

Shoppers Say They're Self-Sufficient

Do customers care about empowered sales associates?

ARTICLE |

Krista Garcia

Many retailers are focused on employing [tech to improve the in-store customer experience](#), but what if good customer experience means being left alone?

A recent [HRC Retail Advisory](#) survey of consumers in North America found that nearly all respondents (95%) only want help from a sales associate when they need it. Therein lies the issue—how to balance shoppers' need for self-sufficiency with in-store tech investments meant to help staff on the front lines?

More than half (53%) of consumers surveyed ranked the in-store experience as the most important factor while shopping, but what does that exactly mean? A good number of respondents (30%) said mobile checkout was important to them, and almost as many thought apps that would make personalized recommendations were as well. But sales associates who served this same function were less desirable, cited by just 17%.

A separate survey of US internet users by [Zebra Technologies](#) discovered that the younger the consumer, the more likely they are to be receptive to sales associates using tech for assistance. Indeed, 58% of respondents ages 20 to 36 thought this would make for a better in-store experience, while only 36% of those ages 53 to 71 agreed.

Even so, 20- to 36-year-olds were also more likely to think they could find information on their smartphones faster than sales associates (64%). This age group also felt they were better connected to consumer information than store associates (53%), and said that finding information using a store app would be easier than talking to an employee (55%).

What's more, a December 2017 survey by InMoment also illustrates a disconnect between customers and retailers. Both US internet users and brand professionals cited poor interaction with staff as the No. 1 factor that contributes to a negative brand experience. But while nearly three-fourths (74%) of consumers agreed with this sentiment, only 29% of brand professionals thought that was the case.

Attitudes Toward How Technology Influences the Shopping Experience According to Internet Users Worldwide, by Age, Sep 2017

% of respondents in each group

	20-36	37-52	53-71
Have a better experience in stores where the sales assistants use the latest technology to assist customers	58%	49%	36%
Can find information myself faster on my smartphone than asking a store assistant for help	64%	53%	34%
The self-help kiosks in the store are helpful	52%	44%	32%
Better connected to consumer information than store associates	53%	42%	26%
Can find information using the store app easier than asking a store associates	55%	43%	27%
Can find more product information through generic search engines than store websites	59%	50%	36%

Note: "agree" or "strongly agree"

Source: Zebra Technologies, "2017 Global Shopper Study," Nov 15, 2017

232735

www.eMarketer.com

Just 7% of respondents in both groups considered something related to in-store tech to be a potential deal-breaker. According to consumers, the top three negative factors were related to customer service, which would indicate that brands and retailers are underestimating shoppers' perception of sales associates who aren't knowledgeable, who don't understand a customer's needs and who are not around when they do need help.

It's not so hard to see why a shopper wouldn't want to interact with staff if this is the perception they have, fairly or not. Skepticism about the helpfulness of sales associates might not be unfounded—especially among younger shoppers who are accustomed to digital

shopping tools—so it would seem that retailers empowering employees with tablets and granting access to in-stock inventory or shoppers' past purchases is only the first step.

Customers have to be given confidence that new features are actually helpful to them, and that retailers are rolling out tools they've asked for.

At the recent Shoptalk conference in Las Vegas, Macy's CEO Jeff Gennette announced the department store will introduce self-service mobile checkout at all full-line locations by the end of 2018. Shoppers will be able to scan and pay for purchases with the Macy's app, a move likely to appeal to those who prefer tech innovation over human interaction.