

Tech convergence a disruptive trend for retail in 2023

The overriding retail trend for 2023 will be the convergence of technologies, and retailers would be wise to wake up to the widespread implications and opportunities of profoundly disruptive technology trends.



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This is according to Ajay Lalu, director and co-founder of Q-Hop, who notes that 5G will continue to lead digital physical convergence.

“This is the beginning of the metaverse – which is (or will be) an interactive environment built on blockchain and internet technology like Web 3.0. From the retailer’s point of view, the ability to create a much more realistic virtual world means endless opportunities. The most obvious of these would be the opportunity to replicate the in-store experience digitally.

“Despite improvements, today’s e-commerce sites are not much more advanced than they originally were — more reviews perhaps, sometimes better photographs, but it is just catalogue shopping on steroids. The in-store experience remains the goal, where you could be given a 360-degree customer experience and, at the very least, touch and feel the product,” says Lalu.

Opening up new markets

He notes that replication of the in-store experience online would not only supercharge a retailer’s existing business, but it would also genuinely open up new markets.

“For example, a wealthy shopper in, say, Kinshasa may wish to buy luxury goods such as a Louis Vuitton handbag, something that’s not readily available in any store in town. Of course, they could look at a picture on the e-commerce site which is a rather flat experience when compared to going into a luxury goods emporium and spending time browsing. So, a realistic experience of the Louis Vuitton shop in the Place Vendôme at home would open up a global market for many products,” he adds.



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Lalu confirms this same scenario could play out across retail; a consumer in Durban could experience a craft market in Cape Town and order a unique item to be shipped.

“Importantly, this is a two-way street. A craftsperson can also gain customers across a country (or the globe for that matter) without incurring the expense of finding agents and so on. This would enable them to allow potential customers to see how the creative process unfolds or track the creation of the specific item they have ordered.”

Lalu says Africa can shop the world, but perhaps more importantly the world can shop Africa.

“One sector of retail that could obviously be transformed is clothing. Selling clothing online has always entailed a lot of returns because human bodies are not standard, and variables like the cut of a garment cannot really be properly shown on a photograph. But imagine if your avatar with your actual body measurements could try on a garment in the metaverse before ordering it. The next step, clearly, would be to have a garment manufactured to your measurements which heralds an era of hyper-personalisation.”

Another way that technology could open up new markets for retailers is the ability to sell products on any social media platform. “Here’s how: the manufacturer of a distinctive garment – say a shirt – could find all instances of people wearing that product across multiple social media platforms (using AI), and then tag that item so that visitors to that page could order the same product.”



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Convergence of physical and digital

Lalu says one of the golden threads that run through these technologies and their use cases is the convergence between the physical and the digital. “Brick-and-mortar retailers could harness this kind of technology to enhance the in-store experience too. A mobile device could be used to scan an item and immediately obtain reviews, specifications and the like. Other information like how sustainably the product is produced or its impact on the environment could also be provided.”

Lalu says the future of retail means processing large amounts of data and using the resulting insights in real-time on mobile devices. “The cloud for processing and 5G for enabling data-driven mobility are central here. This convergence is going to be vital also in the emerging use of drones for delivery, especially in remote areas.

“These are examples of how technology and its convergence can disrupt the entire sector and retailers need to apply their minds and business strategies to focus on how they will use these opportunities to grow their businesses,” concludes Lалу.

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