



IKEA utilises VR technology to allow shoppers to take a virtual tour of a simulated room and configure the furniture and colour palates to suit their tastes

Embracing new technology for shopping malls

Augmented reality changing the way retailers market and sell their products



Guest writer

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THE shopping mall and retail industry is at a crossroads. This involves the millennials, Generation Z and technology.

Challenges faced by retailers and shopping mall owners as well as managers revolve around the debate of supply and demand of retail space and also the issue of online versus offline.

However, too often many would jump onto the bandwagon of either

defending brick and mortar shops or online in a realm of the web and apps. Many a time we read of debates and opinions on which is superior. The issue is not about which is better and which is not. It is about the opportunity to bridge the gap. Bridging gaps has always been the main focus of a good relationship even in business.

Understanding the current targets is important. It is believed that Millennials are those born from 1980s to 2000s whilst Generation Zs are those born thereafter. That would mean the oldest age for a Millennial today would be 40. The oldest Generation Z would now be about 17 years of age. Both are exposed to the computer generation where Apple, Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Amazon, Siri, Alexa, Lexa and now, Cortona have become an integral part of their lives as with smart devices.

Shopping malls today consist traditionally of a variety of shops housed in clusters or in a strategic mix and packaged in an intended ambience to create that point of difference. Retailers have also traditionally focused on products

and shop displays to help make a sale.

However, traditional shopping is fast losing out to the new way of shopping. The onslaught of apps and websites which began with blogshops and evolved from those who have experienced shopping with Amazon as well as eBay have put a strain on shopping malls and retailers seeking patronage.

Today, fashion shows and onsite events just do not bring in the footfall anymore. Technology has changed this. The new generation has also managed to quietly coax and encourage those in their 50s onwards to use phones without buttons and also social media. Reports globally show that they are also one of the fastest growing Facebook users.

Leveraging on augmented reality

The idea of augmented reality in shopping is not new. It started as prototypes no less than six years ago. However, in the past year, people have started to take notice of augmented reality. The word "augment" is defined as adding value, hence an augmented reality would mean adding value to the reality we have today.

The most significant use of augmented reality is the phenomenal "Pokemon Go" where many people, regardless of age, would have that app on their smartphones.

This game superimposes the animated monsters in an augmented reality mode if so desired.

Retail examples have included stores like Sephora teaming up with Modiface to create a virtual artist app. This app allows one to walk into a store and use one of the mirrors or have an app to help you choose the look you want by superimposing life-like colours, for example, onto your lips. You can also look at having a combination of different shades for eye makeup, blushers and lip colours. Some would also allow you to do a hair colour simulation based on your actual face.

Many others have also used augmented reality to help customers go through an experience in the store. A store is no longer just a store to a potential customer. Some brands have also added an option for augmented reality in selecting shoe colours and trims. Nike has also unveiled this at a store in Paris, France.

Augmented reality catalogue

Today, there are even stores which have mirrors that allow you to play with different fits, designs and colours. Some brands would also have an app to allow you a virtual mannequin. This can also be connected to social media apps which would make the social interaction a possibility when asking for advice. Some would also allow you to have an on-call fashion adviser of the store if so desired.

IKEA has also rolled out an augmented reality catalogue. This allows designers and home owners as well as businesses to visualise items in a desired space. Imagine home improvement stores having an option for customers to also superimpose colours and shades to make a better decision.

Even Lego has come up with augmented reality or AR kiosks for children and adults to scan the QR or bar codes



Times are changing. Shoppers of the future will be able to use VR technology to browse in a virtual shopping environment

to see how the product would look like assembled. This would definitely add onto the experience.

In Germany, Adidas has also rolled out a store which would be able to "knit for you" the sweater you have chosen based on your actual needs after a scan of fit and design. Amazon has also come up with an Amazon Go store where one is able to go to it and shop without having to carry a wallet. It has no lines and no checkout.

However, you need to have an app activated on your smart device before entering and exiting the store. This store is located in Seattle, US, as a prototype. It uses machine learning, artificial intelligence as well as computer-aided visions to "see" what you have taken and picked up.

Last year, eBay, together with Myers of Australia, created the world's first virtual reality department store. With the aid of shopticals, which is a box requiring your smartphone powered by the intended app, one would be transported into the virtual department store. You would browse, select, change and purchase products based on eye gaze movements or sight search.

Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) would become huge innovations in creating the difference in shopping. Shopping malls should also look at AR in marketing. Combined with the extreme reach and powers of social media, going to a shopping mall would no longer be just about shopping and neither should it be just a social need entirely.

Bridging the gap

Customers today have a choice of online and physical stores when shopping. The gap is the experience. If you add virtual wallets into the mix with payments using an e-wallet or digital wallet, you would find that the power is given back to the consumers.

As mentioned earlier in the article, online versus offline is no longer about which is better. Each is a platform for two extremes whilst AR and VR attempt to bridge the gaps. Big Data is another where one would be able to better serve the customers and with the onset of AR, VR and social media, the potential is limitless.

Facebook has also just announced a push for AR. Imagine a future where optical would become smart glasses where information of a product or object is placed beside your sight. Google Tango had also been launched for an immersive experience based on the surroundings.

In summary, let us imagine a casual meet-up at a cafe in a shopping mall. Your friends and you were discussing about something one of you saw in a shop within the mall. You pull out your smart device. It projects a hologram of one of you. You are then able to see how that outfit looks like and seek a physical fitting. Upon request, a fashion person comes in to meet your group. The cafe provides a changing room.

The product if liked is purchased and paid by contactless, pin or even a virtual wallet. Better still, if it is made entirely in-store in an augmented environment. Stores would become magnets of not only shopping but also social interaction.

Hence, the way to go is the focus on the customer experience and understanding your market. This has never changed. It is just that many have opted to defend fastidiously the either or of online or offline. The experience of the filling the gap is priceless. **FocusM**

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