
The Future of Seamless Shopping

What is the future of shopping?

It's a seamless experience that merges context, content and commerce across the entire customer journey.

About the Research

BUSINESS FINLAND

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Future Watch Report

Everyone shops. But retail chains around the world are going under.

Everyone shops. And every for-profit company sells products, services or both. Shopping is a ubiquitous activity that cuts across geographic borders, online, mobile, and the physical world. It's everywhere.

The global retail industry alone employs 1 out of every 10 working age adults and involves approximately \$23 Trillion USD – yes, trillion – in transactions annually. “Shopping” encompasses large market space that spans industries.

Despite regional economic challenges in specific countries, the overall global standard of living continues to rise. Unemployment is going down and consumers have more disposable income than ever before. More people are moving to large cities, enabling more commerce and exchange of goods. Technology empowers more people to start their own businesses more easily than before. Technology has also allowed advertisers and marketers to reach nearly an unlimited audience with a single click, post or Tweet.

But there's a problem. Retail chains around the world are going under. Companies that have been leaders for decades are going belly up. Just take American retail icon Sears, which filed for bankruptcy in October 2018 after 125 years of doing business. Analysts suggested Amazon was to blame for its downfall.



(Source: [WikiCommons](#))

Also consider British high-end retailer House of Fraser (HoF), which opened in 1849 and declared bankruptcy in August 2018, only to be bought out by tech savvy retailer Sports Direct. Reports suggest that HoF put little effort and investment into its online strategy or e-commerce operations compared to other British department stores, ultimately leading to its demise. The retail sector will continue to be disrupted, and companies that aren't prepared face dire consequences.

The way people shop is fundamentally changing

The Big Disruptor

So, what's going on that accounts for the upheaval of longstanding retailers? The disruption is simple: the way that people shop is fundamentally changing.

Whether they can articulate it or not, people want – and expect – extreme convenience, instant access, and a level of personalization we could only dream of 10 years ago. Older people recognize that online shopping is not only convenient, but necessary. Younger consumers, having grown up with technology at their fingertips, are constantly pushing the boundaries of what they expect and what they're willing to share with companies and brands. Ultimately, people want to engage with businesses as seamlessly as possible. They want products, services and the economic transactions around them to fit seamlessly into how they're living, experiencing – and want to live and experience – life.

What happens to companies and brands that don't address this changing desire? Obsolescence.

Human beings are changing the way they shop, the way they think about products and services, how they engage with brands, and the way they view themselves in connection with things they purchase and consume. The very nature of consumption is changing before our eyes.

Take the “selfie” as an example. “The digital iPhone selfie world is affecting the way shoppers think about purchase decisions. Everyone is walking around wanting to look great all the time,” said Mikel Rosen, fashion industry expert and co-founder of London Fashion Week. “This is changing what consumers are looking for and looking to buy. It's hugely disruptive because there's no longevity. Ultimately, the customer is living the life of instant gratification, and the supplier is supplying instant gratification.”

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Today's world has become easier in many ways, but it has also grown more complex. We are bombarded by choices every day. We are told what to buy, where to travel, how to dress, and even how to eat. With so many options and choices, it can be overwhelming to make even simple decisions.

Businesses and brands that understand how to cut through the noise by driving the convergence of context, content and commerce will win in the long run. No matter what the industry, surviving – and thriving – requires creating a seamless shopping experience for those you serve.

Here's the Future: Seamless Shopping

Whatever you call it – the streamlined experience, the harmonized experience, the agile experience, the effortless experience – we know that e-commerce must be simple, fast and easy. “Friction” loses customers. Seamlessness draws them in.

So, what is seamless shopping?

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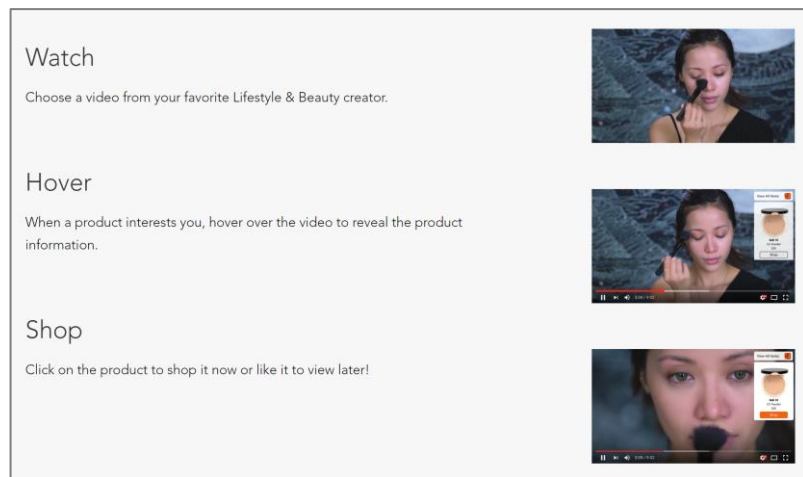
Seamless Shopping is the process of engaging people in a meaningful experience that merges context, content, and commerce while concurrently building loyalty to the brand and business model across the customer journey.

Imagine a time when you're watching TV, you see a shirt you like on your favorite actor, and you're able to instantly buy it and have it "3D printed" at home. The experience merges context (watching television) with content (the shirt in the show) to create an opportunity for commerce (buying and receiving the shirt). While this scenario may be far off in the future, that's the direction of interactive TV, along with the promise of additive manufacturing.

Or imagine a time when you're on Instagram, you see a photo of your friend standing at the top of Machu Picchu, and you're able to instantly organize and divvy up the purchase price of a group adventure vacation to the exact same location?

These scenarios aren't that far flung. In fact, aspects of them are available today.

EVER is a mobile app that empowers users to connect with the content that they are watching on their television or smart TV. Users can connect to the app as they're watching Netflix, Roku, AppleTV, etc. and then instantly open the app to find out what is on the current frame of the picture. Consumers are then given the opportunity to engage with that content, make a purchase, or further explore the content in new and creative ways.



(Source: Everapp.co)

"Today nothing really exists to allow people to satisfy their curiosity when they're watching a TV show," said Chander Chawla, co-founder and CEO of EVER. "It is natural for us to be curious about things we see and like. While watching TV, consumers see something they want to buy or an actor they want to know more about or a place they want to travel to, and it's hard to make that jump to the next step. We built the technology, got a patent, and made it possible to satisfy natural human curiosity in real-time. The challenge that we faced was signing contracts with studios and TV channels."

Seamless shopping experiences like EVER highlight the fact that today's consumers want more personalized offerings, faster delivery of those offerings, and unsurpassed service – when they want it and where they want it. In exchange, they're often willing to share personal information and trade cost savings for greater value.

Don't Get "Amazoned"

In 1994, a young entrepreneur named Jeff Bezos left his Wall Street job to launch a startup called Amazon. Few people thought that a business selling books online would ever amount to much, but in five short years, Bezos would change the way that people shopped forever.

No longer would people shop only from department stores or magazines. Now consumers were on the Internet, and buying just about anything was made even more seamless than before. In 1999 Bezos was named Time Magazine's "Person of the Year", and his startup was already attracting millions of customers. Today, over 600 million people visit Amazon.com every year, and that number is only expected to increase.

This is bad news for retailers and startups looking to steal market share from Amazon. Amazon is notoriously protective when it comes to holding on to customers and will fight for them tooth and nail. So how can you avoid being "Amazoned" while still providing a customer experience that is truly seamless?

"In order to provide a seamless shopping experience today, you need to break down organizational and data silos, you have to be able to have visibility into inventory across different places," said Steve Dennis, former Senior Vice President of Marketing for Neiman Marcus and current President of Sageberry Consulting. "The retailers that can help customers find what they want and use data and insight to personalize and harmonize those experiences are really getting an edge."

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There is a changing of the guard in the retail space, driven mostly by shifting consumer expectations. Traditional retailers no longer have the power or influence they used to, and startups and tech companies are transforming the competitive landscape. Businesses that can blend new technology that merges context, content and commerce in whatever their industry or customers' experience they're supporting will be the big winners.

The "Three C's" of Seamless Shopping

Consumers won't simply offer blind loyalty to companies that offer personalized products and services. Consumers want companies to adapt to their lives, not the other

So how can you avoid being "Amazoned?"

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way around. If enough customers move away from a brand because of negative press, a poor experience, or bad reviews, brands and companies are forced to change – which can happen virtually overnight. What constitutes the optimal shopping experience is continuously affected by the shifting expectations and behavior of customers themselves, rather than by any single technology or business model.

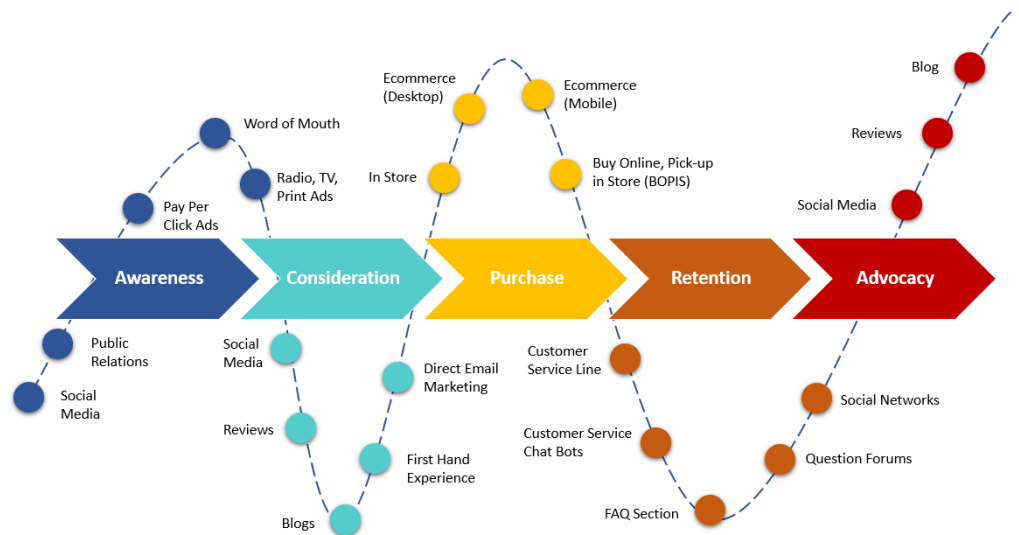
“Often it’s not technology that’s disrupting a market. It might be the tech that allows a business to deliver, but it’s mostly a new way to attract consumers and drive business that may not have been served by earlier business models.”

Michael Marx, SVP at Visa USA

Consider the traditional customer journey. People typically make decisions about products by moving through a series of linear steps: awareness, consideration, purchase, retention, and advocacy. Has this changed in today’s disruptive world?

Yes and no.

The Three C’s underlie the future of seamless shopping: context, content and commerce



(Source: InnovationPoint)

The lines between and linear progression of these steps in the customer journey are fading as the overall customer journey blends into a more integrated experience. While the traditional customer journey map is still valid for framing the require elements of a strong customer experience, another framework is necessary to understand where the future is headed.

“The Three C’s” that underlie the future of seamless shopping:

- **Context** – The setting, environment, or event in which the customer participates
- **Content** – Data and information that supports the product, provides personalization, and drives the business model
- **Commerce** – A transaction involving the exchange of value, usually financial

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(Source: InnovationPoint)

The holy grail of the Seamless Shopping Experience is the complete blending of context, content and commerce into one unconscious experience. The integration of these attributes so that purchasing products and services is a natural and essentially invisible part of the overall customer experience itself.

It's important to remember that nearly every shopping experience is also a social one. Sometimes the context relies heavily on who you are with or the people you interact with daily. In turn, those people affect the content that you consume and the way that you engage in commerce, whether online or off.

Seamless shopping experiences feel like a natural, fully integrated part of the product or service.

11 Trends Shaping the Future of Seamless Shopping

According to [research conducted by Salesforce](#), 75% of consumers expect an overall consistent experience whenever they engage with brands - either through social media, mobile device or in person. [Research from Medallia](#) strengthens the argument, with 77% of consumers reporting they have chosen a product or service because of a positive recent experience they had with a company and another 64% saying they actively avoided a specific brand because of negative experiences.

But what does “service” even mean?

Sure, developing seamless shopping experiences involves providing great service, but doing it so “seamlessly” that the service feels like a natural, fully integrated part of the product or service to customers. One cannot ignore technology’s role in redefining shopping by providing the basis for this invisible seamlessness.

Here are 11 trends that promise to make seamless shopping a future reality, and all which advance the seamless integration of context, content and commerce into the overall customer journey:

1. Location Awareness
2. Mobile-Local Retailing
3. Try (Virtually) Before You Buy
4. Voice Everywhere
5. ‘Me-Tail’ & Hyper Personalization
6. Subscription Business Models
7. Real Time Proactive Intelligence
8. Refilling, Reusing, & Recycling
9. Seamless Payments & Transactions
10. Flexible Ordering & Pick-ups
11. Automated “Delivery Drivers”

We’ve expanded on each of these trends in the pages that follow.

Creating Seamless Context

Borders no longer exist, at least where browsing and shopping are concerned. The proliferation of online and mobile blur the boundaries and create global shopping opportunities.

Consumers can go onto Instagram from just about anywhere on earth to get inspired by the latest fashion trends and brands. Or they can open Google Maps to get hot tips on nearby restaurants. People engage with influencers on Twitter or Facebook to learn about events or get ideas for trips. And they go to Amazon to search for products.

The power of context – both online and off – changes how businesses must engage with both prospective and existing customers.

1. Location Awareness

Before too long, your smartphone may start telling you when to leave for work in the morning. This is just one of the features of the Google Maps app, which uses location-based services (LBS) to provide a more seamless consumer experience while simultaneously gathering data on regular movements and travel habits.

For retailers in the new age of omnichannel shopping, the key to ensuring the best seamless shopping experience involves leveraging information on where customers shop and how they engage with products in those locations. Fortunately, consumers have become more open to using apps on their smartphones which use LBS to provide additional value to the customer like location-specific product recommendations and notices on nearby events or activities.

Smartphones allow consumers to interact with brands at multiple touchpoints seamlessly, but brands need to keep up with expectations. This means brands need to have mobile optimized websites and apps that make the online shopping experience relevant to where they are and what is trending around them. Radius8, a location-based tech start-up, helps retailers develop localized store-powered online experiences that are also mobile optimized and integrate seamlessly into each location's inventory to know what is in-stock and what is popular in and around each unique store.

"It's a very interesting time in retail, especially around the evolution of localization. Driving store-powered online experiences is quickly becoming table stakes for retailers to meet the growing expectations for which brands like Nike and Amazon are laying the ground work amongst consumers. Right now retailers are asking themselves: How do we create the same level of personalization in-store as we do so seamlessly online and how do we leverage ecom to give our stores a digital voice so they can deliver more hyper-local curated experiences online?" said Jenna Flateman Posner, Chief Growth Officer Radius8. "Amazon Go is taking all the friction out around the payment in store, and they're also using local information to bring the trend concept into the store too, which is really unique. But without data, they'd be helpless. Without data all of these concepts wouldn't work. So the question becomes, how do retailers leverage technology to harness the data generated from physical locations to put that data back to work in context of the consumers physical location?"

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Localistico, a Spanish mobile marketing tech startup, takes advantage of the fact that one in three google searches from a mobile relate to the local area around a consumer. The company helps retail brands drive traffic to physical stores by placing targeted ads on Google based on the location that consumers are in when they search.

According to research conducted by Google and consulting firm Hearts + Mind Strategies, consumers said they preferred to use smartphones for the entire shopping process. We also see the rising importance of smartphones in stores. According to research conducted in 2018 by Yes Marketing, over half (57%) of consumers now use their smartphones in store to research products they're interested in buying. Clearly, smartphones have become integral to the shopping experience, and location-based services through the smartphone will only become more important in the months and years ahead.

2. Mobile-Local Retailing

What was once convenient has become inconvenient. A few years ago, you may have felt it was convenient to run down the street to pick up a loaf of bread and a carton of milk at the corner store. But what about now? Why bother going to the store, when Amazon or Whole Foods or 7-Eleven could deliver the same groceries to you in an hour? The answer is simple: Sometimes consumers just want to shop at a brick and mortar store to experience a social context or get a product immediately.

In the grand scheme of things, retail stores are not going away anytime soon. In fact, the retail sector is being driven largely by brick and mortar sales, which still account for 90% of all retail sales. But even as online businesses put more pressure on mom and pop stores around the world, there are signs that tech companies are looking to invest in the brick and mortar space. Just consider the rise of Amazon Go, Amazon's physical store which sells books, food, and popular products based on regional preferences. Online eyeglasses maker Warby Parker has also gone into the brick and mortar game, opening several stores in major metropolitan areas to drive awareness and help streamline the process for consumers looking to have eye examinations or try on multiple products in store.



(Source: [Wiki Commons](#), Amazon Go Seattle)

Companies that support local retail communities are also raising huge funding rounds, with local wholesale marketplace Faire securing USD \$100 million at a \$535 million valuation and online local marketplace Minted announcing it had raised USD \$208 million in Series E funding. In addition, startups which support localized search and advertising as well as targeted location-based marketing capabilities are growing quickly, with Radius8 and Localistico being two such examples.

It's clear to see that the return to brick and mortar represents a massive opportunity for companies around the world, especially if businesses maintain a strong online presence. Clearly, retail success in the future means having a mixture of brick and mortar locations and a strong online presence.

3. Try (Virtually) Before You Buy

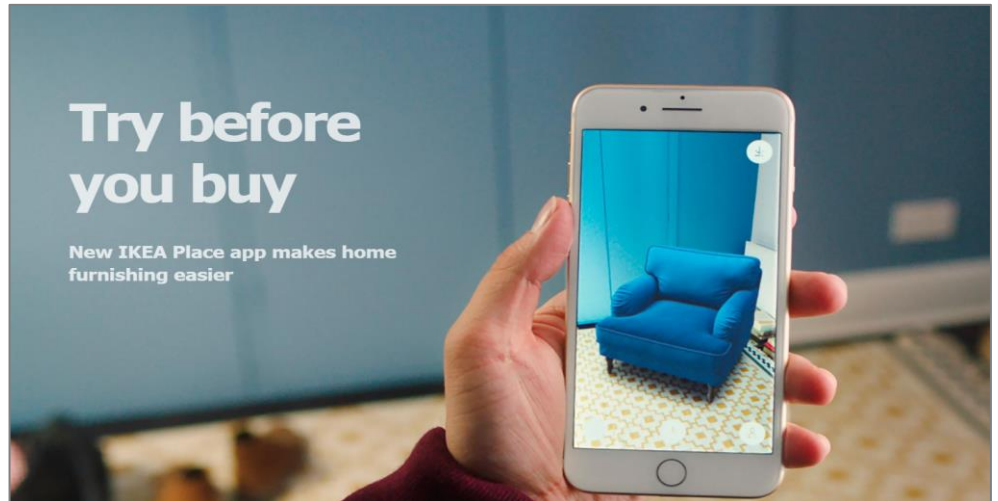
Customers engage with products and services in different ways than they used to. They are more likely to shop online, and less likely to spend hours in brick-and-mortar stores looking for their next purchase. Even if shoppers do come into a physical store, they are much more likely to do research online first in order to identify what they want, the best place to find the specific item, and read reviews about the quality of the product.

Virtual reality and augmented reality will become even more integral to the seamless shopping experience. The role of augmented reality will be transformative to the retail industry, especially when it comes to testing out products and services before making a purchase. According to a 2017 report from Digital Bridge, nearly 70% of consumers expect retailers to launch an AR app within the next six months, yet less than a third of retailers currently work with the technology. Shoppers also have positive associations with AR, perhaps because of the novelty of the technology.

For retailers, the potential for leveraging Augmented Reality (AR) in-store is huge. AR has numerous applications for retail including home furnishings apps to trying on clothing and testing make-up. These many applications have inspired and attracted businesses both large and small, and there is a lot of interest from major brands. Companies like Sephora, for example, have already adopted in-store augmented reality to help customers “try on” makeup and zero-in on their optimal color palette.

Not only can AR applications help companies avoid returns on items that don't look right or don't fit properly, they will produce stickiness with their customers who, according to data from Digital Bridge, are likely to be willing to pay more for products purchased in store with the assistance of AR.

IKEA, for example, originally began exploring AR because it wanted to improve the customer experience when customers were shopping on their online store. They were also interested in driving sales in their e-commerce division. In 2017, IKEA launched the Ikea Place AR app, one of the first apps to use Apple's ARKit for building mobile apps with AR features. The app allows users to place nearly 2,000 pieces of furniture in their immediate surroundings using AR. Pieces of furniture are sized precisely, down to the millimeter, to ensure that they will fit into the location you want them.



(Source: [IKEA](#))

4. Voice Everywhere

Humans are social creatures. Yet despite this, consumers are often happy to avoid human interaction in the interest of having a seamless shopping experience. We see examples of this drive towards automated assistance with the rise of cashierless check-outs in stores, and with chatbots on websites. The importance of digital assistants will continue to grow as consumers show a preference for interacting with digital devices, apps and bots instead of flesh-and-blood humans.

Digital assistants come in many forms. They may be in the cloud, conversing with you as you enter a website, or they might be sitting in your kitchen, the ubiquitous Alexa or Google Assistant waiting to supply you with data or take an order. No matter what form these digital assistants take, one thing is certain, they will completely upend the relationship between shoppers and brands. According to a recent presentation from Gartner managing vice president Gene Alvarez at the Gartner Customer Experience Summit in Tokyo, an estimated 25% of customer service operations will use digital virtual customer assistants of some kind by 2020. Consumers are embracing the technology wholeheartedly. Research from Limelight Networks found that globally 19% of consumers currently own some sort of smart speaker, while that number climbs to 35% in the US. While it is early days now for the life of this new network of interconnected speakers, chances are that digital assistants will only become more prevalent in the future.

The rise of digital assistants at home and online will be a boon for businesses around the world. As natural language processing becomes more reliable and artificial intelligence systems develop better algorithms for communicating with customers, businesses will be better able to provide meaningful customer service, personalized solutions and faster response time for consumers all around the world.

The question remains, how do businesses manage to position themselves as trusted advisors to consumers where it matters most, in the home?

There is a movement now for large companies to make money by selling the hardware that consumers use regularly for low costs, often at breakeven, all the while planning to make money on the back end through the sales of content and advertising on specific platforms. This is often referred to as a Trojan Horse business model, because while the device provides value to the customer, the value provided to the retailer comes in the form of data gathered about the consumer and incremental revenue from purchases made through the device. Amazon's Alexa and Echo devices are today's best example of this strategy in action.



(Source: [Unsplash](#))

Connecting Seamless Content

What is “content” when it comes to the seamless shopping experience?

To media companies, content includes the shows and entertainment provided to viewers. It's the product they sell. But in the world of seamless shopping, “content” goes far beyond this limiting definition.

Content includes the data and information that supports the product, provides personalization, and drives the business model. *Content* enables seamless shopping by helping to provide and reinforce the *context* in which the customer experiences the product.

5. ‘Me-Tail’ & Hyper Personalization

Author and businessman Dale Carnegie often said that a person's name was the sweetest and most important sound he or she could hear. Today that still holds true, and customers expect more than ever to be treated as the individuals they are.

To many consumers, the seamless shopping experience is all about finding the right product at the right time. The tricky part is finding that perfect, personalized product or solution. As more and more businesses gather data on individuals' shopping habits, preferences and spending patterns, they will be in a better position to provide greater personalization to customers than ever before.

“Me-tail is something that we've noticed becoming very big recently,” said Michael Olmstead, Chief Revenue Officer at Plug and Play, the world's largest innovation platform and Silicon Valley's most active investor. “Hyper personalized experiences are now being delivered across all these channels which are empowered by artificial intelligence and machine learning. People say hyper personalization, but in simple

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terms it means businesses are just getting better at selling and using technology to make it easier to transact.”

The opportunity to deliver personalized services to customers is huge. According to a recent study from Deloitte, over half of consumers were interested in personalized products or services. In fact, Deloitte’s research pointed to the fact that as many as “1 in 4 consumers are willing to pay more to receive a personalized product or service.” Research conducted by Accenture and the Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA) goes further, saying as many as 63% of consumers are interested in personalized recommendations, and that 60% of consumers would share their data in exchange for exclusive deals.

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“The biggest opportunity is back of the house, operational efficiency in the warehouse, in the supply chain, and in inventory management,” said Olmstead. “Technology designed to prevent stock out situations is a huge thing for customer loyalty. The better you get on operational efficiency, the easier it gets to drive me-tail.”

Personalization of products and services is key to success in the new digital-first economy. The ability to successfully implement a personalization strategy requires a balance between investing in the right technology and keeping a strategic view of the value proposition you provide to your customers.

One of the first and consistently best examples of the movement towards “hyper-personalization” comes from Amazon, which provides recommended purchases to make based on every item you search for or put in your cart. Every time you search for something on the site, Amazon uses data taken from other happy customers to provide suggested bundles which be valuable to you as a shopper.

Frequently bought together



Total price: **£92.97**
Add all three to Basket

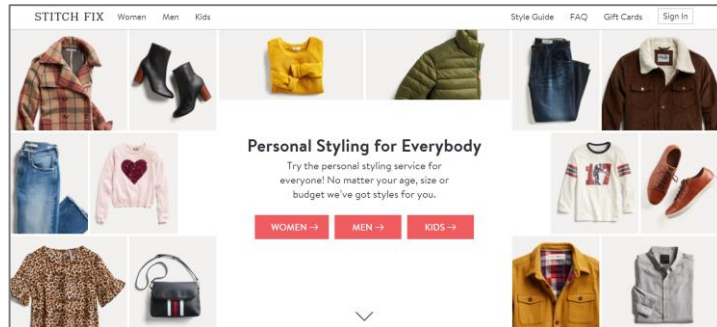
ⓘ These items are dispatched from and sold by different sellers. [Show details](#)

- This item:** AmazonBasics Professional USB Condenser Microphone - Black **£72.99**
- InnoGear Microphone Pop Filter Swivel with Double Layer Sound Shield Guard Wind Screen Popfilter for... **£6.99**
- Microphone Arm Stand, URMI Microphone Suspension Boom Arm Stand Mic Clip Adjustable Boom Studio... **£12.99**

(Source: Amazon Website)

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Another great example of “Me-tailing” is Stitch Fix, which pairs shoppers with personal stylists who help them find clothing that fits their preferred tastes. Shoppers fill out a questionnaire based on their clothing preferences and are then sent a selection of clothing to try. Shoppers then return the clothes they don’t like and only pay for the things they do like. Stitch Fix is then able to use this data to tailor subsequent orders and deliveries, providing a more personalized experience every time.



(Source: [Stitch Fix Website](#))

But beware: consumers don’t just want the latest and greatest technology to personalize every offer down to the last pixel.

“The lure of the latest technology leads brands to run before they can walk.”

Paul Roake, founder of ecommerce consultancy PRWD

“The lure of the latest technology leads brands to run before they can walk,” said Paul Roake, founder of ecommerce consultancy PRWD and Google Garage Consultant. “If you have a checkout system that doesn’t work, you don’t personalize the crap checkout. You improve the crap checkout.”

6. Subscription Business Models

In the 1900s, mail order services were a big deal, and they marked the start of a big movement in seamless commerce. In fact, the 125-year-old retail giant Sears started off selling mail order subscriptions for watches in 1886. Now, technology has enabled the rise of a new generation of subscription services that make the shopping experience even more seamless and straightforward. But what’s different between then and now? Speed, personalization and superior customer service is the answer.

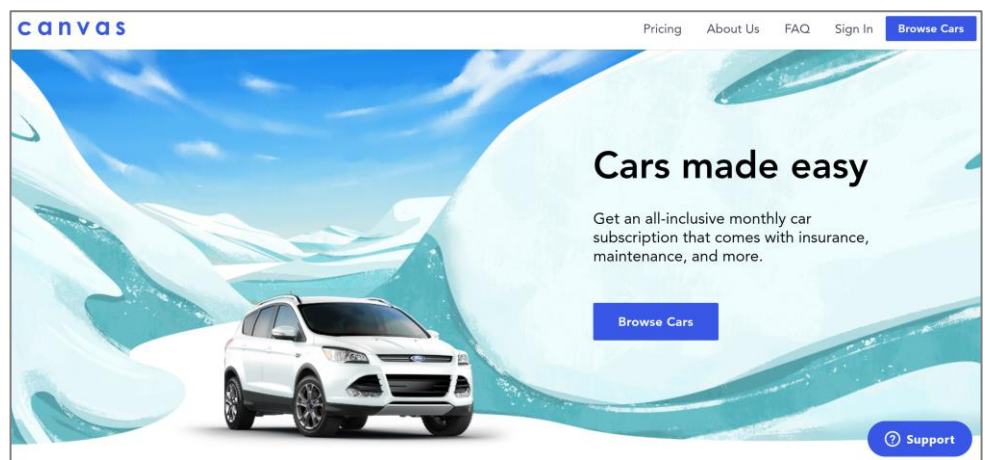
“In the old days, I needed to ‘own’ things. Now I have a subscription, so I don’t have to own it. The kids today don’t even understand why you would buy a DVD or even think about that. I can see this in the future moving into other areas and industries.”

Andreas Neumann, Creative Director at IDEAN

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“I’m a big fan for subscription,” said Andreas Neumann, Creative Director IDEAN. “It’s a different values model. In the old days, I needed to ‘own’ things. Now I have a subscription, so I don’t have to own it. The kids today don’t even understand why you would buy a DVD or even think about that. I can see this in the future moving into other areas and industries. Sure, there are still people that own Lamborghinis, but now people think about car ownership in a different way. It’s all about moving forward towards subscription.”

Companies like [Ford](#) (branded canvas) now offer subscription ownership plans that include the car, maintenance and insurance for a single price. Other companies like Dollar Shave Club offer subscription razors and blades – and was recently purchased by Unilever for \$1 billion USD to take advantage of its unique business model.



Time and attention are two of the most valuable resources in the world today. With businesses fighting to stay top of mind, there is an opportunity to help consumers by giving them back some of their time in exchange for loyalty and recurring revenue. Enter the brilliance of the subscription service, a sector which has grown more than 100% over the last five years, generating more than USD \$2.6 Billion in sales in 2016.

With the touch of a button, shoppers can instantly sign up to monthly subscription services for everything from streaming entertainment in the form of online movies and TV shows to home deliveries of soap, razors, diapers, and just about anything else you can think of. According to a report from McKinsey & Co. on the future of the subscription economy in retail, nearly 15% of online shoppers have subscribed to an e-commerce subscription in the last year, while just under half (46%) of respondents subscribe to an online streaming service like Netflix.

But why is this important now? Subscription services have been around for years, and they are finally coming into their own, becoming more varied and creative in their method of delivery and differentiation.

Subscriptions may be tailored to the needs of different types of people, creating unique opportunities at the intersection of personalization and business model innovation. Busy moms want diapers and staples replenished through Amazon. Fashion-conscious millennials look for beauty inspiration from Birchbox. As more brands consider ways to keep customers coming back for more, subscriptions allow brands to build long-term relationships with shoppers.

7. Real Time Proactive Intelligence

If you've ever seen the movie *Minority Report*, you likely remember this scene: Tom Cruise's character is living in 2054, in a world in which advertisements are customized to the individual. When he walks into a department store, a computer quickly scans his eyes and knows if he is a customer, where he has shopped before, even what his preferences are. Now in 2019 we have the technology to make that happen, and we're getting closer to making that future our reality.

The ability to provide the right offer to a customer based on their specific need or desire is integral to the future of the seamless shopping experience. With the support of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms that take into consideration the context that a consumer is in, businesses can provide tailored content which is more likely to lead to a purchase being made. One company targeting consumers based on personal information is online clothing retailer [ASOS](#), which asks new visitors to its website to connect via social media accounts. The company then uses data on the consumer's gender, age and even likes and dislikes on Facebook and Instagram to target advertisements more effectively.

Businesses around the world are actively investing in technology to allow them to provide more targeted offers to their customers. According to research from Narrative Science, 61% of big companies are already implementing some form of AI in their businesses. The ability to process information from consumers quickly and efficiently allows companies to deliver personalization and curated content more quickly, optimize delivery times for orders, and even predict the type of customer service consumers would prefer when they have a problem. According to a 2018 report published by IBM, the three most popular ways for retail businesses to leverage AI focus are supply chain planning, demand forecasting and customer intelligence.

The good news for businesses is that advances in proactive intelligence will help to level the playing field for businesses competing with the likes of Amazon and Walmart. Over the next several years, tools will become accessible and easier to use for even those without any programming experience. This will enable businesses to build stronger connections with customers and ultimately deliver better seamless shopping experiences.

8. Refilling, Reusing, & Recycling

If there's one thing that will change the face of retail as we know it more than most of the technology trends previously discussed, it is the growing importance of sustainability and sustainable products. Today, two thirds of consumers around the world say they would pay more for products that are sustainable, while that number jumps to 73% for millennials.

With more focus being put on the impact that certain products have on the environment, companies around the world are starting to look to alternative products, services and business models which will allow them to continue to provide great service to customers while at the same time protecting the planet. The company [TerraCycle](#) has been a pioneer in this space, designing and implementing processes for recycling

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plastics more effectively and empowering companies to manufacture and distribute reusable packaging to reduce global waste.

But what on earth does this have to do with the seamless shopping experience? Consider the times we live in, and the context that most individuals see retail in as they consider making a purchase. While we may think of seamless shopping as something that makes the process faster and more straightforward, we must also think about what will make it easier for consumers to make certain purchases from an ethical and social point of view.

The trend around refilling and reusing products will become more and more important as environmental sustainability becomes a bigger issue for consumers. Already, businesses are investing large sums of money on products and services that provide greater sustainability for the environment and the consumer ecosystem.

For instance, TerraCycle recently launched an initiative called Loop with corporate partners including P&G, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever, Mars, Clorox, Coca-Cola, Mondelēz, and Danone to produce packaging which can be reusable and refillable. By providing a line of reusable and refillable products, these brands not only show their dedication to the issue of sustainability, they open themselves up to connecting with the customer through new subscription business models which build stickiness and loyalty between the customer and the brand. Ultimately, reusability may not only help the environment, it may provide a new route into the seamless shopping experience.



(Source: [Greenbiz](#))

Curating Commerce

Making payments easier and more straightforward for consumers may seem obvious, but too often businesses are distracted by the myriad of challenges involved in getting to the sale in the first place. The financial transaction – often seen as the most important end game for many companies – can often be the least “seamless” part of the journey. Abandoned shopping carts, page bounces, and returns are just a few of the common challenges in today’s e-commerce world.

The concept of commerce within the seamless shopping experience is about much more than taking payment. While seamless shopping does indeed involve the financial transaction, it also involves the “delivery” of the product or service itself as part of the

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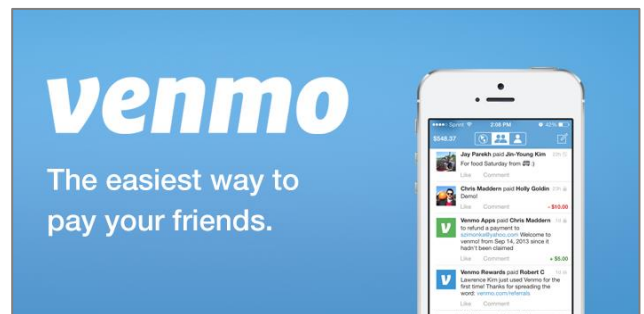
overall experience – which reinforces the broader experience and leads to loyalty. So, payment and delivery are both involved in *curating commerce*.

9. Seamless Payments & Transactions

One of the *least* seamless parts of the seamless shopping experience is often the payment. But now Fintech is helping to enable seamless shopping by allowing for advances in digital payments through mobile commerce, blockchain enabled product and content authentication, and even cryptocurrency.

There are numerous methods to enable a seamless experience in the payment space, either online or offline. On the offline side, mobile and near field communication (NFC) payments have become incredibly important in recent years. Contactless payment cards are already a big deal in the UK and Europe but have taken longer to enter the American market. Brick and mortar retailers are also partnering with payment processors to enable scan and pay and completely seamless payment solutions which allow customers to walk into a store and pay for products without taking out your wallet or going to the cash register.

On the online side, one company that's done this well by seamlessly translating real-world behavior and unmet needs into its payment platform is Venmo. A simple concept, Venmo makes it easier to split up costs for things like travel, rent, nights out or utilities between families, friends and roommates. Not only that, the app includes a social angle, enabling users to see what their friends are spending money on. Using Venmo, people can share bills and expenses in a natural way, just like they might do using cash at the end of a dinner.



(Source: Venmo)

Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of the mobile payments trend comes from China. Both Alipay and WeChat Pay process more payments in one month in China than PayPal processed in the entire year of 2017 (\$451 billion). The incredible size and speed at which both tech companies grew into this new role is awe inspiring, but perhaps what is more interesting about Alipay and WeChat Pay is what they represent for the future of seamless payments around the world.

In September 2018, *Raconteur* magazine published an article titled "Chinese payment giants are lightyears ahead," outlining the massive shift that has taken place across the Chinese economy as Alipay and Wechat Pay started processing mobile app payments. The reason for this shift was a reaction to the completely tedious process of getting a credit card or debit card through traditional banks in China. Effectively, the adoption of these two platforms was caused by a need to drive a more seamless

payment process, and by proxy a seamless shopping experience. Now, both companies are continually breaking down barriers between the online and physical worlds to provide consumers with a completely seamless experience. Alipay's platform has been described as the Chinese Amazon which also allows users to send money to friends using only their telephone numbers. WeChat Pay on the other hand has become a blend of Facebook, Gmail and a built-in payment platform for splitting bills among friends.

Smartphone payments, smart wallets and seamless transactions via mobile are coming to Europe and North America in a big way, just as they have come to China. At the end of the day the companies that can leverage those new tools and engage with consumers through them will be the ones to win in the long run.



(Source: Wiki Commons)

10. Flexible Ordering & Pick-ups

Demonstrating flexibility is key when engaging customers, especially during the buying process. People are now busier than ever, and they want to be given multiple options when it comes to how they order and pick-up products so that they can use the right option for them in their current situation. The importance of flexibility is what has led to an increase in the number of businesses that offer alternative methods of shipping, delivery, pick-up and reordering.

Offering flexible fulfillment options like one-click reordering or click-and-collect helps consumers save time and engage with brands on their schedule. The launch of the Amazon Dash button took many industry leaders by surprise when it allowed consumers to order staple products like detergent and coffee with the touch of a button. Similarly, the number of retailers offering click-and-collect options for shoppers has increased, finding a middle-ground between delivery and in-store interaction.

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In 2018 Walmart reported that 34% of click-and-collect users purchased an additional item when they came to pick something up from the store. In the UK, research from Cybertill found that 65% of click-and-collect customers made additional purchases in store. Connecting with shoppers online and in store also gives businesses the opportunity to develop a stronger relationship with the customer. Best Buy, for instance, provides priority parking to customers that have ordered products online. Clearly, offering these more flexible options supports the seamless shopper experience, but it can also improve business.



(Source: [Wiki Commons](#))

New business models that allow for streamlined fulfillment of orders will continue to be introduced as consumers demand more flexibility to fit with their schedules. Increased loyalty often comes from customers that interact with brands in this flexible way. As more brands develop flexible options for shopping, pick-up and delivery, the question is whether click-and-collect will become table stakes, or will it be disrupted by same day or instant delivery via autonomous vehicles or drones?

11. Automated “Delivery Drivers”

Time is precious for consumers these days. Individuals tend to work hard and play hard, and they have very little time left in between morning conference calls, afternoon yoga classes, and evenings out with the family to go shopping for groceries or pick up toilet paper.

To respond to this time shortage, companies are looking at ways to cut time out of the customer journey between home and store. One of the most intriguing ways this is happening is through the integration of automated delivery robots.

Delivery robots include everything from flying drones that were originally introduced as a viable delivery option by Amazon, to self-driving cars and trolleys that can maneuver on everything from main roads to sidewalks. In the US, Kroger introduced self-driving cars which deliver groceries directly to your door in a pilot program in Arizona, and 7-Eleven has partnered with flying drone company Flirtey to provide deliveries via airdrop to consumers in Nevada. Even Dominos delivered a pizza to hungry consumers via drone in New Zealand in 2016.

What’s incredible to see is the way that consumers are embracing this technology wholeheartedly. Kroger has already made over 1,000 deliveries in its pilot program, and 7-Eleven delivered orders via drone to over 70 people during its brief pilot. Many consumers express an interest in getting food or other necessities delivered to them via robot, especially if delivery is faster and more convenient than other means. According to research from eDigitalResearch, 33% of consumers would be open to receiving online deliveries via drone.

Future Watch Report



(Sources: [Wired](#) & [Amazon](#))

The main thing standing in the way of fully integrated robotic delivery to consumers is legislation and regulation. Currently, laws prohibit drones from operating in many areas, and laws that govern autonomous vehicles are still being written. The future will be automated, and consumers are ready for it. The question is not whether it will happen, but when it will be fully rolled out globally.

Invest and apply technology while creating new value propositions and business models in the process.

Shaping the Seamless Future

To move toward seamless experiences, companies must find the best way to invest and apply technology while creating new value propositions and business models in the process.

“At the end of the day, the seamless shopping experience revolves around service, and success is all about learning to de-commoditize the products that we sell,” said Bill Tancer, retail expert and *New York Times* Best Selling Author of *Click - What Millions Do Online and Why it Matter*. “There is a place for service, but the next wave of disintermediation is the experience itself. As technologists we’ve thought so much about the utility of shopping, we haven’t given that much thought to the pleasure of shopping, especially online.”

“At the end of the day, the seamless shopping experience revolves around service, and success is all about learning to de-commoditize the products that we sell.”

Bill Tancer, New York Times Best Selling Author of Click - What Millions Do Online and Why it Matter.

A great example of a company creating a new value proposition that seamlessly reinforces its product mix is the e-retailer of sunglasses and prescription eyeglasses, Warby Parker. The company integrates augmented reality and facial recognition technology to help customers determine which glasses will look best on their face and has recently started providing online eye examinations for people to get updated prescriptions. Warby Parker understands the customer experience begins far before the shopping cart click, and provides unique tools and technologies to make the customer’s journey as seamless as possible.

Even with today’s emphasis on digital business, e-commerce, and customer experience, according to a report from Marketing Week, 15 years ago consumers went through about 2 touch-points when buying a product. Today, most consumers go through 6 touch points on average. The counterintuitive increase in the number of touchpoints it takes to make a decision and purchase a product speaks brilliantly to the need for a more streamlined shopping experience.

So what can we do?

Retail Giants Go Seamless

On the front lines of retail disruption are companies that sell physical products. The transition from brick and mortar to digital and omni-channel marketing and sales can be challenging. Businesses and brands must get two things right to succeed in this new world order: the technology and the seamless experience. Both complement and reinforce each other. When they don’t, friction occurs.

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“I think the biggest disruptor in this space right now is the revolution of brick and mortar. Brick and mortar stores are still being built to help customers experience products in a new way, but retailers are leaning on the online platforms to sell the products more than ever,” said Carter Jensen, Head of Retail Innovation at Latitude. “What we’re seeing is that brick and mortar isn’t tied to sales but it’s extremely valuable for the overall experience. It’s a great example of how omnichannel isn’t just about the online experience.”

The biggest disruptor right now is the revolution of brick and mortar. Brick and mortar stores are still being built to help customers experience products in a new way, but retailers are leaning on the online platforms to sell products more than ever.”

Carter Jensen, Head of Retail Innovation at Latitude

The most innovative retailers are reinventing themselves through focusing on applying the seamless shopping experience to their own markets, value propositions and business models:

ZARA

Zara has always been at the cutting edge of e-commerce and online sales, but the company recently experienced some negative feedback about its in-store experience. To address this, Zara developed a tech-driven strategy to optimize the in-store and out-of-store shopping experience. Its recent investments include the development of an augmented reality (AR) app to help customers see what new clothes look like without trying them on, a self-service check out, and click-and-collect options on their website.



7-Eleven, the world’s largest convenience store chain, is investing heavily in streamlining the customer experience across its over 60,000 stores. In 2018 it said that it was debuting scan-and-go options at 14 of its Dallas-based stores, with the goal of bringing that technology to 1,000 additional locations through 2019. It also recently announced a partnership with the ride sharing app Lyft to act as a go-to rest stop between rides with delivery services in the near future.

NORDSTROM

Nordstrom is mostly known for its upscale department stores, located among other department stores in large shopping centers. In the last few years, Nordstrom has engaged customers across multiple channels by encouraging them to purchase products through social channels like Instagram and Pinterest. The company also launched a new chain, Nordstrom Local, a merchandise-free concept store with a barber shop and food-to-go. Finally, Nordstrom recently launched a “Get it fast” option through its mobile app which allows shoppers to see real-time inventory at stores and choose in-store pickup or free next day shipping.



TARGET

Target has completely reimagined its approach to omnichannel shopping over the last few years, investing in store refurbishment, faster delivery of online orders, and the integration of RFID chips into products to help with in-store inventory tracking. Ten years ago, Target stores operated separately from the Target website. Now its brick-and-mortar and online stores are combined, enabling all 1,800 of its physical locations to become distribution warehouses for online transactions. In 2018, three out of every four online transactions were fulfilled by a store, either through delivery or BOPIS (Buy Online, Pick up In Store).



In-store associates at REI stores are provided with tablets to help assist shoppers with making decisions about products. 75% of their customers visit their website or mobile app to check out items before making an in-store purchase. REI understood that mobile devices offered a great marketing opportunity combined with the shopper experience. The co-op decided to equip their sales associates with devices to help customers with their purchasing decisions, and also provides free in-store Wi-Fi for customers to access information as they shop.

Casper

ONE PERFECT MATTRESS

Casper, a direct to consumer (DTC) mattress provider made a name for itself by selling high quality mattresses online, offering a free 100-day trial with easy returns if the customer didn't like it. The company has experienced rapid growth and is now valued at USD \$750 million. To further enhance its customers' experience, the mattress retailer recently announced it would be opening 200 stores in 2019 to combat online imitators.



Grocery store chain Kroger is investing heavily in the seamless shopper experience, running pilots for new technologies ranging from driverless cars designed to deliver groceries to new Internet of Things (IoT) technologies that are designed to provide personalized "food inspiration" to customers in stores. Kroger's partnership with self-driving delivery vehicle company Nuro is designed to make online shopping more seamless, while its recent partnership with Microsoft Azure aims to create a new experiences for shoppers by using sensors set up throughout its stores.

Jump Start Your Seamless Shopping Future

Taken together, a cadre of startups just might turn Amazon into simply another online store

In the retailing world, it's been everyone against Amazon. A cadre of startups are envisioning and building the future infrastructure to drive seamless shopping as a standard across industries. Taken together, they might just turn Amazon into simply another online store by giving everyone else incredible new capabilities that help merge context, content, and commerce in new ways.

Here are 15 startups building noteworthy technologies and business models that may one day power your seamless shopping experience:

The logo for Clinch features the word "Clinch" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "i" is stylized with a vertical bar that is split into four colored segments: red at the top, yellow, blue, and green at the bottom.

<https://clinch.co/>

Clinch produces personalized, programmatic advertising based on user data and demographics. Advertisers can use Clinch to leverage data and to track and communicate directly with specific customers to provide more personalized and targeted ads.

The logo for flexetail features the word "flexetail" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "x" is stylized with a white, multi-pointed starburst or cross shape behind it.

<http://www.flexetail.com/>

Flexetail is an on-demand mobile retail store that allows brands to build small format retail solutions affordably. The mobile retail structure can be installed quickly and provides retailers with a small retail space that is completely climate controlled and which can be used to test new products, services, and markets.

The logo for Allure Systems features the word "Allure" in a large, black, serif font. Above the "ure" part of "Allure", the word "SYSTEMS" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. A small square symbol is positioned to the right of "SYSTEMS".

<http://www.alluresystems.com/>

Allure Systems creates augmented reality models of fashion and clothing products that customers can view by scanning a QR code or going online. The system then uploads clothing separately so models can be matched with the clothes a customer would like them to be wearing.



<https://www.afterpay.com/>

AfterPay provides small loans to consumers through a mobile app, creating a seamless and straightforward process for consumers to buy products that they want. AfterPay allows retailers to offer their customers the ability to “buy now and pay later” without requiring traditional credit, upfront fees or interest.



<http://www.radius8.com/>

Radius8 helps retailers develop customized websites tailored to their specific location. For example, a shopper going online to the Gap site at or near a store in Miami would see bikinis and flip flops on its home page, while a shopper in New York might see leather jackets and torn denim. Radius8 enables retailers to sell more to consumers by creating store-centric online experiences.



<https://www.flirtey.com/>

Flirty is developing the world's first drone delivery startup. Flirtey aims to make individual deliveries faster and safer by using drone technology. It recently partnered with 7-Eleven to provide drone deliveries to customers as part of a pilot project to test the technology.



<https://www.starship.xyz/>

Starship's autonomous robots conduct short distance routine deliveries for things like Starbucks and sandwiches. Starship's mission is to make these short distance deliveries more convenient for the consumer. After undergoing testing at the Intuit campus in California and in Milton Keynes, England, Starship released a squadron of 25 autonomous robots “into the wild” in Fairfax Virginia in January 2019.



<https://www.zappar.com/>

Zappar is making augmented reality design accessible to the masses. The team at Zappar has developed a tool called ZapWorks which allows individuals to develop AR entertainment for businesses and consumers. While many large brands and chains have invested in AR for their businesses, investment in high quality AR has been out of reach for many startups and small businesses. Zappar is looking to change that.

catchoom

<https://catchoom.com/>

Catchoom is a visual technology vendor for the fashion and retail space. The startup blends AR with image recognition and an e-commerce AI engine to allow consumers to take a picture of a product and find similar products online. Catchoom helps consumers connect with what they like through images to make faster and more informed decisions while shopping.



<https://virtualapt.com/>

VirtualAPT "makes the physical experience digital." VirtualAPT builds robots that create 360-degree VR videos for use in various shopping and branding experiences. By bringing a realistic in-store experience to the home in the form of a web-based, interactive video, consumers are given the opportunity to view a space without having to travel there. While not specifically focused on the retail space, companies like VirtualAPT will influence how retailers develop the seamless shopping experience over time.



<https://www.magia.ai/>

Magia.ai has developed a chatbot that “speaks” to customers through websites to answer questions, provide recommendations on top products, and generally assist in the selling process. Magia.ai was developed using deep domain expertise in the retail space and has been built with natural language processing capabilities to allow for easy understanding of consumer requests and preferences.



<https://www.deepmagic.cc/>

Powered by AI, DeepMagic has developed a fully automated “micro-store” format that allows merchants to run employee-less stores, minimize costs and eliminate shrinkage without losing the essence of the shopping experience. Customers gain access to the store through a secure mobile app. Cameras then monitor the inventory and automatically charge the customer for any product that is taken but not replaced.



<https://www.curalate.com/>

Curalate is a social media company that helps businesses monetize their social media accounts more effectively. Curalate’s Like2Buy product was the first solution to bring shopping to Instagram, and with that solution they have managed to help millions of consumers have a more seamless shopping experience with various products and brands on the app.



<https://www.newstore.com/>

NewStore is a startup that gives brick and mortar retailers a way to support the customer journey in their retail locations, from product search to point of sale. The platform helps retailers keep tabs on the potential customer as soon as they walk in the physical door. The app then connects the sales associate with the customer and provides relevant background information like past purchase history and clothing style.



Nuro is a self-driving car company based out of Mountain View, California that has recently partnered with grocery store giant Kroger to deliver groceries via automated driverless vehicles. Since the start of the program Nuro has made over 1,000 deliveries for retailer Fry's (owned by Kroger) in the Scottsdale, Arizona area where the pilot program is being launched. As part of the program, shoppers can order food from their local Fry's store and pay \$5.95 to have their groceries delivered to their door via autonomous vehicle.

More disruption is on the horizon.

The Future is Now

The traditional customer journey will likely never go away, but it will change. Consumers will continue to move through the steps of awareness, consideration, purchase, retention and advocacy, but the order of those steps and the importance of each will depend entirely on the context, content and type of commerce-based experience in which they're engaged.

"Most retailers have been quite good at making one improvement after another, but they're not ground-breaking or significantly disruptive in isolation."

James Mullan, SVP at GDR USA

Even with the dramatic technology-driven changes of the decade, more disruption is on the horizon. "Most retailers have been quite good at making one improvement after another, but they're not ground-breaking or significantly disruptive in isolation," said James Mullan, SVP at GDR USA. "Those improvements become table stakes quite quickly. However, experimentation at the moment is rife, and a meaningful revolution in shopping for certain categories is imminent."

Nevertheless, even with the important role of technology as an enabler of innovation, it's important to remember that the seamless shopping experience is less about technology and more about removing roadblocks to great customer experiences.

Three C's provide a new lens when considering the best way to create a seamless shopping experience. Different industries operate in different ways and there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to creating the perfect seamless shopping experience. Keeping in mind the interplay between context, content and commerce can help create customer experiences that go beyond incremental improvements and shape the future of seamless shopping.

Methodology

Our research into the future of seamless shopping included was built upon an exhaustive review of hundreds of reports, articles, news sources and data sources along with depth interviews with leading industry professionals.

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