

It's time to rethink everything you've ever learned about the "customer journey," "path to purchase," and "shopper cycle."

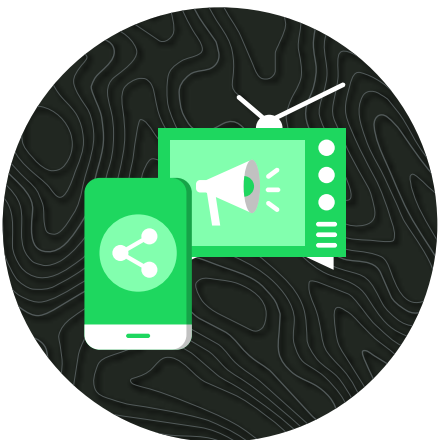
For years, brands have diligently pursued ways to map consumer touchpoints on the traditional path to purchase. But today's consumers don't follow neatly prescribed patterns—linear, circular, or otherwise. They don't need to tread down the path from "awareness" to "consideration" to "conversion" to make an informed buying decision. While a traditional path might still influence some customers, others might jump straight to "advocacy," for example, and skip the "consideration" step altogether with the proper approach.

As a result, brands must deliver a seamless, engaging, and industry-leading omnichannel retail experience built for today's hybrid shopper. Strategy must be combined with storytelling and technology to ensure that the most relevant messages reach the right customers, at the right time, on the right channels to influence behavior.

Snapshot in time: How the retail buying process has changed

Just five years ago, the average U.S. household had four or five electronic devices. Currently, that number has more than doubled to 12+ devices, according to Hub Entertainment Research. In addition, our sources of entertainment are expanding. Americans now spend about 13 hours daily with various media—predominantly mobile, digital video, and streaming services.

The relative simplicity of managing an in-store + website experience is long gone. The number of channels you can use to reach your target market has exploded, and the battle for time spent with digital media is intensifying. We're starting to see brand content, usually in the form of ads, being integrated within entertainment sources in a very different way—one that's more natural and story-centered.



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Source: Hub Entertainment Research

All of these factors contribute to a dizzying rise in the number of disparate vantage points from which any one consumer can interact with a brand. Therefore, at the bare minimum, a retailer's in-store experience must tie to its digital experience. In fact, many brands that are investing in apps are now reformatting the in-store footprint to match what's happening on their app. Walmart is just one example of retailers taking this approach.

Rethink your consumer connections

Consumers now have the power to change ad preferences or permissions, for example, to deny access to them on platforms like Instagram or Facebook.

Consequently, retailers must rethink the connections between each potential consumer touchpoint before, during, and after conversion. It's no longer enough to push brand messages; you must create relevant and compelling stories to capture consumers' imaginations at every touchpoint.

Still, even the best stories don't hold consumers' attention for long. Brands that repeat the same story at every touchpoint risk boring their audience. Instead, retailers must develop interconnected narratives that present a consistent-but-evolving story regardless of whether the consumer is in-store, online, on an app, or at any other point of contact.

For Rayann Anderson, Senior Practice Consultant at Domo, the goal should be to not only understand customer lifetime value, but also the customer's journey and buying habits across all digital and physical touchpoints. This enables a retailer to build a successful omnichannel experience.

"[Retailers] want to connect what customers are buying with what they are browsing. How are they interacting with them on social media? That's important for most types of retailers," says Anderson.

"They want to know, 'What are the customers' preferences? What's in their shopping cart?'"

"Thus, as they move between channels, retailers can offer them a personalized customer experience. If I'm shopping online and I put items on my wish list or in my cart, and I go into the store two weeks later, a sales associate should be able to see that information and continue my buying journey. Retailers should seek a consolidated view of customer interactions."

Remember: Relevance has a deadline

As important as it is to create a seamless shopper experience, the real question is this: Is the experience effectively earning consumer conversions, loyalty, and advocacy?

Achieving this trifecta requires that you always remember that relevance has a deadline. No matter how relevant your brand's story or message is, it's useless if it's not delivered at the right moment. You must understand your customers enough to promote the right content at the right time. In other words, you must get ahead of your customers' purchasing decisions.

That's especially important with millennials, who are now primary purchasers. As the first generation to grow up with the Internet, they buy differently. They tend to be more motivated by digital points of service.



Therefore, you must combine data and AI to make the consumer experience timely, easy, personal, and thoughtful—not just from initial contact to conversion, but beyond. Brands that leverage data and analytics-infused performance marketing strategies can better:

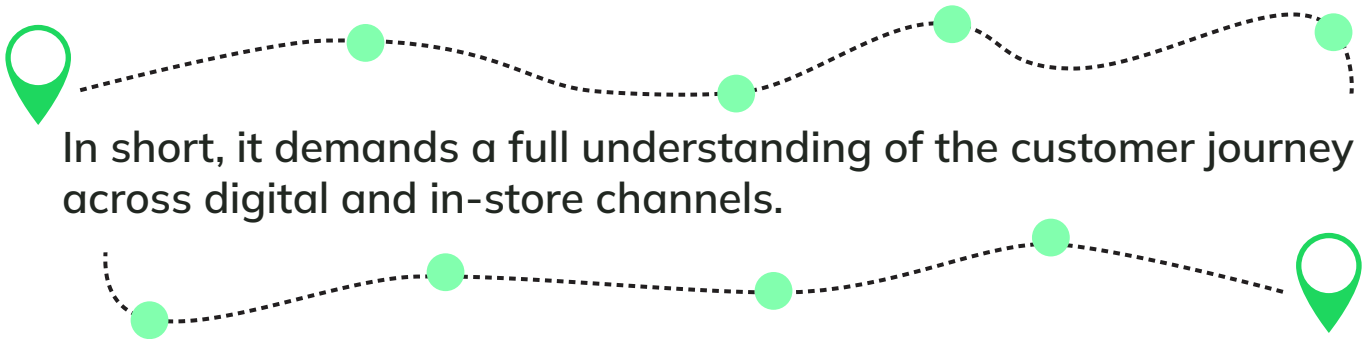
- **Identify gaps between themselves and their competitors based on their customers' preferences.**
- **Engage their customers with the right messages at the right times.**
- **Ensure their consumer touchpoints feed into one another to create effective, seamless experiences.**

Evaluate your performance marketing strategies

Retail brands that create consistent and seamless experiences across channels do so by connecting every touchpoint and data source at their disposal in order to create thoughtful, personalized stories that resonate with their customers.

However, developing such impactful omnichannel experiences requires an integrated approach that combines customer insights across data sources to inform customer relationship management (CRM) and marketing automation platforms (MAP). By operationalizing a data-driven approach to experiences, brands can create a connected ecosystem and centralized flow of data to feed marketing initiatives based on previous behaviors and interactions. Doing this will allow retailers to focus on the “next best action” using the most effective channel or channels to drive transactions.

But where should retail brands start?

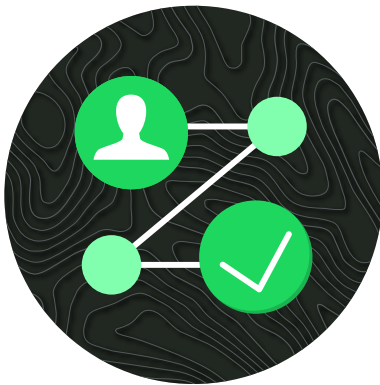


In short, it demands a full understanding of the customer journey across digital and in-store channels.

It begins with identifying the most useful channels for creating an omnichannel experience. Digital channels are at the core of the modern customer journey – websites, social media, SEO strategies, and more all work together to attract customers. This ultimately leads consumers to make direct purchases, subscribe to email or text alerts, visit physical store locations, or allow them to follow and become unofficial brand advocates.

Geo-location and in-app activity are two examples that can help brands more directly serve their customers.

With geo-location, retailers can alert customers who are in the proximity of the store (or a competitor's store, for that matter) by notifying them in real time about discounts, special offers, or other enticing promotions that could drive them to the store. It's also a relatively simple and inexpensive way to elevate brand recognition and engagement.



Tracking in-app activity can also be leveraged to reach customers. In fact, in recent years, it has emerged as one of the most effective ways to stay top of mind for customers you're looking to convert. Progressive retailers tracking in-app activity use it to provide customers with instantaneous product reviews, price checks, and even ways to help plan their shopping trips, leading to greater customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Linking these various channels, however, is the real trick. And it's where brands who best employ omnichannel retail experiences separate themselves from their competition.

To minimize technological siloing and ensure all tech and platforms communicate with each other, it's important to identify what, if any, gaps exist between online and offline channels and close them.

Start with simple questions like:

- **Does the in-app experience match the website and in-store experience?**
- **If a customer moves from the retailer's website to their app, is it seamless?**
- **Do each of these platforms "see and recognize" the customer so they don't have to log-in multiple times; and are products personalized?**

It's also critical to consider the customer's journey and create workflows that necessitate communication based on a customer's behavior and preferences. Double down on integration efforts that facilitate and simplify customers ability to make purchases from any and all channels. This includes creating systems that seamlessly sync a customer's data between channels, delivering consistent messaging that can be supported by all channels, and developing systems that accurately measure the effectiveness of these channels.

Anderson takes aim at these exact ideas by using the example of a sales associate at a store.

“They're the face of the retailer, enabling them to successfully assist your customers” says *Rayann Anderson, Senior Practice Consultant at Domo.*

“For example, providing sales associates visibility to a customer's virtual closet, or past purchases, personalized item recommendations, inventory availability, and estimated shipping times enables them to offer better customer service and close the transaction.”

“The goal is to present all the information from multiple systems seamlessly. It's irrelevant where the data lives. What matters is the result at the end of the day, which is profitably enabling that transaction to close and the customer to be happy.”

For example, to sell a pair of jeans, the complex orchestration of channels might look something like this:

1 PAID MEDIA

The clothing retailer is running a video campaign for awareness on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The videos showcase the retail brand and features prominent influencers.

2 RETARGETING & SEGMENTATION

Engagement with the campaign is captured and a retargeting audience is built across the aforementioned channels; plus on higher intent channels like paid search. Additionally, an email segmentation is built in the marketing automation platform for known customers who engaged with the campaign.

3 EMAIL

Then, an email is triggered to the new segmentation; highlighting the same jeans, tops, and accessories showcased in the original videos. The marketing automation tool tracks the email engagement. Because the customer clicked to view the jeans, the platform builds a product interest segmentation for jeans.

4 WEBSITE

The customer clicks on the email to view the pair of jeans on the retailer's website. The jeans and similar products based on a recommendation engine and personalized to the customer's prior behaviors are shown.

5 SMS

Since the customer viewed the product online, added to cart, and didn't check out, the marketing automation tool triggers an SMS message that reads, "you have items in your cart", along with a discount code. Still, the customer doesn't bite.

6 GEO-LOCATION

However, they do visit the physical store in the next two weeks. As they walk near the store, the retailer's app fires an alert based on geo-location with a message that reads, "Your discount code is still available for use."

7 IN-STORE EXPERIENCE

As the customer enters the store, they experience similar imagery from the videos, website, and emails - all of the digital touchpoints and the in-store experience are seamless to the eye with consistent branding throughout. Even the music from the influencer packed videos matches the music in the store.

8 IN-APP EXPERIENCE

The customer opens up the app, where the discount code they received via SMS is shown. The customer grabs the jeans off of the rack, plus some of the familiar accessories they've seen along their journey, and checks out.

9 NURTURE

The journey doesn't end there. The marketing automation tool then adds the customer to a new segmentation of recent purchases. And, a new email nurture kicks off; plus the segmentation fires a new lower funnel campaign across paid search and other media.

In this example, the CRM, marketing automation platform, and business intelligence tool are in constant contact with the MarTech stack; always finding the next best action in real time and delivering a seamless brand experience through every touchpoint along the way.

Customers rightfully expect the same purchase experience across all channels. With that, it's imperative that retail brands excel in gathering, sharing, and understanding customer data internally, and use it to deliver a level of convenience, personalization, and efficiency externally that makes it a hallmark of your brand.

Omnichannel: The key to retail success

The retail buying process has changed dramatically in the past few years and will continue to evolve. To appeal to the hybrid shopper of today and tomorrow, brands must put tools and strategies in place to deliver a thoughtful, personal, and seamless omnichannel experience.

Those that do, however, will most certainly reap the biggest rewards. For retailers, nothing is better than consumers who bypass the traditional “path to purchase” and quickly become loyal customers and brand advocates.

Ready to take your omnichannel retail experience to the next level? Let MERGE be your guide.

Visit our [CONTACT US](#) page to learn more.

What a year with the team at MERGE!

We witnessed a complete overhaul of our traffic programs, a new energy in our paid media efforts, and a substantial lift in performance revenue. I was especially impressed to see paid social hit its stride at the end of the year and become a high conversion channel. Looking forward to much more to come."

-Bryson White, VP, DTC, Black Diamond

