to give shoppers an £80 discount spread over five shops. This produced a 24% increase in orders from new and early stage customers. In the six months to September 2016, online sales grew by 4.3%, Waitrose's market share in the grocer sector is up to 5.2% and a striking 70% of John Lewis' click-and-collect orders are now picked up from Waitrose stores.

Mark Price is now retired from Waitrose and, as Lord Price, is a trade minister in the current government. He said in the company's latest annual report: "Winning customers, gaining market share and growing profit in this tough market is a tribute... to everyone in Waitrose." It might also owe something to myWaitrose and deepening engagement with customers.

Waitrose **UK LEADING 2017**

DIMENSION SCORECARD
IRUK17/Brand Engagement/March

IRUK 2017

Email effectiveness

Search visibility

Social media

internetretailing.net/organisations/rwai

Mothercare: targeting millennials

OF THE 'SIX pillars' Mothercare's CEO, Mark Newton-Jones, uses to define the company's global strategy, the first is "Become a digitally led business". With 40% of sales now online, of which 80% are via mobile, that aim is clearly well on the way to being fulfilled.

As Newton-Jones put it in the company's latest annual report, "Our target customers are digitally-enabled millennials who use their mobile devices whilst out and about to browse merchandise, review content, read reviews and purchase product."

Those millennials are also a main concern for brand and marketing director Gary Kibble. "The millennial customer wants to access content in a bitesize way and be able to interact through multiple devices at different times of the day," he told us last year. In its interim report last November, Newton-Jones said the Mothercare app had been downloaded one million times and there were more than 3m customers on its database.

Given the company's target market and inevitable churn, customers have a short time to accrue lifetime value. By the time children start school, Mothercare is no longer a key go-to destination, so it must aim to satisfy its customers' needs and wants in a comparatively short time. Its website provides 'wish list' and 'gift list' functions that can be accessed by friends and family. There is the 'My Mothercare club' with various discounts and events, as well as a series of 224 emails that are triggered by the different stages of pregnancy and birth. These include weekly personalised pregnancy messages, ensuring that the company becomes a key source of information and advice as soon as a woman becomes a potential customer.

There are also in-store evenings for expectant parents, while stores invite groups of new mothers to special post-birth gatherings. All this emphasises the idea that shoppers have joined a select group. As its online page header declares, "Welcome to the club."

The website includes extensive advice sections, from problems with conception to toilet training. The sense of being in a club extends to customer
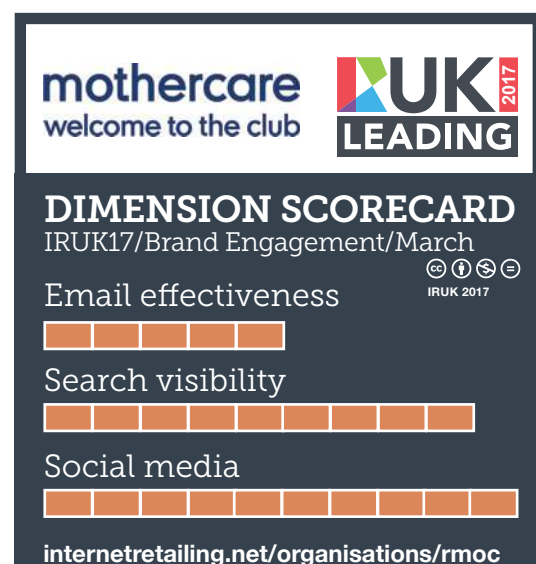

As babies grow up, so Mothercare customers move on

Image credit: Mothercare

reviews and an 'Ask an owner' function, where shoppers can post queries to be answered by fellow parents. The app offers a complete product catalogue and store finder, help with choosing baby names, 'baby tunes' to play to restless offspring and a storage facility for electronic receipts, which can also be scanned in-store when returning items. Everything, if fact, that the digitally savvy millennial customer would expect.

That focus on digitally enabled millennials is paying off. Mothercare now has an online presence in 14 markets, iPads are used in-store, there is a new responsive website and – more importantly – both margins and like-for-like sales have been up in the past two years, after five years of decline.

mothercare
welcome to the club

IRUK LEADING 2017

DIMENSION SCORECARD
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IRUK 2017

Email effectiveness

Search visibility

Social media

internetretailing.net/organisations/rmoc

12 practical approaches that work

Retailers encourage customers to engage with the brand and offer highly responsive customer service when they foster two-way conversations with existing and potential shoppers. Here are some practical approaches that leading IRUK Top500 retailers are taking

1 Choose relevant social media channels…

When shoppers spend most of their online time using social media, it makes sense to enable this group also to talk about the products they have bought – or are considering buying. IRUK Top500 retailer Matalan supports six social media channels – Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube and Google Plus – and also operates a blog. Shoe retailer Schuh has seven social media channels – all those just mentioned plus a Snapchat channel too. The most relevant channels offer retailers a way to express their brand personality: Schuh's YouTube channel, for example, features a series of entertaining 'how to' and 'shoe hack' videos covering issues such as restoring salt-stained shoes, what to do when shoes are too small or too large, and how to open wine with a shoe!

For those retailers without the resources to cover a wide range of social media channels, it can be more strategic to focus resources on the sites that best lend themselves to the brand. So Pinterest and Instagram enable highly visual brands to showcase their wares, Twitter is the go-to channel for customer service, and many use Facebook to start conversations and organise events and competitions.
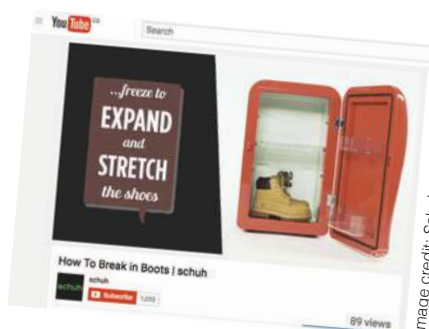

Image credit: Schuh

2 …and try out some new ones

Fashion retailers are among those making good use of Snapchat to engage with its growing millennial audience. A recent Snaplytics Snapchat Quarterly Report analysed 500 brands using the site and found that brands post an average of 13 stories a month – and that the optimum length for a brand story is 11 snaps.

Burberry has used the site for time-limited campaigns. One collaboration featured British actress Lily James, and saw Burberry use a dedicated Snapchat filter over the course of 24 hours.

When we took a look at the latest stories, we found a new one from Topshop, which came live from a shoot in Hoxton and was told in the recommended 11 snaps. Also, MyVoucherCodes.co.uk recently featured a range of retail brands in what it said was an industry-first, a six-hour event on Facebook Live.
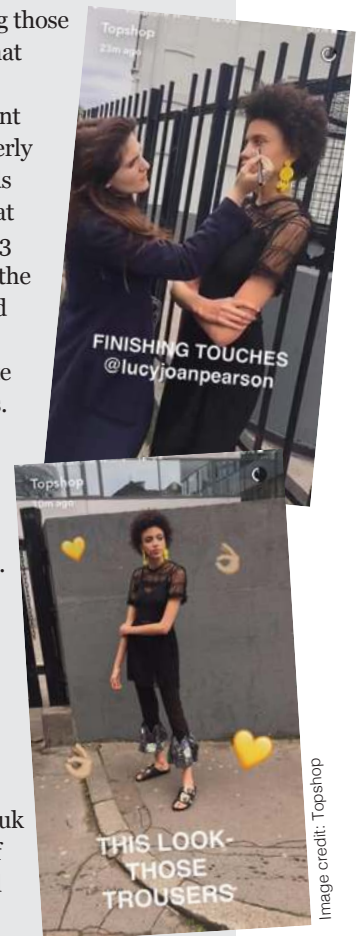

Image credit: Topshop

**Above: Topshop's coverage of a fashion shoot on Snapchat
Left: Information and entertainment from Schuh via YouTube**

3 Engage with international customers

Talking to shoppers in new markets via the channels they use means developing an international social media presence that can help raise brand awareness. UK retail brands have used social media sites in China and Asia to open conversations and develop relationships. Fashionistas could follow Burberry's September 2016 catwalk show in London, for example, via channels including WeChat. Its WeChat followers had exclusive access to buy two editions of 'The Bridle Bag' through in-app purchases. The WeChat experience was activated through an HTML5 mini site, which gave what Burberry billed as "unprecedented access," to the show, which had a takeover from actors Kris Wu and Vicky Zhao.

Meanwhile, when Sainsbury's extended its partnership with the Tmall in China, it signed up for Super Brand status during the 8.8 shopping festival in 2016 as it looked to raise awareness with new audiences.

4 Make red letter days special

Focusing on events that are of interest to existing and potential shoppers helps retailers to stand out from the crowd. London Fashion Week 2017 proved to be a useful location for retailers to have conversations with their customers. Topshop enabled their shoppers to watch – and shop – its show live via its website. Content on Instagram included live streaming of the Burberry and Mulberry catwalk shows, while designers including Thakoon and Prabal Gurung used Instagram Live to share behind-the-scenes moments.

Eva Chen, Instagram's head of fashion partnerships, says the key to using Instagram Live is to keep it casual, while going with the flow and answering questions from followers. She says, "When answering questions from your followers, be sure to give their account name a shout out and repeat the question." It's also important to give it time – she advises it can take at least 15 to 20 minutes from the start of an event for viewer numbers to peak.

Image credit: Topshop

Instagram Live is a great way of covering events but does need time for viewer numbers to grow

5 Engaging with shoppers via mobile devices…

Communicating with shoppers over their smartphones is a priority for leading retailers since more and more people are using their devices to browse and shop on the go.

The recent *Mobile Mandate* report from OC&C, PayPal and Google suggested that by 2020, as many as two-thirds of ecommerce transactions will take place via a smartphone, with 80% of all purchases involving a phone to research, compare prices or buy.

The significance of smartphones becomes clear when you add to this a *Bazaarvoice Social Trends Report* that suggests as many as 30% of customers have changed their minds in a shopping aisle as a result of additional product information they've seen on their phones.

This points to the use of location-specific coupons sent to customers in store by US retailer The Home Depot. Closer to home, UK department store House of Fraser enables users of its mobile app to check in-store stock. They can also use the app's barcode scanner to find out more about items they see in the store and beyond, via a Home catalogue that incorporates augmented reality to bring items to life.

6 …and also engage across channels

Shoppers that engage with a retailer across several channels, whether the store, mobile or the website, generally spend more than when they interact through only one. Helping shoppers to do that includes providing persistent baskets and wishlists that stay up-to-date across all channels, as well as enabling cross-channel services such as click and collect.

Cross-channel links between social media sites can also help boost engagement with the brand since that enables customers to follow retailers and brands across all the sites they use. InternetRetailing research shows that at the time of the research, 90% of IRUK Top500 retailers had a Facebook page, of which 55% showed links to other social networks from that page. Almost half (44%) of the 204 retailers with an iOS app enabled users to share an item on social media, athough only 1% showed social media Likes on the app.

Image credit: Marks & Spencer

A simple white shirt is denim's perfect partner

CROPPED FLARE

New to this trend? Wear a small pointed heel to set off the kicked-out shape perfectly

Shop the jeans

The first – and toughest – challenge of any email is to survive being binned even before its read

7 Send emails that are worth keeping

Emails must be useful or interesting if they are to stand out from the crowd in a shopper's inbox. Across the IRUK Top500, only 11% of emails are read, according to research, and 10% are marked as 'not spam'. Emails from Debenhams and Marks & Spencer enjoy relatively high read rates, while those from Debenhams are more frequently marked as 'not spam' than any other Top25 retailer.

When we looked at recent emails from M&S, we found some useful style guides alongside advice on issues from layering clothes for different weather conditions to what to buy for Valentine's Day. Emails from Debenhams had useful advice for grabbing bargains ahead of a February sale event.

8 Customer service that really helps

It's important that customers can get in touch in ways that suits them. Offering the right customer service channels will help them to trust in the retailer being able to meet their needs. That means offering choice but this doesn't have to be exhaustive. IRUK Top500 retailers support an average of between four and five (4.8) customer service channels. Not many will have the resources to support the 10 channels that Matalan does, nor the eight operated by M&S, H&M, Mothercare, Lands' End, Bathstore and Schuh. Shoppercentric research names email, Facebook and Twitter as the channels that shoppers most want to use to connect with retailers. Additional customer research will help retailers prioritise the other channels that their shoppers value.

9 Ratings and reviews

Shoppers can get a sense of whether a product's right for them or not when they see what other people thought of it through ratings or reviews. They do this quicker when such feedback is easy to see on both the website and the mobile app. InternetRetailing research found that of the 204 IRUK Top500 retailers that have an iOS app, 27% showed star ratings in the mobile app and 26% had written reviews.

Myprotein punches 397 places above its weight in this report. One of the ways it stands out so well is by being one of relatively few retailers to show product star ratings in its mobile app, while also enabling visitors to Like products on social media.

Amazon also makes it very easy for users of its app to see star ratings and reviews from the product page of its mobile app, while users can also easily share their purchases and wishlists via social media, email and SMS.
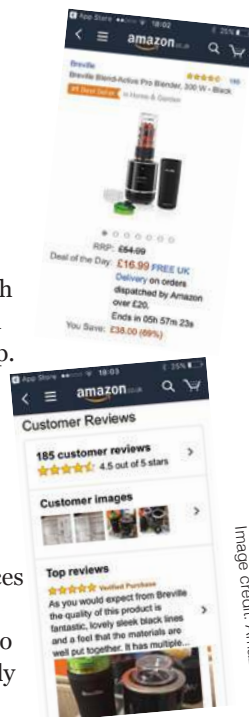
Image credit: Amazon

Amazon, once again leading the way

10 Investigate new technologies

Retailers have found that emerging technologies can help them respond to customers more quickly, or in more relevant ways. Ocado, for example, put artificial intelligence and machine learning to work in order to understand and prioritise its customer emails. AI software is used in its machine learning-enhanced contact centre to categorise incoming emails, parsing and tagging them in order to cut down on the time that customer service staff spend in dealing with them.

Shop Direct is tackling big data as it works to offer customers a personalised experience: its team of data scientists created complex algorithms that predict the behaviour of customers visiting its Very.co.uk site and show them products that match their promotion affinity score. It is continuing to invest heavily in personalisation technologies for that website as well as for VeryExclusive.co.uk and Littlewoods.com. When the retail group hired Gael Decoudu to head its data science and digital analytics team, Shop Direct deputy CEO Gareth Jones, said, "As part of our strategy to become a world class digital retailer, we want to develop insight from data analysis to create a more personalised experience at every stage of the customer journey."

The Internet of Things: Today and Tomorrow, a study from Hewlett Packard Enterprise company Aruba, studied 20 countries and found that 49% of retailers were using Internet of Things technology – most commonly through in-store location services that deliver personalised offers and product information to shoppers.

11 Keeping shoppers loyal

When shoppers can use their loyalty cards across channels, including via mobile phone, they're more likely to have it with them at the moments that count, whether that's in the store or checking out on the website. That makes customers more visible to the retailer since it charts customers' journeys across channels and seeks to understand how they prefer to be served. But if a customer is to use up time and smartphone storage space on installing a retailer's app, it needs to have features that make it worthwhile.

Department store House of Fraser and health and beauty retailer Boots are among the retailers that have enabled shoppers to use their loyalty cards from mobile apps. Signed-in House of Fraser shoppers can, via the app, see whether a product is available in their size – or that of family members – at their nearest store, while also reviewing their order history. Boots shoppers can view relevant offers and redeem them via the app, while also booking appointments, and uploading photographs – from the phone, from Facebook or Instagram – for printing or personalising into a card, canvas or other photo product.
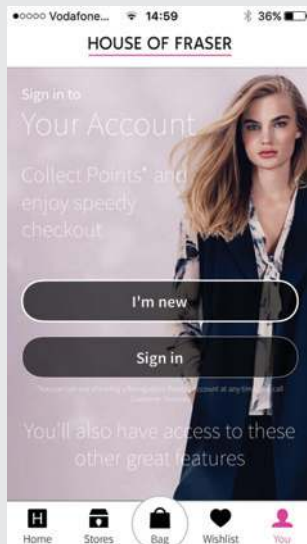
Linking a loyalty card to an app gives shoppers greater convenience and retailers more information

Image credit: House of Fraser

12 Keep all this information safe

Successful brand engagement means encouraging shoppers to share a wide variety of information, from names and addresses to birthdays and payment details. Adopting payment technologies such as tokenisation has helped to keep credit card details safe. A similar attention to detail needs to be taken when it comes to personal information that can potentially be used in identity fraud. The forthcoming EU General Data Protection Regulation, which comes into force in the UK at the end of May 2018, sets out a legal framework for the responsibilities of those that store and process data to protect personal information. Measures that retailers need to consider include the importance of robust systems to look after data. Find out more from the Information Commissioner's Office at www.ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/

A new retail ecosystem

As brands go direct to consumers, retail is changing. Rob Garf and Jamie Merrick of Salesforce Cloud Commerce discuss what this might mean for retailers and brands. **Jonathan Wright** reports

ARE BRANDS AND retailers in the midst of a series of messy divorces? At the risk of over-dramatising what's happening, one of the major developments within the retail sector over the last few years has been the growth in the number of brands deciding to go direct to consumer, potentially cutting out retail partners. Here, brand engagement really does mean that the brand is engaging directly with the consumers of their products.

Think of the way a company such as Nike has expanded its retail presence, both online and in stylish bricks-and-mortar stores. As to why companies such as Nike and Apple are taking this approach, listen to Jamie Merrick, head of industry insights at Salesforce Commerce Cloud as he rolls out a long list of the potential upsides: "More sales, better margins, less dependency on retail partners, better product assortments, engagement, loyalty, new geographies and the big one, which is a better experience."

In short, brands are going direct because they see huge opportunities in doing so. Here, we're not just talking about lifestyle brands with an upstart image, but far more traditional conglomerates too. Unilever, for example, sells and promotes its Maille mustard brand directly.
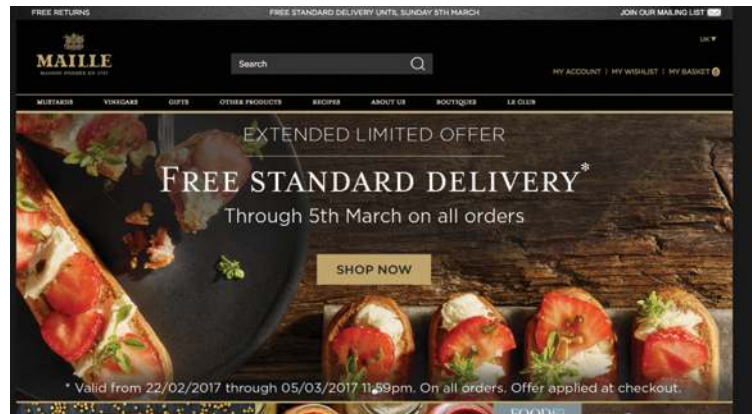

Image credit : Maille

That a mustard brand can connect directly with consumers shows the wide potential for brands selling via the web

More intriguingly still, for the way it shows a bold step away from a wholesale model, Unilever last year bought Dollar Shave Club, an online men's grooming subscription service, for $1bn.

Out on the high street, in city centres and in shopping malls, this activity is starting to have an effect on traditional retailers. "Department stores in the US are feeling a lot of the pinch as brands start to go direct," says Merrick.

> "Customers will give up their data only if they get something back in return"
>
> Jamie Merrick

Emergent behaviour

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see what's occurring in crude 'brands vs retailers' terms. Rather, what we may be seeing is the emergence of an entirely new kind of business-to-consumer/retail ecosystem.

We've already noted how Unilever has bought a subscription-based ecommerce business. From another angle, Amazon's Dash Replenishment ▶
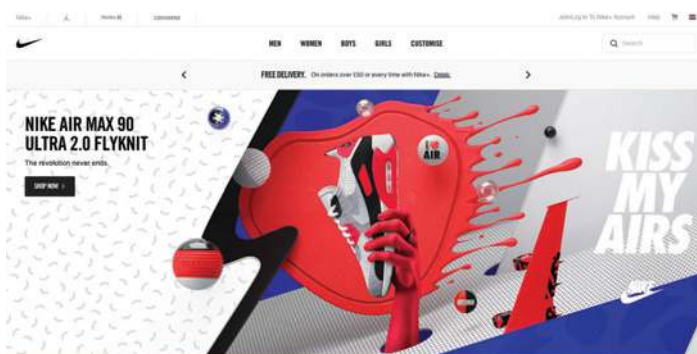

Image credit : Nike

Nike's direct brand engagement was spearheaded by the ability for shoppers to create personalised products

Image credit : Under Armour

Under Armour's approach relies on the retailer being a one-stop shop for sporting needs

Service "enables connected devices to order physical goods from Amazon when supplies are running low". Less remarked upon, Amazon has started to use Google product listing ads, in great part to raise awareness of products they've created themselves. The lines between different kinds of retail activity are blurring.

In this context, a new report from Salesforce and management consultants Accenture makes for fascinating reading. *Retail Organisations: The Next Stage of Transformation* is based around "20 interviews and 200 surveys of executives from non-food retailers with high online penetration, and brand manufacturers with high direct-to-consumer revenue". The report argues that both retailers and brands need "to look beyond their own four walls and orchestrate an adaptive network of business partners to offer a personalised blend of products, services and experiences to customers, wherever and whenever they demand".

To unpick that a little, both retailers and brands have traditionally focused on products – things they sell and/or make. Instead, the customer needs to be the focus, says Merrick's colleague and report co-author Rob Garf, VP of industry insights at Salesforce Commerce Cloud. "It's now as much about creating and curating a customer experience that, in many cases, goes well beyond the physical product," says Garf. "It could include

a service, it could include delivery." But for both retailers and brands, there are huge problems in preparing for such a shift in emphasis. In particular, focusing on consumers means that businesses need to understand these consumers in far more detail before they can offer the kinds of experiences customers will increasingly demand. This means both collecting customer data, and then using it to create and hone new kinds of experiences.

This is particularly important because customers, and not just millennials and digital natives, are becoming aware of the value of their personal data. If they're going to hand over information, they don't want it to be a waste of time and want something in return beyond the

> "It's about creating a customer experience that goes beyond the product"
>
> Rob Garf

goods they purchase. "Customers understand this relationship they've got," says Merrick. "They're giving up their data and are prepared to do it only if they get something back in return. The return they're asking for is a better experience – they're asking for something more engaging."

Which begs the question, what kinds of businesses are best placed to provide such levels of customer service? Intuitively, it's tempting to say retailers because these are businesses that should always have been customer-facing. Yet this is too binary a way in which to pose

the question. To return to the idea of a new ecosystem, without underplaying the potential for tension between retailers and brands, nobody has all the answers here. To resuscitate a word that drops in and out of fashion, 'co-opertition' between brands, retailers and other kinds of businesses, such as delivery services and marketplaces, will have to become commonplace in the years ahead if customers are to get the service levels they'll demand.

"I think what we're seeing is that organisations don't have the answer to everything," says Merrick. "Therefore, working on partnerships and collaborations to overcome some of the differences is probably the way that's going to be most successful."

The challenge of brands

This doesn't mean that brands don't pose a very real threat to retailers. One of the findings in the Salesforce research is that executives at brands are less likely to anticipate the organisational changes that lie ahead. Does this mean they have their heads in the sand? Not necessarily.

"These branded manufacturers have only been selling direct to customers these last 15 or 20 years, so they don't have as many hardwired systems and processes for their retail operations," says Garf. "They have an opportunity to leapfrog the traditional retailers and they've already had massive change moving from a wholesale operation to including a retail operation. They feel like this massive change is behind them and this next stage of transformation is relatively easier, although nothing's easy."

In other words, it may be that brands are better placed to make the most of new opportunities ahead not because they have the greatest retail expertise, but because they're so confident about dealing with change that they will approach the problems with fewer preconceptions.

Again, though, we should be careful of making too many generalisations as there are also plenty of example of retailers being innovative. Take sports company Under Armour, for example,
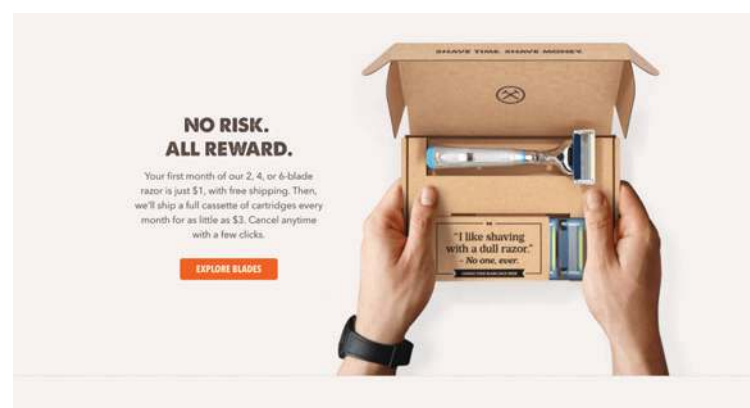
which also has a fitness app business. "[Under Armour] is adding more to its [offering] to elevate it in customers' minds," says Merrick. "Once it's elevated itself in consumers' minds and is seen as the home of fitness – somewhere customers can engage and not just to buy a pair of trainers – then it becomes a different proposition. And that's what will make it stand out."

To return to data, this also means Under Armour has rich sources of information on which to base its offering, both about the products it sells and how they're used by its customers.

And make no mistake, such data will be crucial. "Brands were reluctant to go to the consumer but now that they have to, they've seen some early success and they're going to start to gain more insights," says Merrick. "They're in an interesting position. In a past life, we had the saying, 'Do consumers shop because of the brand on the door or the product on the floor?' What we meant by that is do consumers go to a store because they're loyal to the name of it or do they go to a store because they know there's a particular brand in the store that they want to get?"

It would seem that we may not quite see an acrimonious divorce of brands and retailers creating lasting divisions in the retail landscape. However, while there will certainly be instances of brands refusing to stock retailers based on insights they've gained directly from consumers, a certain amount of counselling may be necessary if this new business-to-consumer/retail ecosystem is to be harmonious. ▰

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Unilever's acquisition of Dollar Shave Club suggests the company understands the value of direct engagement

Email and the holiday season

Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Christmas… the key retail dates come thick and fast at the end of the year. **Fernando Santos** looks at how retailers use email to try to maximise sales over this crucial period

AS INTERNETRETAILING'S RESEARCH has built up over the years, one of the areas where we've gained the keenest insights is in the use of email. This may sound old school but as we noted in our analysing the numbers feature (page 12), email remains many customers' preferred means of contact when dealing with brands.

It follows that when retailers don't manage to communicate well via email – by which we mean efficiently and with personalised emails carefully tailored to what customers may be interested in – this will be reflected in overall performance.

It's therefore heartening to report that over the past three months, UK retailers have performed strongly, according to our latest research conducted in conjunction with Knowledge Partner Return Path. Compared to an average read rate of 14% across all senders, the figure for UK retailers is 19%.

That's not to say there aren't areas where retailers could do better. In the run-up to Black Friday and Christmas, the number of emails being sent increases, for obvious reasons. Yet as this happens, there's also an increase in the number of emails that get snarled up in spam filters. Turning to user-marked spam rates, these are relatively low, although this may have something to do with customers increasingly accessing emails via mobile, where it's not always easy to mark emails as spam.

Read rates

Drilling down into the figures, there's clearly a competitive edge to be gained by being a retailer whose emails are actually read by customers. Read rate is a more accurate description than open rate in that it accounts for all emails viewed, regardless of image rendering. Here, high achievers include Top500 retailers such as Amazon, Very.co.uk and Apple.

"Amazon is consistently held up as the benchmark for targeted/relevant email based on demonstrated needs and interests, and this is demonstrated in the data we have analysed," says Guy Hanson, senior director, professional services, at Return Path.
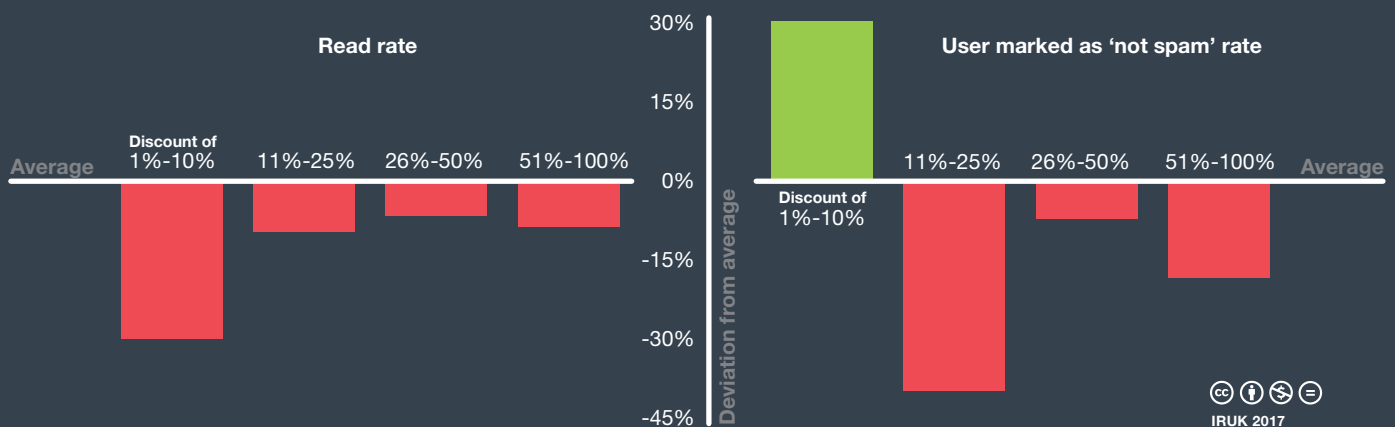
Amazon's strong performance continues in mailbox provider (MBP) marked spam rates, where M&S and John Lewis also excel. In contrast, says Hanson, "Three of the senders with the lowest read rates are also the senders with the highest filtering rates." This points to a fundamental truth – that emails will not get read if they aren't being consistently delivered to subscribers' inboxes.

What about users marking emails as either 'spam' or 'not spam'? While emails from eBay and John Lewis are rarely marked as spam, the same can't be said of other retailers in the Top500. As for those emails that users mark as 'not spam' or 'not junk', Superdrug, among others, performs strongly here. However, we would add a caveat. A low 'this is not spam' rate will not be a problem if a company's emails aren't being marked as spam in the first place.

Turning to forwarding rates, emails from Amazon, Apple and M&S are most regularly shared. Conversely, our research revealed there are still companies that underperform when compared to the rest of the industry in terms of their emails being deleted without being looked at. Subject line testing may help here.

Advertised discounts: their effect upon email interaction rates

The average impact upon email interaction of advertising a discount in the subject line. The averages cover hundreds of thousands emails sent to customers in the UK by Top500 companies between October and December, 2016

Read rate

User marked as 'not spam' rate

Deviation from average

Average | Discount of 1%-10% | 11%-25% | 26%-50% | 51%-100%

Discount of 1%-10% | 11%-25% | 26%-50% | 51%-100% | Average

30%
15%
0%
-15%
-30%
-45%

IRUK 2017

This Top500 study was conducted in collaboration with InternetRetailing Knowledge Partner Return Path

When to send

The research was particularly revealing because it covered Christmas as well as Black Friday and Cyber Monday – two dates that are emerging as increasingly important within retail. As you might expect, email volumes doubled in November when compared to October as retailers prepared for all three of these dates. In December during the run-up to Christmas, email volumes remained roughly at the same rate as in November.

Overall, British consumers didn't seem to mind this too much, as indicated by the read rate for emails increasing over the three months, perhaps reflecting worries over getting Christmas gifts purchased in time. However, there was also an increase in the number of complaints.

Turning to pricing strategies, just 4% of the campaigns we reviewed used a pricing reference, for example, £9.99, in the subject line. This may be because such emails are more likely to get caught in spam filters (29.4% vs 14.2%) and also because the reading rate for such emails was lower (14.3% vs 19.2%).

Discounting strategies have similar trends to their pricing counterparts, although not as pronounced. The effect on read rate is less

pronounced in the 26% to 50% discount range, with a drop of only 6% in comparison to the average. However, users are 30% more likely to manually retrieve emails from their spam filters if these messages contain an offer with a lower discount range (0% to 10%).

For those thinking ahead, advent calendars were a hit with consumers in 2016, one manifestation of a significant increase in the use of interactive content. Asda, for instance, used 'reveal' technology so that subscribers could see offers by scraping off the 'covering' like a digital take on a scratch card.

Guy Hanson notes, "Compared with Asda's benchmark, read rates for the advent calendar emails were higher, filtering rates were lower and the likelihood of recovery from spam was significantly higher."

For more email analysis, including a look at the festive season behaviour of Amazon's UK customers, see our research blog posts at internetretailing.net

....

www.internetretailing.net

Conclusion

IT MAY INITIALLY seems curious how an element of retail craft that was once regarded as a soft skill has become so central to all that businesses do in the digital age. Think twice though, and an increasing emphasis on brand engagement by retailers is entirely logical.

Where once, your friendly neighbourhood shopkeeper knew all of his customers personally, that's impossible in the age of the internet. Instead, retailers have to find ways to automate communications, via email and social media. In return for these efforts, retailers are getting back more information than ever before, at least in terms of the sheer volume of data, as customers share personal details and retailers build up, for example, purchase histories. Seen in this light, it would be surprising if the art of maintaining 'conversations' with customers, and doing this at scale, wasn't a defining skill in multichannel retail.

Moreover, as Jamie Merrick, head of industry insights at Salesforce Commerce Cloud points out in our emerging practice feature (page 29), consumers now expect this data to be used to improve service levels and the customer experience. Otherwise, why should customers want to share information? There has to be a quid pro quo.

This picture isn't going to change anytime soon. Indeed, treating this customer information carefully is going to become even more important as a way for retailers to differentiate themselves from competitors. Further complicating matters, as brands go direct to consumers and new kinds of subscription-based services become increasingly commonplace, retailers are going to need to initiate conversations with the quiet insistence of someone being polite at a noisy party.

But woe betide any retailer that shouts because all the evidence is that this only irritates consumers. Getting to know customers, scaling up the restrained charm of the neighbourhood shopkeepers, is a way to prevent this.

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