



We're shopping

The online retailing experience has a great deal to add to the quality and convenience of high street retailing, discovers Chloe Rigby.

THE WAY RETAILERS sell online owes everything to years of experience built up by traders selling face-to-face to their customers. From online shopping baskets to web checkouts, a raft of tools have been developed to help e-consumers see products and make purchases just as easily as they can in real life.

The result is that most people in the UK are now happy to shop online (62 per cent do so, according to a Royal Mail survey) – and along the way they have become highly literate in the tools of e-commerce.

But now that online shopping is a given for many consumers, maybe it's time multichannel retailers started to consider how this can work in the other direction. Already strategists are starting to imagine a future in which consumers can call on web-based resources while they are in store. By completing the e-commerce circle and bringing the web and the store to the same place, they believe that consumers will be more likely to complete their purchases in store.

That's important because all the evidence suggests that shoppers spend more when they buy in store. As long ago as 2007, a Yahoo and ChannelForce study found that those who researched online spent more in-store, while recent findings from a survey commissioned by the NRF and Shop.org concluded that price was the main driver of online sales – closely followed by free or discounted shipping. So it seems it's in the interests of multichannel retailers to encourage consumers to research online and then conclude the sale in store.

But at the moment, what often happens, says Hedley Aylott, managing director of online marketing agency Summit Media, is that consumers research online, visit the store to see the product, and then go back to the web to place the order. Rather than, as the shorthand has it, clicks-to-bricks shopping, this is clicks-to-bricks-to-clicks. That's a pattern likely to continue as consumers become more cost-conscious as a result of the recession.

So what can multichannel retailers do to ensure the final purchase is made in store? And what role can online tools, transferred to the high street, play in this?

FUN IN STORE

Online the shopping experience is always individual, but shoppers going to stores – especially in peak times – often have to queue before they can get the information they need from a sales assistant or make a purchase. Deborah Collier, managing director of Echo E-Business Management, which advises clients on e-commerce strategy and management, says one queue-busting alternative might be to bring interactive digital information displays into store on video terminals so that customers can look up the information they need while looking at the item they are interested in. Collier predicts that video, already popular in online sales, will become more widely used in stores, alongside interactive digital information points that could be an alternative source of information. Taking the pressure off sales assistants would give them time to devote to customers



who prefer to speak to a real person. The key, she says, is to give customers a choice – so that there's something to suit everyone's style of shopping.

She adds that use of digital information should be tailored to the very different approaches that customers have when they are shopping online or going to a shop. In store, she says, the experience has to be about enjoyment, whether that's in the form of a catwalk fashion show or the chance for a little indulgence in the hair salon. "Online, people are much more about speed and being able to see a product clearly and closely," she says. But, within the store "is where you want it to be engaging and fun."

Such digital information points could also be used by sales staff to back up the information they give. Summit Media's Aylott says he has found that sometimes customers don't

Social retailing

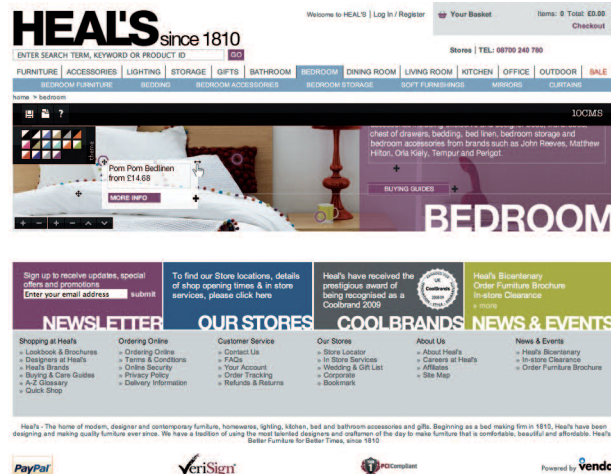
The concept of social retailing emerged from the convergence of social media and e-commerce.

US digital agency IconNicholson came up with the idea for the National Retail Federation 2007 annual show in New York and has continued to promote it since then.

Social retailing trades on the idea that today's young adults love to shop – and continuously talk to their friends via a range of social networking sites. It involves young shoppers updating friends on their shopping experience through text messaging, instant messaging, and email, telling them what clothes they are looking at and asking for feedback. Examples of instore technology include interactive mirrors that can be used to show friends images of the clothes they are trying on through live video feed and ask them for their votes on whether an outfit is 'hot or not'. At in-store kiosks, teens could make buying decisions together, see what the others have bought and also buy items that are not available in store.

The Near Field Communication technology that forms part of the Social Retailing concept also allows retailers to monitor inventory at the same time as monitoring customer behaviour.

"The technologies behind social retailing tap two major industry trends that will drive change into our clients' businesses for the next several years," says Christopher Enright, IconNicholson chief technology officer.



The Heal's website features rich media tools designed by 10CMS

believe what the salesperson is telling them. But if the assistant takes them to a web point to show them the offer on the retailer's website, they would be more likely to believe.

Widespread use of in-store internet access might also allow shoppers to carry out some of the actions they'd usually take when leaving a store – such as comparing prices. By making it easier for every customer to check prices in store, says Aylott, consumers would be more likely to make the purchase before leaving the store. Once they have left the store, he says, it becomes less likely that the retailer will benefit.

In-store, web resources can also supplement the limited space available in store, offering virtual extra shelf space. Interactive rich media pages featuring tools including interactive e-catalogues, lifestyle images with hotspots and 3D product carousels can be used in instore kiosks, says James Brooke, sales director at 10CMS, which develops rich media tools for multichannel clients including Heals and Kiddicare. "These new experience rich content tools can be leveraged in store, bringing the extended online catalogue into the in-store experience," he says.

FROM THE WEB TO THE STORE...

One of the most attractive aspects of buying online is the convenience. By bringing that convenience into store, retailers could make it easier and more likely that shoppers will buy. One way of doing that, suggests Aylott, could be by helping customers to use their online shopping basket in store. The basket has become a useful internet tool for customers to select goods they'd like to buy and then park it before making a purchase another day. By sending it ahead of them to the store, a print out could be prepared showing them where the items they'd like to buy are located in the store. Alternatively, in the case of fashion items, the actual goods could be put aside for the customer to try on when they visited, thereby making the process much more convenient. "It saves so much time," says Aylott.

A further sophistication of that could be of use in the parenting marketplace, he says. Stores such as Mothercare or Mamas & Papas, which offer the chance for customers to make an appointment to discuss their needs with a sales adviser, could enable them to browse online and select some of the products they are interested in, for further discussion in store.

...AND BACK AGAIN

As well as bringing the web into the store, stores can encourage web use through a variety of different



mechanisms, says Echo's Collier. In the here and now, she suggests staff could promote the use of the web through pre-printed web cards. By writing down the name and reference number or measurements of a product on a card pre-printed with the store's web address, she believes customer would be more likely to follow up online. For the future, she predicts the use of mobile phones to scan barcodes of items that interest them in store. They could then be used to look up the items online from home.

Another store-to-web tool, used by retailers stores such as Halford and Best Buy, are customer reviews, published in circulars that are distributed in store, in order to drive traffic back to the website, says Sam Decker, chief marketing officer of social commerce company Bazaarvoice. Bazaarvoice's MobileVoice reviews platform allows a further dimension – allowing retailers to deliver customer reviews on mobile handsets.

Aylott suggests that sales staff could help make a purchase more likely by offering a quotation instore. The details required would include an email address, triggering a follow-up email from the salesperson to the potential customer, welcoming them to the store and making an offer – free vacuum cleaner bags to someone considering buying a vacuum cleaner, for example – that would entice them back to buy either online or in the store.

MOTIVATING THE SALES FORCE

But one key area to be tackled is in making it worthwhile for staff to encourage customers to buy online. After all, if sales assistants only earn commission or a bonus for instore sales, there is no reason for them to encourage customers to the website.

It is those staff, however, who represent the multichannel retailer's main advantage over the pureplay competition. That's especially true when staff are well-informed and motivated to help. Too often multichannel retail is effectively set up as a competition between the channels. When a customer leaves the store they may well be going to buy online – so why should the sales assistant encourage that?

The answer, suggests Aylott, lies in linking the advice given in store to the eventual sale online. That could be

What the experts say

Offering the Choice

"There is a very symbiotic relationship between the web and in-store – and it's the ability to offer choices that is important."

Deborah Collier, managing director, Echo E-Business Management



"If you have a store make the most use of it. Make sure you are enabling people to shop in whatever channel they want."

Hedley Aylott, managing director, Summit Media

Digital In store

"This functionality (MobileVoice reviews) is being used to propel brands to the forefront of customer-centred technologies."

Sam Decker, chief marketing officer, Bazaarvoice

"While standard web content is unwieldy to use in store, experience rich content tools can be leveraged into kiosks to drive sales in the retail environment."

James Brooke, sales director, 10CMS



done, for example, when a sales assistant gives a quotation. If that quotation includes a reference number, it can be entered during the sale and credited to the person who gave the advice.

That reference number can also form part of the tracking of customers across a retailer's different channels. (For more information on tracking the customer journey across multichannel retail see the customer engagement section on page 30).

In the past, says Collier, there may also have been fears that store jobs might become redundant as e-commerce increased; today the reality is, she says, that both channels are important and support each other.

"There are opportunities for the stores themselves to survive by creating more experiential shopping and using digital technologies to do that," she concludes. "But customer choice of channel is key."