

# Q&A: Rethinking retail ahead of the holiday season

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The holidays are upon us, and retailers have to be ready with seamless, cross-channel shopping experiences that live up to consumers' expectations. So what can the industry expect after Thanksgiving dinner is done, and how can retailers prepare themselves to make the most of the busiest season of the year?

Toshiba Global Commerce Solutions Executive Director of Global Marketing Fredrik Carlegren sat down to talk about the importance of brand authenticity and how it affects the holiday shopping experience, tactics for effectively bringing tech into the brick-and-mortar space and what Toshiba's recent consumer research can tell us about this year's holiday shopping season:

**As retailers prepare for the holiday season, how can they rethink the in-store experience to better meet shoppers' expectations?**

Retailers must start with authenticity. Based on that brand quality, they have a tremendous opportunity to create unique in-store experiences that amplify authenticity with shoppers. Although online shopping hit a record-breaking \$105 billion in the US last holiday season, the vast majority of holiday shoppers still went to a store to complete their shopping.

So, what does it mean to create authentic experiences? Our own extensive retail survey found that consumers go to the store to see and touch the quality of items. They make choices to select certain products, try them out and compare them, including prices. Shoppers want the store to be the center of the brand experience.

Stores can leverage this unique position to attract, engage and retain shoppers. That said, the retailers that can truly blend both in-store and digital to bring the worlds of e-commerce and in-store shopping closer together are likely to come out on top.

**What are some ways that retail marketers can use digital and in-store tools in tandem to provide a more meaningful experience to customers?**

Today, these opportunities to create seamless experience across channels and devices are ever expanding. It's important for retailers to consider both shopper-driven and retailer-driven tactics to have greatest impact.

With shoppers, using digital displays in the aisle is a great way for marketers to help push products and promotions. I have seen that Walmart has been rolling out digital displays in many of their stores as endcaps as well as in the aisle to show product demonstrations. When retailers can capture data and analyze these in-store digital interactions, they can truly unlock tremendous value.

Another way to make in-store shopping more convenient is to better integrate it with online shopping. At Men's Wearhouse, in-store salespeople are paid commission to drive online purchases by messaging, video chatting and sending photos of in-store inventory to online shoppers.

**What sort of human interactions are valuable to consumers when they visit a store? Where are there opportunities for retailers to automate without detracting from the overall experience?**

There's no question that one of the greatest assets of the in-store experience is a positive human interaction. Yet many retailers are missing the mark by offering that interaction at the wrong time. Our study found that most shoppers (58%) would like help from a live person while they are looking for a product. We also found that most shoppers would like a human to greet them upon entering the store, and that they would like a human interaction for customer service. Those are all opportunities to create high-value human interactions where it matters, helping to drive sales and customer satisfaction.

One area that our research showed customers do not prefer interacting with humans is at the checkout, which is the most common -- and often only -- time a human being interacts with a shopper. Automating this process by leveraging technology to ease check-out frees in-store associates, potentially enabling retailers to reallocate those resources in ways that can yield greater benefit.

This feeling of automating the checkout experience will only continue to grow as the next generations mature. Our research shows that millennials and Gen Xers have a strong preference for self-checkout. It was the most popular option, with 41% saying they prefer it, compared to 31% of baby boomers who said the same. Regular checkout is also the least-preferred method of checkout for millennials and Gen X shoppers.

**Where does emerging technology, from voice-assisted devices to chatbots, fit into the overall holiday shopping picture? How heavily should retail marketers be investing in them?**

When shoppers go online to make purchases, it is often because of convenience. Technology can also make the in-store shopping experience more convenient, particularly during the holiday season.

For example, the Mall of America rolled out a chatbot assistant during the 2017 holiday shopping season to guide visitors and make food and gift recommendations. At such a busy time, such a service can make shopping easier and more efficient.

Voice-assisted devices can offer a self-service option in stores to complete tasks. Our study showed that 75% of consumers said they were interested in using voice assistance on a store device. Sixty-four percent are open to using voice-assisted devices as a self-service option in the store for coupon printing, and 52% to obtain loyalty card information.

These are just some of the many opportunities to free up staff and provide a more seamless, tech-driven shopping experience. There's no question that some of these automation technologies offer retailers the potential to increase revenue by making the shopping experience more efficient, as well as more pleasant, for the consumer. The extent to which they should invest will vary, so retailers really must continue to ensure that in each case they help improve that authentic brand experience.