The Store Associate: Empowering a Key Asset for Better Customer Experience

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November 2021

Retail is in rapid transformation. Changes in shopping habits and consumer expectations have increased the complexity of the shopping journey, requiring retailers to focus more on customer experience.

The physical store is becoming more important in defining the customer shopping journey, together with the role of the store associate assisting the shopper in store. In a unified approach to retail operations, the store becomes the place where customers can experience products and services with the support of the store associate.

The Store Associate Evolves to Become Central in Customer Experience

With the increasing complexity of the customer journey, retailers are transforming the role of the store associate to focus more on supporting the customer journey and to play a bigger role in omnichannel operations:

- 65% of retailers say store associates contribute more to in-store customer assistance, customer service, and in supporting the in-store customer journey.
- 64% of retailers agree store associates play a bigger role in remote customer support and after-sale assistance.
- 60% of retailers say store associates focus more on omnichannel fulfilment operations.

With physical stores evolving into experiential hubs, the store associate becomes central to defining the customer experience of the retailer offer, and needs to be empowered to perform optimally.

Empowering the Store Associate for Better Customer Support

The adoption of technology including automation, AI and advanced analytics in brick-and-mortar stores means that most routine, lower value tasks have now been automated to remove frictions from the shopping journey (think of the increasing adoption of automated checkout solutions), leaving more time for the store associate to focus on value added tasks such as offering personalized advice and support to the customer:

- 88% of retailers introduced or expanded in-store technology such as self-service kiosks and smart touchscreens to support store associates with customer order processing.
- 81% of retailers introduced or expanded automation capabilities — including the use of robotics — to support the store associate.
- 52% of retailers introduced or expanded AI/ML and advanced analytics and mobile clienteling tools to enable store associates to access customer information to provide personalized customer journeys.

Retailers' transformation through technology is instrumental in making the store associate increasingly connected and empowered to be able to better support the customer journey.

Better Employee Experience Leads to Better Customer Experience

As a result of the changes in the role of the store associate, employee experience is also evolving. Retailers need to provide a conducive environment for employees to thrive, through easy onboarding procedures and training to empower the store associate to add value to the customer journey:

- 85% of retailers introduced or expanded workforce management tools to increase efficient use of in-store staff and strengthen employee experience satisfaction.
- 65% of retailers introduced or expanded AR/VR for use cases including store associate training.

Empowering employees increases staff retention, as store associates see the value of their work and its impact on the customer journey.

Combining Automation and Human Interaction to Meet Different Customer Expectations

The pandemic revealed the importance of the brick-and-mortar store and of the physical interactions between shoppers and store associates that only the in-store shopping experience can offer.

The objective of the digital transformation occurring in brick-and-mortar stores is to remove frictions and bottlenecks from the in-store customer journey, not to replace store associates and go for full automation.

Customer experience is central in retail, and technology implementation is driven by the need to ensure the best customer journey possible and the best use of all the resources available in retail operations, including retailers' most important asset — the employees.

Retailers should continue to cultivate the role of the store associate as a pillar of the customer journey and best combine resources from automation and human interaction. For example, they can build parallel customer experiences in-store to accommodate both customers looking for quick in-store visits, where automation reduces frictions and delivers speed, and those seeking advice who visit the store to interact with the store associate, who, thanks to operational automation, has more time to dedicate to the shopper.

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