The Future of Shopping: An Eerie Silence?

Brian David Johnson, Frost and Sullivan

Technology is poised to transform shopping in radical new ways. But could we be overautomating ourselves into an eerie silence?

Imagine walking into a store, selecting the items you want, and then walking out—no cashiers, no lines, no crowds. Could this be the future of retail and grocery stores? Because such a frictionless shopping experience is what digital economy companies are designing as they move into traditional economy areas such as shopping.

Of the top 10 most valuable companies in the world, 6 are data driven: Apple, Alphabet (Google’s parent company), Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook, and Alibaba. They use the Internet, computers, and smartphones to deliver services to consumers in ways that would’ve been impossible a few decades ago. And their massive user bases—consisting of tens and hundreds of millions of users—are used to generate profits.

Some are advertising based, while others deliver traditional goods and services in nontraditional ways. To remain growth companies in the 21st century, these organizations are now moving out of the digital economy and into the traditional economy—and a store near you.

In August, Google and Walmart announced their partnership. Steve Brown, a futurist who specializes in the intersection between technology and retail, commented in a recent phone conversation that “the scale of Walmart with the data sense of Google make this really important. Together they could transform shopping as we know it.”

And earlier this year, the business world was caught off guard by Amazon’s announcement that it was buying the lifestyle grocery chain Whole Foods. However, for those watching this sector, it came as less of a surprise—Amazon has been exploring and prototyping new approaches to retail for several years. For example, its Amazon Fresh service delivers groceries to people’s homes, and in 2016, Amazon opened convenience stores in Washington State and New York City.

Such changes mean that a store that traditionally employs 89 people could now be run by a mere 10. “Labor accounts for the lion’s share of a supermarket’s operating costs,” wrote Josh Kosman in a February New York Post article (nypost.com/2017/02/05/inside-amazons-robot-run-supermarket-that-needs-just-3-human-workers). “In 2015, the industry employed 3.4 million workers nationwide, with an average grocery store employing 89 workers to generate annual sales of more than $2 million.”

Shopping’s future might be frictionless, but it could also be devoid of people. Customers who’ve experienced these stores of the future not only talk about their convenience and efficiency but also comment on their eerie silence.

“When you remove the welcoming smiles from the store, it’s no longer a welcoming place,” says Brown. “It’s an example of overautomation. Certainly, brands should embrace automation but it can’t be the only point of differentiation. Ultimately it’s the humanity in your brand and the people in your store that will set you apart from the competition.”

Technology and its engineers are poised to transform shopping in radical new ways. But how far do we want to go? How much do we value the presence of people over efficiency? Could we overautomate ourselves into an eerie silence?

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