

Teeny Shoppers

Innovation is all about having a window into the future. That window is wide open when it comes to the convergence of the cellphone and digital media at retail. All we need to do is watch the way teens and twentysomethings use cellphones to shop and that future is plain to see.

The way young people use cellphones at retail is nothing like the way older folks use them while shopping—actually, it's nothing like the way older folks use cellphones, period. As we all realize by now, this younger generation doesn't look at a phone simply as a way to make a call. For them, it is a lifeline to friends, family—at times it seems to be at the very center of their entire way of life.

As it happens, that way of life frequently centers on shopping. That thought might alarm some budget-conscious parents! But the cellphone is, in fact, a great way to compare prices, cash in coupons, check on inventory and check in with friends—at the store, on the fly. Young people understand this better than anyone.

Jayne O'Donnell recently reported on how teens are using cellphones to shop in *USA Today*. She tracked the shopping patterns of a 15-year-old named Alan Brody, who says he uses his cellphone to save time at the mall, via a service called Slifter that enables him to locate what he's looking for at local stores.

As youthful behavior goes, using a cellphone as a shopping buddy is incredibly logical and savvy. It makes so much sense that it should be regarded as nothing less than a leading indicator of the future of retail itself.

The cellphone does have its limitations. As the *USA Today* article points out, screens are a bit on the

small side (even for a teenager) and mobile searches don't always turn up useful information. Sometimes the items in question are simply not available at the mall where you're shopping, or even at a store nearby.

Both issues call out for better integration of cellphones with the digital signage that is increasingly populating retail environments. Frost & Sullivan predicts that by 2011, 90 percent of all chain retailers will have some form of digital signage. It's a huge opportunity.

In the past, most of these screens have been used simply as a new medium for an old idea—the old idea being image advertising. The notion that people would stop and look at television-style commercials while they're shopping was discredited long ago. It's not just young people who have rejected in-store advertising of that type; people of all ages generally find it not only irrelevant but also sometimes irritating.

Given that so many people are using technologies to skip commercials when they are passively watching television at home, why would we ever think they would stop to watch them while they are actively shopping in the store? They haven't and

they won't. But they will stop and engage if doing so makes their shopping trip more enjoyable and productive.

THE INTERACTIVE POTENTIAL

Each and every screen that currently carries digital signage can be interactive. With the right kind of software, a static, non-interactive screen can be converted into a cellphone-compatible screen.

In some cases, this can be as simple as changing the message to include a cellphone number that shoppers can call to connect to more information, special offers or even to purchase an item online if the store is out of stock.

Suppose, for example, you're shopping at Macy's and have found a great pair of shoes but they don't

For innovation at retail, look no farther than your own pocket.

have them in your size. No problem. Using your cellphone, you could interact with an in-store screen to order the shoes online and have them shipped directly to your home. Or maybe you're at Best Buy, deciding between two washing machines. Just use your cellphone to call up the details you need to make your choice, and view it on a big-screen display.

Some retailers offer a split-screen environment, where part of the screen carries an eye-catching video while the other part allows shoppers to interact. It's also possible to turn the cellphone itself into a screen controller.

We used this technology recently in a highly successful program for Nike. It was a World Cup promotion where shoppers could watch videos of their favorite players and then opt-in to join a branded Nike community. It was a great way both to entertain shoppers as well as build relationships with them.

A company called Cellfire offers another promising application. In a nutshell, Cellfire allows shoppers to download coupons from their home computers into their cellphones, and then redeem them at retail. This concept is a perfect fit with the idea of cellphones as a digital wallet — which is also taking hold among younger shoppers, in particular.

In a similar vein, a company called Redeemit also enables coupon redemption via cellphone at retail. The offers can either be sent to the shopper as part of an opt-in push campaign, or else the shopper simply requests the offer via text message. The coupons can be programmed to be used once or many times, to work with individual products or bundles, within specific times or dates. We liked that technology so much we bought the company earlier this year.

ONLINE CROSSOVER

Perhaps the most exciting opportunity of all is to explore how viral videos and social networks might translate to the in-store environment, with the cellphone as the link. It would be wonderful to see some of the playful nature of the internet's viral videos injected into the in-store shopping experience.

Consider, for example, the online "Elf Yourself" campaign hosted during the holidays by OfficeMax. The way it works is, you upload a picture of yourself and record a message. Your face and voice are then

dropped into an animation of a singing and dancing elf, which you can email to all your friends.

With an in-store digital screen taking the place of a web browser, OfficeMax or any other retailer could do something similar right in the store. Shoppers could use their cellphone to take and upload their pictures as well as record their voices, and then send the resulting video to their friends. That may not be the most utilitarian use of the cellphone, but it certainly can build buzz, traffic and above all, shopper loyalty.

The online social-networking phenomenon is an even more tantalizing opportunity. In the early days of e-commerce, some experts predicted it would never catch on because it turned shopping into a solitary, isolated and therefore unappealing exercise. The fact is, in-store shopping can be just as lonely — but all of that has changed with the advent of social-networks and cellphones.

For example, if you want an honest opinion of how you look in that parka, you can snap a picture, send it to your Facebook buddies and get an instant assessment. The opportunity for retailers to facilitate that kind of interaction, and build both sales and loyalty in the process, is enormous.

It's understandable that the convergence of cellphones and digital media at retail might be hard for senior-level marketers to appreciate fully, given that many of us are well past our twenties, let alone our teens.

But I'd like to leave you with one thought that you're sure to love: Unlike most other marketing technologies, the capital cost when it comes to cellphones as media is shouldered by the consumer!

Not only that, but with mobile technology becoming increasingly advanced, evermore sophisticated functionality will open up evermore opportunities for innovation in the years ahead. ■



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