

Retail leading in digital transformation

By  Lynette Hundermark

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"As the physical and digital worlds continue to merge, it is becoming clear that as a retailer it is all about providing the consumer with that consistent brand experience to strengthen that relationship and help them in their path to purchase".



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This was the consistent messaging at the recent World Retail congress in Rome. Retail is possibly one of the only sectors where physical and digital services go hand in hand. While the old world of traditional retail is based on in-store and catalogue based promotions, and above the line advertising, there is also the expectation that today's digital world can also be integrated where the connected consumer can perform tasks (should they wish) such as online price comparisons and online shopping. Thus, it presents opportunities to make our lives easier.

Africa, as a mobile-first continent, already has the consumer engaging on the mobile platform, making mobile commerce an opportunity for traditional retailers to leverage on. However despite this opportunity, in comparison to Europe and the US, the African markets are still on the back foot of global developments in the retail scene regarding leveraging available online channels.

Omnichannel is more than just a buzzword, it is the norm

Having recently judged the World Retail Awards, for the second year in a row (previously in Paris), it was fascinating to see that of the numerous entries I evaluated, every one of them treated online shopping as an integrated shopping experience. Brands globally are ensuring that customer touchpoints or channels work together to form a seamless customer journey with the end goal of driving sales or retaining customers.

To the customer, there were no boundaries separating the physical stores from online, it was all about getting the product in the consumers hands using all the touchpoints available to them and the various retail channels working together to make sure that end goal was achieved. This would then ultimately lead to customer acquisition strategies where personalisation could be applied and a true understanding of the customer was achieved.

Disrupting the traditional retail model - using technology and the power of mobile

It is no longer about working in silos and technology cannot be viewed as the silver bullet, it has to work hand in hand with

the rest of the departments especially in today's omnichannel world for rapid retail transformation. Retailers need to understand their business goals and challenges and see how technology can be used to achieve those goals. The mobile device today is without a doubt the remote control to the connected world and consumers are increasingly interacting on the mobile device in smaller moments - giving retailers the opportunity to capitalise on those moments or as Google call it "micro-moments".

Stats from Google show that mobile search exceeds desktop in 10 countries including the US and Japan. This has resulted in at least 29% increase in mobile conversations in the past year. Brands now need to connect the dots and be there in those moments, rethink legacy approaches and measure the moments that matter. Successful international case studies presented by Mastercard have also indicated that testing relentlessly is vital in competing in today's disruptive world, it's not about just placing a new solution out there and expecting it to work. An agile approach needs to be adopted where customer segmentation techniques are used to ensure that profitable solutions are rolled out - a one size solution never works.

And while taking the above-mentioned factors into consideration, the basic foundations of online transacting still need to be continuously enhanced and improved (and certainly not forgotten) which still include constant education of the African consumer in trusting the online platform and providing a credible platform to transact on.

Relevance is key in digital transformation adoption

To keep its relevancy and appeal in today's market, 100-year-old brands such as Disney, Coca-Cola and Levis continue to keep to their mantra of 'elevating' the customer experience by simply keeping in touch with and always staying connected with their ever-changing customers. This includes embracing the omnichannel world which includes the physical and online world (which can include mobile, social and whatever channel is relevant for that target market) and providing enticing content that surprises and delights its customers.

For some brands, especially the traditional retailers who haven't had the ability to keep in touch with this new evolving world, partnering with young startups who understand the new world is a viable option for them to ensure relevancy is still maintained.

In summary, as digital and mobile continues to become more embedded in our lives, especially in the African markets, it is important, for retailers especially, to seize the opportunity as the audience is ready and waiting to engage. Focusing on an integrated shopping experience, rather than being channel-specific where the consumer experience is continuously monitored, will inevitably yield favorable results. The key is to always learn, test and improve. There is no one size fits all solution and simply taking a solution from another market and replicating it in Africa, won't work. However, using international case studies as a benchmark and customising it for the African audience is a step forward.

ABOUT LYNETTE HUNDERMARK

With over 15 years of experience in the tech, digital marketing and mobile solutions space, Hundermark co-founded specialist mobile solutions consultancy Useful & Beautiful. With a passion for developing mobile products that are aligned to business goals, Hundermark's appetite for keeping abreast of the latest industry trends is fast establishing her as an expert

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