Retail’s Great Digital Divide
and How You Can Bridge It
As a retailer, how do you keep up in the ever-changing digital world? Filling a store with a product and providing quality in-store customer service is no longer enough. Today, retailers have to discover how to attractively provide their products across multiple channels sustainably and affordably. This guide provides you with everything you need to know about the great digital divide — what it will look like in the future, and how you can bridge it today.

**Retail’s Great Digital Divide**

Two weeks of mega retail events (NRF14 and OR14) created one very clear impression — there is an ever-widening gap forming between retailers and their frenemies in manufacturing.

Consumers now seek the offline experience for browsing, but the online experience for purchasing.

How do we know this to be true? One word: Amazon.

Amazon’s model of innovation and effortless experience is something manufactures can no longer ignore.

Costs are significant — manufactures make investments in order to create, build, and sell products through a remarkably inefficient, overhead-burdened retail channel. Yet, as Doug Stephen’s article “The End of the Beginning of E-Commerce” states, online consumption has topped at 1.2 trillion!

Today’s digital savvy consumers and their ever-growing preference to shop online are all of the justification manufactures need to take a share of the online market.

Online stores have become a point of digital collaboration and transaction while manufacturers’ logos grace the front of redesigned storefronts. Outlets have 100% of their merchandise on display to touch, feel, and try — and they’re moving toward having all of it hot-wired to be accessible online.

There will not be any salespeople. Instead, there will be product experts and domain professionals who add value to the socially simulative environment. In addition, they will provide Facebook and Twitter enabled gatherings used to evolve the forum beyond big box display cases and into an interactive, human-rich community.

Not all manufacturers will offer such outlets. Commodity transactions will remain on Amazon-like-platforms while luxury brands and their upscale offerings will integrate “social stores” with sexy online experiences — boasting services like personal assist, synchronous shopping, and interactive agent video.

One thought provoking Facebook post left us listening for the echoes of laggards falling into this ever-widening digital divide.

”I have been consumed by Amazon. After they sent us an Amazon Fresh delivery of goods in a beautiful Amazon Fresh Bag, I have signed up. I have also lost a many year battle and finally signed up for an Amazon visa card. I just ordered everything we need from a grocery store, plus more of course because it is so cool. I might never again see Costco or Safeway. I have also ordered about 40 books on my kindle in the last year and I now only buy videos from Amazon. I am now totally involved. These guys are so good, it’s crazy.”
Top Three Ways Companies Are Changing to Meet Customer Requirements

So obviously the market is shifting to the Internet, but how do you adapt to become an innovative, thriving businesses of the future?

There’s one thing that you will always need to remember: Customers are still human beings, no matter if they’re shopping in the store or online. Sometimes in this digital era it’s easy for companies to lose track of this seemingly obvious fact.

However, the customers themselves will never forget. In fact, those organizations which provide a personalized, humanized customer experience are those who will tower head and shoulders over their competition.

Are you not sure where to start in order to bridge the digital divide and provide the type of environment your customers crave? Here are the top three ways companies are changing to meet these new customer requirements:

1. BLENDING THE ONLINE AND OFFLINE EXPERIENCE

Customers expect to be met where they want to interact.

Enter the omni-channel world. Businesses can take consumers from their current channel of choice and seamlessly care for them within an uninterrupted brand experience through digital and physical environments. Yet throughout this trip, the customer isn’t necessarily consciously aware of or concerned about where one channel started and the other finished.

Creating seamless experiences takes a lot of effort and dedication to the end goal. Take, for example, Canada’s sports gear company Sport Chek. Sport Chek uses its online presence to enhance and drive a highly personalized experience, and perform optional customer location tracking in its stores.

If you agree to let the company track you in its stores, it will take note of which items you stop to check out or purchase. It then sends you coupons and suggestions that are personalized specifically for you based on your interests.

This type of tracking also provides employees with information that will allow them to personalize customers’ in-store experiences. Information employees might receive could include customers’ names, whether customers have been to the store multiple times, and what might convince them to make a purchase in the future.

2. MIGRATING FROM CUSTOMER SERVICE TO CUSTOMER CARE

Customer service is a phrase that has received much buzz.

Good customer service hasn’t gone out of style. However, it has expanded from the basic process of assisting customers who are making a purchase or using a service to the broader process of caring for your customers throughout their journey. This may include helping customers’ research products or services, assisting them through the purchase process, nurturing them after the purchase, and more.

It’s critical to teach employees how to truly interact with and listen to customers. Scripts are great starting points. However, the truly enlightened company will teach its employees to go beyond flow-charted communication to genuine conversations.

Moreover, customer care includes truly understanding your customers at whatever point they are in their journey. This means
taking the time to understand their needs and drives from day one. If you don’t have that knowledge, you will never be able to personalize the conversation and care for your customers enough to keep them satisfied in the long term.

3. PERSONALIZING THE EXPERIENCE — WITHOUT CROSSING THE BORDER INTO CREEPY

As mentioned above, personalization is a key way to gain customer loyalty. That being said, you have to be careful not to take personalization to the point where it becomes “creepy.” This balance is best described by a quote found in the article “Privacy vs. Personalization” by Sharon Paskowitz, Jonathan Chiriboga, & David Coulson:

“With the Use of Social Media, Mobile Technology, Sensors, Geo-Fencing, and CRM, Brands Can Deliver Even More Personalized Marketing Communications and Offers to Customers. But Just Because They Can, Does That Mean They Should?”

Getting customers’ opt-in is key to keeping their comfort level up. For instance, Gap is working to add in personalization factors that are “cool, not creepy.” This includes targeted emails and landing pages online, as well as optional customer tracking in-store. However, nothing is done without express permission and all factors have been added with the intent of bringing additional value to their customers.

Another example is Ancestry.com who provides a visual engagement solution to its online customers. What does this mean? Any time customers have questions or concerns, they can speak with a representative “face-to-face,” despite the fact that they are working online. With permission, agents can see exactly what customers are seeing and expedite the process of resolving problems. And no private information is exposed.

To make this level of personalization and humanization work, you’ll need to have the appropriate tools. Phone and chat provide a great starting point, but true visual engagement involves a deeper set of tools, including cobrowsing, screen sharing, and agent-video solutions.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The companies that will thrive are those who will take the extra steps to meet their customers in the locations that they want to shop, and take the time to treat their customers like actual people. If you can blend the online and offline experience, focus on customer care, and bring personalization to their experience, then you will be well on your way to becoming one of those thriving businesses of the future.
You’ve learned about the great digital divide and how to bridge it by personalizing the customer’s experience both in-store and online. Yet to personalize the online experience you’ll need innovative solutions that can truly bring the human touch into the otherwise cold online world.

**Glance** empowers companies to construct a differentiated, customer-centric online experience through the integration of visual solutions such as cobrowse, screen share, agent video, and more. Our goal is simple — to provide solutions that are fast, easy to use, and work every time, so our customers can easily collaborate with their customers.

Seize your competitive advantage by providing a customer experience that’s head and shoulders above the rest. Contact **Glance** today to learn how to strengthen your customers’ loyalty, and bring your company instant value.