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NAVIGATING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN RETAIL:
STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH IN 2025

In partnership with Digital Women

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INTRODUCTION: YOUR ROADMAP TO RETAIL'S DIGITAL FRONTIER IN 2025

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at Hyve

We're so excited to launch our latest toolkit, 'Navigating Digital Transformation in Retail', as part of Spring Fair! As the go-to event for everything retail, we know how much technology is reshaping the way businesses run, connect with their customers, and grow. This report dives into the latest trends and offers practical tips to help retailers stay ahead in today's fast-moving digital world.

We're especially proud to be teaming up with the Digital Women Network—a fantastic community of passionate, tech-savvy individuals working to empower women in business. Studies show that women tend to adopt AI and digital tools more slowly than men, often due to factors like under-representation and concerns about trust in the technology. With our new toolkit, we're offering practical resources to help everyone in retail make the most of these opportunities and stay ahead of the game.

Spring Fair is more than just an event—it's where the retail world comes together. From thousands of exciting brands and buyers to trendsetters and industry experts, it's the perfect place to discover products, ideas, and tools that can inspire and drive your business forward. We can't wait to see how these collaborations and insights shape the future of retail!

Lucy Hall
Lucy Hall is the founder and director of Skills of The Future Ltd, which encompasses the Digital Women community, a vibrant network of 130,000 women dedicated to learning and sharing digital skills, and SocialDay, the UK's leading social media marketing forum
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Retail is changing at a pace we've never seen before, and digital transformation has gone from being a nice-to-have to an absolute must. This collaboration between Digital Women and Spring Fair is about cutting through the noise and giving retailers real, practical ways to take action, stay competitive, and thrive.

What I love about this project is that it's not just focused on the tech—it's about the people. Digital transformation is nothing without the skills and confidence to make it work. Closing the skills gap and empowering businesses to embrace change is at the heart of what we do at Digital Women, and this guide reflects that. It's practical, actionable, and designed for anyone ready to take their business to the next level.

The future's moving fast, and so are the skills we need to keep up. From creating incredible customer experiences to making data work harder for you, this isn't just about survival—it's about setting yourself up to lead. These strategies aren't here to overwhelm you; they're here to inspire and equip you to take charge of your digital journey.

Because let's be honest: the businesses that embrace this now? They're the ones that will thrive tomorrow.

5 QUICK TACTICS
FOR RETAILERS TO INCREASE THE PROFITABILITY OF THEIR FACEBOOK ADS

Aggie Meroni
Aggie is the Founder of White Bee Digital, a Paid Social Agency that scales ambitious product-based businesses to 7 and 8-figure revenue with social media advertising.

Whether you're a veteran advertiser on Meta (Facebook and Instagram) or just thinking about dipping your toe into promoting your retail business, you've probably been bombarded with advice from all over the internet, podcasts and probably your business acquaintances about what ROAS (return on ad spend) is 'normal' and the latest 'hack' to achieve the best returns.

My agency has worked with hundreds of retailers and there are 5 things that can quickly improve your profitability.

Before we launch into that, I want to flag that your profitability is very different to your ROAS number. Every business will be working to different margins and seasonality. Even your direct competitors will have different numbers driving their success. For this reason, absolutely, never compare your results with what another retailer is achieving.

The first thing to do is to really understand your margins and what you can actually afford to spend to acquire one sale. In order to calculate this accurately, it is important to really understand how your customers buy from you. Do you sell an 'impulse purchase' product that is bought only once, and then you don't get much repeat business, or do your customers return again and again?

Understanding the lifetime value of your customers (how much they will spend across their whole time with you) is a key factor in how much you can afford to spend to acquire them. Subscription businesses for example may retain a customer for 5 monthly payments, expect to break even or make a small loss on their cost to acquire a new customer if they budget one month's subscription, but they know they will make up the profit once they make subsequent purchases.

Once you know what your ad profitability number if for your business there are 5 other factors that will greatly improve your profitability.

1   Your website conversion rate

This is the single biggest factor to ad success that you control and is outside of your ad account. The biggest misconception about Meta ads is that they make the sale. They drive the most relevant traffic to your website, but your website makes the sale. If you have a poor website with a conversion rate under 2%, you will make it very difficult to achieve success from your ads. If your current website has a conversion rate of 1% and you manage to increase it by 1% to 2%, you will double the number of sales you make from the same amount of traffic (ie same ad spend) that you drive to your website.

freepik.com

2   Increasing your average order value

The more customers spend with you during each transaction, the more profit you will make. One mistake I see is retailers using their ad budget to promote single items that have a very low value. The better option would be to filter your products by price so only products over a certain price can be dynamically shown or you create bundles and upsells on your website that encourage larger order values.

3   Free delivery over £X

One tactic to test to encourage larger order values is to set your free delivery cut off at a figure just above your current average order value. For example, you may have a signature product that is your bestseller and retails for £39. If you set your free delivery value to £45, customers will need to purchase an additional item to benefit from free delivery. Ensuring you have other products that complement your bestseller, in this example, would make this easier for your customers.

4   Invest in professional photography

With people being bombarded with up to 10,000 ads a day, our brains protect us and only register about 100. You want your ads to be one of the 100 your future customers remember. Having a variation of ad creatives showing your products against a plain background, in lifestyle shots as well as photos shot by customers (user-generated content or UGC) can really help your product stand out when someone is scrolling absentmindedly on their phones.

freepik.com

5   Make sure your website is mobile-optimised

Meta makes over 95% of its revenue from transactions that happen on a mobile device. Ensuring your website loads quickly and is easy to navigate on mobile will give you the best chance of success when advertising on social media. If your website takes longer than 3 seconds to load or has buttons that are too small to press on a mobile device, you will lose customers who give up and leave your website before completing a purchase. You paid for those people to be there, you want them to stay as long as possible and buy!

These are just 5 ways to increase your profitability when advertising on Meta. The tweaks you need to your own business may not be glamorous and they may take some time to implement but the rewards will pay for themselves.

5 WAYS TO USE DATA

DASHBOARDS TO MAXIMISE E-COMMERCE PROFITS

Lucia Dello
Lucia is the founder and director of Dello Insights. During lockdown, she applied her extensive data analysis expertise to the e-commerce sector creating a customised dashboard solution that helps clients make informed decisions and optimise their performance.

A wealth of sales data is stored on e-commerce platforms such as Shopify. However, their reports lack the in-depth visual insights necessary for retailers to understand the key drivers of sales performance. Using customised dashboards that transform the data into powerful insights, it is possible to maximise e-commerce profits.

1 Optimise the blend of acquisition and retention activity

Track sales from new or returning customers and the changes over time to understand the success and impact of acquisition and retention activity. In this example, the sales growth in months 5 and 6 came from returning customers whilst new customer sales declined.

By applying additional filters on the dashboard, the impact of changes made in the business, such as introducing a loyalty scheme, a new subscription product, or reallocating marketing budgets and resources toward customer retention can be evaluated.

Chart A:
New / Existing Customer Sales Split by Month

- New
- Existing
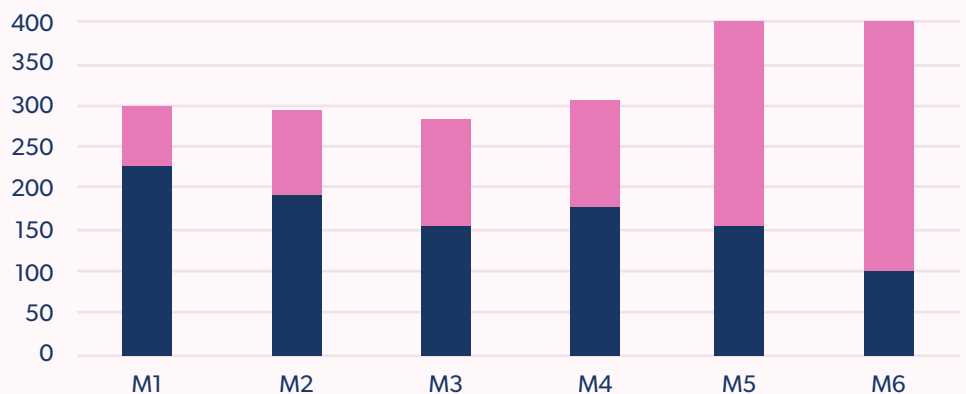
2 Link marketing performance directly to customer lifetime values

Engagement, activity and sales attribution are all important measures to evaluate a marketing campaign but alone they are an incomplete picture of success. A peak period marketing campaign that ranked highly on these measures may have attracted low-spending customers with high refund rates and few repeat sales (C1 blue line) whereas, a campaign that was less successful in the traditional marketing metrics and acquired fewer initial sales could have brought in higher value customers with repeat sales (C2 orange line).

Manually calculating lifetime spend is very time-consuming, whereas a dashboard that includes this report will automatically measure customer lifetime values for newly acquired customers by their acquisition date. Bringing this information into your marketing performance metrics will give you a more rounded, long-term view of marketing performance.

Other useful customer metrics that a sales dashboard can track are the recency and frequency of purchases for individual customers. Which can be extracted to build specific marketing campaigns.

Chart B:
Customer Lifetime Values by Months Since Acquisition
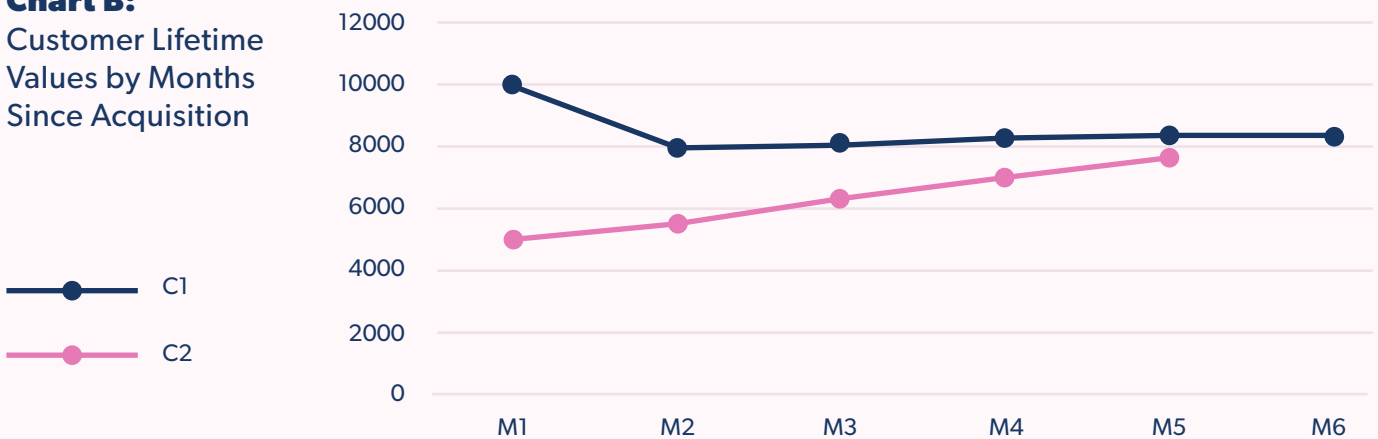
3 Sales channel performance measurement

Few e-commerce retailers solely rely on their websites for making sales. Instead, they market and sell their goods across several channels. Every channel requires individual marketing activity, content, and processes and has different fees and costs. Because this amplifies effort and resource requirements each channel's performance should be regularly assessed.

A correctly set-up dashboard makes tracking sales by channel straightforward.

In this example, the retailer can see the share of Amazon sales compared to the website and sales and how their Amazon sales have changed over time.

Chart C:
Sales by Channel
by Month

— ● — Website
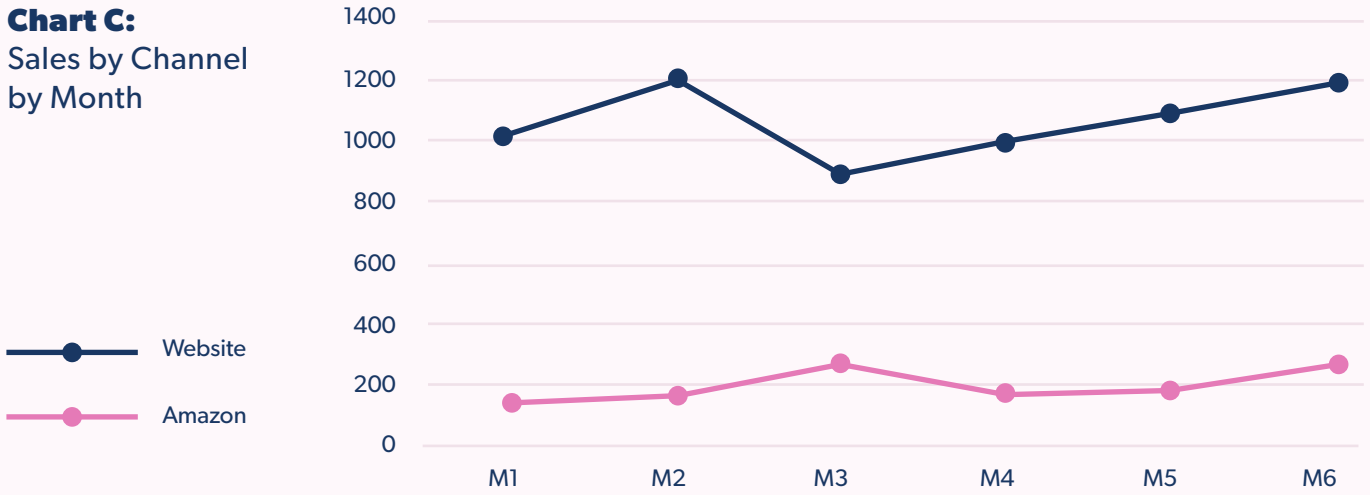
— ● — Amazon

Through careful examination of additional sales from the Amazon channel, the channel's purpose and its marketing, operational and financial costs they can decide whether to keep the channel. Before a new channel is introduced the success metrics need to be defined and using a sales dashboard will ensure these metrics are available to monitor from day one.

4 Align stock levels to match product demand

Holding excess stock is undesirable because it incurs storage costs and overbuying reduces the cash available to the business. Conversely, holding too little stock leads to items running out too quickly, resulting in dissatisfied customers and less effective marketing campaigns.

A dashboard enables the segmentation of products by sales and stock. Classing products from bestsellers to slowest sellers and keeping a watch on the sales-to-stock ratios. Once known, implementing strategies such as always keeping your best sellers in stock and selling off the slowest movers can be done.

Table 1: Product Level Sales and Stock Data

Product	Sales (last 4 weeks)	Sales %	Stock Value	Stock %	Stock to Sales Gap	Weeks of Stock Left
A	40	40%	120	24%	-16%	3
B	25	25%	125	25%	0%	5
C	15	15%	90	18%	3%	6
D	10	10%	0	0%	-10%	0
E	6	6%	60	12%	6%	10
F	3	3%	60	12%	9%	20
G	1	1%	50	10%	9%	50

In the table, Product A is the bestseller with 40% of sales. It makes up 24% of stock and has 3 weeks of stock left at current demand rates. More stock of Product A is needed.

Products F and G have low sales and high stock levels so should be sold off, reducing warehouse space and bringing in cash to use to purchase Product A.

5   Keep control of product margins

Achieving the target for the blended margin is essential for a retailer to be profitable. A dashboard with product margin insights will keep this on track as long as there is a process to check and refresh product costs for each order and adjust prices regularly to protect product margins. The chart below monitors the number of products within different product margin bands. Three hundred products are in the 50-<60% margin band, 50 have a margin of under 50% and fewer than 10 products have a margin over 70%.

Discounts and promotions will attract customers, but these must be strategically and carefully evaluated. An effective dashboard will give the value of discounts and free shipping for a set period. If a store uses blanket discounts such as 10% off for new customers, it's important to factor this into margin calculations as there will be a significant difference between the expected margins and the margins achieved.

In this example, once the discounts have been applied, the achieved margin is 8% lower than the target. Knowing this the retailer can take action to reduce discounts or raise prices to protect their margin and ultimately, profitability.

Chart D:
Number of Products by Product Margin Group
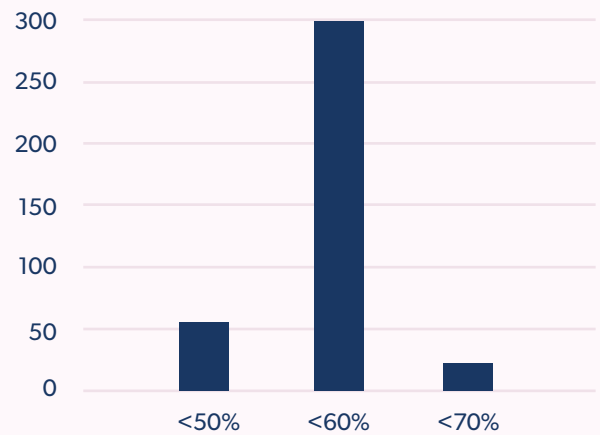
Table 2: Margins

Product Cost	Target Product Revenue £	Target Margin	Achieved Product Revenue £	Achieved Margin	Margin Difference
15,200	51,000	70%	40,000	62%	-8%

At Dello Insights, we support consultants and retailers who sell through Shopify and WooCommerce. Our customers consistently gain the insights they need to maximise e-commerce profits through our automated, customisable dashboards backed by ongoing support.

DIGITAL TRENDS FROM 2024
SHAPING 2025

Niki Hutchison

Niki Hutchison is a Marketing Strategist on a mission to help as many entrepreneurial women as possible succeed in business, so that they can enjoy the choices that come with being financially free. Niki specialises in taking service-based business owners from overlooked to fully booked®.

Paid ads are often seen as the holy grail and the first port of call for retailers, but what happens when a consumer clicks through from your ad? What are they met with? Is your brand aligned across all of your owned channels? Will they recognise your creative, both style and messaging? Will they be encouraged by what they find and want to follow, subscribe, engage, or will they be a one-hit wonder, making one purchase (using their new subscriber discount of course), before immediately unsubscribing and moving on, lost to your competitor who better understands the benefits of fusing organic with paid? Let's explore how you can make best use of the full marketing mix, not forgetting organic digital, to dominate your market in 2024 and beyond.

THE LIMITATIONS OF A PAID-ONLY APPROACH

While paid ads undoubtedly play a crucial role in driving traffic and generating leads, they represent only one step in a customer's journey. The real challenge lies in what happens after that initial click.

Consider the following scenarios:

1

A potential customer clicks on your on-brand ad, only to be taken to a landing page that neither looks nor sounds particularly similar to that original ad.

2

The landing page fails to engage the visitor, lacking the compelling content or user experience needed to encourage further attention or exploration.

3

The customer makes a single purchase using the ever-present 'new subscriber discount', then promptly unsubscribes and moves on to a competitor.

These scenarios highlight the critical importance of looking beyond paid advertising and embracing a comprehensive marketing strategy that begins – and grounded in consistent and robust organic activities.

WHY AN ORGANIC-FIRST APPROACH IS BEST

While ads can be a tempting 'quick fix', here's why, in 2024, organic marketing is more important than ever:

1 Brand Consistency

Organic channels allow you to maintain a consistent brand voice and visual identity across all touchpoints, reinforcing the message that initially attracted customers through paid ads.

2 Trust and Authenticity

In an era of increasing ad fatigue, scepticism and poor customer experience, organic content helps build genuine connections with your audience, fostering trust and loyalty over time.

3 Long-Term Value

Reminiscent of the famous fable about the tortoise and the hare, while paid ads can sometimes offer immediate results, organic marketing provides sustained value over time, continually attracting and engaging customers without ongoing ad spend. So what may seem like a sprint start, can actually turn into a money marathon as you race to keep up with your ever-increasing ad spend.

4 SEO Benefits

Creating well thought-out and structured organic content improves search engine rankings, increasing your brand's visibility and reducing the need to pay for traffic. Why pay for Google when, with a bit of grit and determination, you can nudge your way up the list?

5 Community Building

Organic strategies, particularly on social media, are an ideal way to create an engaged community around your brand, creating opportunities to start conversations and turn customers into advocates.

THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU SPEND A PENNY ON ADS

To truly dominate your market in 2024 and beyond, it's essential to leverage organic marketing methods first. Here's how:

1   **Align Your Brand Across All Channels**   Make sure your website, social media profiles, email marketing and other owned channels all reflect the same messaging, visual style, and brand personality.

2   **Create Your Unique Content Ecosystem**   Develop a robust content strategy that will not only improve your organic results, but will also lay strong foundations for future paid campaigns. This ecosystem might include blog posts, videos, podcasts or social media content all working together to reach your target customer, so that any ad spend then becomes the cherry on top of a multi-layered cake.

3   **Leverage User-Generated Content**   Encourage and showcase customer reviews, interviews, case studies, testimonials and user-generated content to help build trust and authenticity. Never has there been a greater reliance on peer recommendations – or easier ways to access them. And always remember to reply to reviews and comments, whether positive or negative – this is another opportunity to show how you communicate with and look after your customers.

4   **Track and Optimise**   'Go Detective Mode' and look beyond simple metrics like click-through rates or conversion rates. Develop your own analytics strategy that takes into account the entire customer journey, from initial click to long-term engagement and loyalty. Pay attention to where your traffic is coming from to save wasted time, effort and money chasing customers in the wrong places.

THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL MARKETING

Looking ahead to the future of digital marketing, it's clear that long-term, repeatable success relies on organic strategies first. The most successful brands in 2024 and beyond will be those that achieve a seamless, engaging customer experience across all touchpoints, from the very first click to long-term brand advocacy.

By investing in organic marketing before spending a single penny on ads, you're doing more than simply transacting with customers – you're building a sustainable, engaged community around your brand. This organic-first approach is the key to carving out your niche – and staying solvent – in an increasingly challenging digital landscape.

USING AI
WITH THE HUMAN CONNECTION

Susan Heaton-Wright
Susan Heaton-Wright is a leading expert in two way communication for engagement globally. She empowers organisations and individuals to communicate with impact, clarity and credibility in all business conversations, to increase connection and reduce time wasting.
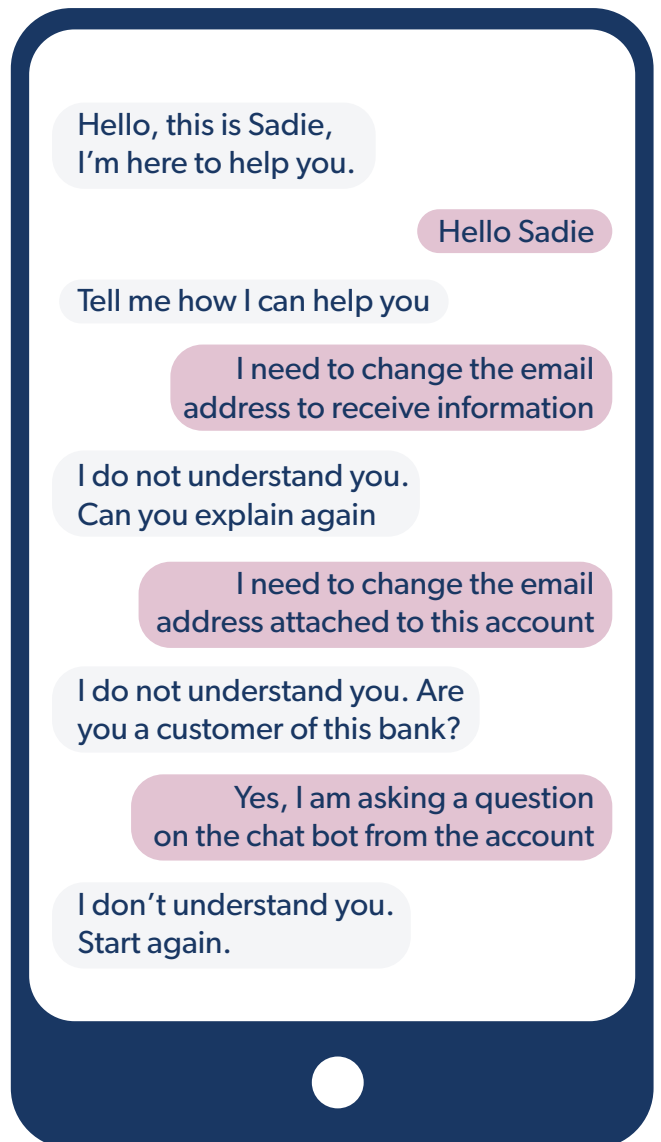
How often have we been tempted to use the Chatbot on a website? Perhaps you want to speak to someone; have a query about a product or delivery; even have a complaint. There is no visible phone number either on the invoice, or the website. Only the dreaded chat bot…

Yes, I have endured the dreaded chat bot on numerous occasions. Whether it is the alternative to "Helpful Tips" pages where you have to scroll through dozens of irrelevant 'answers'; being offered the chance to discuss this with 'the community' – where you wait patiently for months sometimes, for some kind person to give you a tip. Yet all I want is to get an answer to a question or query by communicating with a human being.

So let's get back to AI generated bots. These have been around for some time. Everyone I know – and this is not scientific research but from meaningful conversations – has a nightmare tale of how they left a 'conversation' with an AI enabled bot because the bot hadn't a clue what you were talking about. And these were basic, easy questions. Let me run through one such abandoned conversation with a well known bank as a personal client.

And so the conversation goes on until I abandon it, swearing, having wasted 10 minutes of my life not being understood by an AI bot that hasn't been properly programmed. And this is the challenge: we, as humans have to train AI to do specific things otherwise it will use existing information.

Respectfully, many of us ASSUME we know what a customer is thinking or needs to ask. We base it on our own experiences and the challenges we might be having. The reality is that unless you are able to consider others' problems – by walking

Hello, this is Sadie, I'm here to help you.

Hello Sadie

Tell me how I can help you

I need to change the email address to receive information

I do not understand you. Can you explain again

I need to change the email address attached to this account

I do not understand you. Are you a customer of this bank?

Yes, I am asking a question on the chat bot from the account

I don't understand you. Start again.

in their shoes, with their experience of using tech, then your intervention – and by default the intervention of the AI you have trained, is going to be useless.

For the last few months, I have been working with business undergraduate students on chat bots to provide real time conversation practices for ongoing professional development. The aim was to ensure this was a meaningful, valuable experience for potential executives to learn. We were very aware of the power of AI and the possible opportunities it could provide for practicing specific business conversations. Although at this time, we focused on written chats, in the future, we are likely to include voice conversations.

It is very easy to anticipate conversations; the content and what the specific challenges brought up, based on our own experiences. Equally, AI will 'fill in the gaps' based on their knowledge and existing knowledge it can gather, rather than relevant responses.

As a team we brainstormed what we believed were the challenges of specific business conversations and possible content. However, we then researched potential executives who could be using this platform with:
• Their possible challenges
• The language used
• Examples of questions
• Examples of typical conversations
• Expected outcomes

We were very careful with the questions we asked in the survey, to avoid putting our own spin on the problem. We also gave them the opportunity to provide as much information as possible: of course this was more work for us to collate but the results meant we had a clearer understanding of conversations within the specific market we would be targeting.

The survey results differed significantly from our initial brainstorming, which proves that we should always listen to our target audience rather than anticipate – or guess what they want to ask.

As a result of this work we then trained the AI to have conversations using language and topics that they had highlighted. The initial feedback we have received: and I should emphasise this is still research in progress, was that users felt conversations on the chat box were more human/authentic/real than other chat box experiences.

One organisation that provides a great solution is www.livechatfactory.live Clients log on to a chat box which is enabled by AI; then if the conversation requires more intervention, the humans from Live Chat Factory take over, to resolve the situation. This is still a cost effective solution.

Three points to consider when using AI enabled chat bots for the retail sector, which has B to C customers.

1 As with any customer service, customers wish to be listened to: to feel valued. Unless you have taken the time to research the language and issues they have, they won't feel this. In the worst possible scenario, they are likely to cause negative impact on social media.

2 Our research has demonstrated that you need to have a totally open mind to the challenges and questions clients and customers might have. Instead of second guessing, or only asking limited questions that prevent respondents being able to share exactly why they would contact customer service, ensure you incorporate all options including moving over to a 'human' chat option.

3 AI is incredible but only as good as the human being training it up. Take the time to fully train it and review results on a regular basis. Avoid ignoring this.

We are all wishing to incorporate more digital solutions into our offerings, especially for communication. AI enabled chat bots are a smart solution and we can't underestimate the power of AI and the potential use in the business world. However, we should always maintain the 'human' intervention to ensure it is properly prompted and trained for the best results.

10 AI SOLUTIONS

TO IMPROVE SALES AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN YOUR RETAIL STORE

1 Loyalty Programs

1) Mobile App:
Develop an app where customers can track their points and receive notifications about rewards. Great software options are available from www.appsumo.com for a low one-time fee.

2) AI Analytics:
Use AI to analyse purchasing patterns and tailor rewards that resonate with individual customers.

3) QR Codes:
Implement QR codes for quick enrolment in the loyalty program at checkout or during a promotion online or offline.

2 Workshops and Classes

1) Online Booking System:
Set up a digital platform for customers to easily register for workshops or style sessions and receive reminders.

2) Webinars:
Host live or recorded online workshops, allowing broader participation and creating digital content for future use.

3) Follow-up Surveys:
Use AI-driven surveys post-workshop to gather feedback and tailor future sessions.

3 Seasonal Promotions

1) Email Automation:
Set up automated email campaigns that target customers with seasonal promotions based on their previous purchases.

2) Social Media Ads:
Utilise AI to run targeted ads on social media that promote seasonal events or sales to specific customer segments.

3) Countdown Timers:
Use website countdown timers for limited-time promotions to create urgency and drive traffic.

4   Personalised Recommendations

1) AI Product Suggestions:
Implement an AI tool on your website that suggests products based on past purchases or browsing history.

2) Customer Profiles:
Create detailed customer profiles that store preferences and allow for tailored marketing messages.

3) Chatbots:
Use AI chatbots to engage customers in real-time, providing personalised product recommendations when they visit your site. With some retail clients, we have used their live agent chatbox to convert visitors to buy while they were spending time on a product or payment page.

5   Exclusive Previews

1) VIP Email List:
Create an email list specifically for loyal customers to receive exclusive previews and offers. Have separate email lists to personalised the message.

2) Mobile Push Notifications:
Send push notifications through a mobile app about upcoming products or sales for loyalty program members.

3) Early Access Codes:
Generate unique access codes for customers to use online or in-store for exclusive previews.

6   Social Media Engagement

1) Content Scheduling Tools:
Use platforms like Hootsuite, Postly or Buffer to schedule posts and maintain consistent engagement.

2) AI Analytics:
Leverage AI tools to analyse engagement metrics and optimise content based on what resonates with your audience.

3) User-Generated Content:
Encourage customers to share their fashion styling or gardening successes on social media, which can be promoted on your channels.

7   Community Involvement

1) Event Management Platforms:
Use tools like Eventbrite to organise and promote community events, allowing for easy registration.

2) Social Media Events:
Create online events or challenges (e.g., a photo contest) that encourage community participation and social sharing.

3) Local Partnerships:
Collaborate with local influencers or businesses and promote joint events through digital channels.

8 Quality Customer Service

1) AI Customer Support:
Implement AI chatbots (or a simple live agent chatbox) on your website for 24/7 customer service to answer common questions.

2) Feedback Systems:
Use digital platforms to gather customer feedback on service quality, and analyse data for improvement.

3) Training Modules:
Use online training tools to enhance staff skills in customer service and product knowledge.

9 Email Newsletters

1) Segmentation:
Use AI to segment your email list based on customer behaviour and preferences for targeted newsletters. Have at least 3 to 5 segments of customers.

2) Content Personalisation:
Leverage tools that personalise email content dynamically based on customer interactions and interests. You can effectively use ChatGPT to provide those personalised emails.

3) Automated Campaigns:
Set up automated email campaigns that trigger based on specific customer actions, such as abandoned carts. Have a campaign as well while onboarding new subscribers, inactive subscribers for over 6 or 12 months and high spenders.

10 Feedback Opportunities

1) Digital Surveys:
Use platforms like SurveyMonkey to create and distribute customer feedback surveys easily.

2) AI Sentiment Analysis:
Utilise AI tools to analyse feedback and reviews, identifying trends and areas for improvement.

3) Interactive Feedback Kiosks:
Install digital kiosks in-store where customers can quickly provide feedback on their experience. It can be done with a tablet or better a staff member with a tablet or just pen and paper!

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL SKILLS GAP IN UK RETAIL

Vernette John-Joiles

Vernette is an award-winning business owner, trainer and digital expert. She is a self-confessed 'tech geek' who enjoys exploring the digital space. With a focus on productivity, she brings innovative thinking about how businesses and organisations develop their online presence and improve business operations through the use of digital tools.

We're in the midst of a digital revolution, reshaping how economies grow and thrive. Yet, despite living in this digital age, we face a significant digital skills gap. Research by the UK government and other leading companies, including Lloyds Bank, has revealed that millions in the UK lack digital literacy, hindering job prospects and business growth. Many business owners struggle to embrace digital transformation, potentially stunting their companies' development. This article explores why, from a retail perspective, prioritising digital upskilling is crucial to ensure growth and sustainability in the UK retail sector's future.

THE DIGITAL SKILLS LANDSCAPE

In 2019, the UK government established the Essential Digital Skills Framework, to define digital literacy within the five categories:
- of communicating,
- handling information and content,
- transacting,
- problem solving and,
- being safe and legal online.

Within these five categories are 20 digital tasks for work. Many, if not all, of these tasks relate to undertaking work within the retail sector. However, data suggests many individuals struggle with these seemingly 'simple' digital tasks. This may pose a significant challenge for the retail sector, potentially impacting competitiveness and market share. Due to the growing reliance on digital solutions for operations such as self-checkout systems to order tracking, the digital revolution is redefining customer service priorities, leading to changes in consumer interactions. To remain competitive and to retain customer loyalty, retailers must not only adapt to these changes but also manage evolving consumer expectations. This necessitates a dual focus on employee upskilling and customer engagement in the digital space.

ESSENTIAL DIGITAL SKILLS FOR RETAIL

Examples where satisfactory digital skills within retail may be:

- E-commerce optimisation, where more retailers are relying on optimised websites for quick customer orders and increased sales. This shift requires staff capable of managing sophisticated e-commerce solutions and highlights the need for specialised training in some cases.

- Data analytics has emerged as a critical skill in retail, particularly for inventory management and understanding customer insights. The growing importance of data in sales strategies necessitates professionals skilled in retail-specific data analysis.

- Digital marketing in retail extends beyond social media to include email marketing and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).

Understanding customer search trends and preferences is vital for effective digital marketing strategies.

- Cybersecurity has become paramount with the rise in hacking attempts. Protecting customer data and transactions is crucial, making cybersecurity skills essential in the retail sector.

- In-store digital technologies, such as Point of Sale (POS) systems and digital signage, have become standard, requiring staff to be proficient in their use and maintenance.

Without a workforce that is sufficiently digital literate, areas of retail operations like those listed above may impact retailers ability to maintain a competitive edge. Therefore, prioritising the upskilling of the teams, managers, and business owners would prove to be an essential part for growth in the digital age.

THE REALITY OF DIGITAL ADOPTION

Working with over 250 SMEs over a 2-year period from various sectors, has helped with gaining valuable insights into common challenges faced by businesses. Key themes that frequently emerged were:

- uncertainty about effective digital growth methods

- lack of customer insights

- supply chain unpredictability using technology

- cash flow management concerns (especially for digital implementation)

Relating to these themes, a significant challenge for the retail sector is the time required to embrace digital transformation. Identifying areas where digital solutions offer the most benefit or are urgently needed may likely cause interruptions to operations, and potentially for undefined periods of time. Another area for exploration is 'digital confidence'. Whether business owners or employees, there are many that foster reluctance to learn or interact with digital solutions due to uncertainty about their workings, control mechanisms, and long-term 'unknown' implications.

This highlights a crucial need in retail: building digital confidence among staff on all levels. Increased digital confidence leads to better adoption of new working methods, enabling staff to acclimate quickly and deliver services confidently using new digital tools.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL SKILLS GAP

Bridging identified digital skills gaps in retail requires a commitment to continuous learning and adaptation. Retailers must clearly communicate their business direction and future expectations to staff, emphasising the benefits of embracing digital technologies to remain competitive in today's fast-paced digital world. Effective upskilling involves tailored approaches for diverse staff members, recognising that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is insufficient, and can also be alienating. This may necessitate identifying and implementing various learning strategies to accommodate existing skill levels and different learning styles.

Part of promoting a positive attitude towards changes that digital transformation brings, may also lie within creating a digitally savvy retail culture that involves consistent messaging about the company's digital tools and preferred working methods. Retail leadership plays a vital role in driving digital transformation. Leaders must be willing to strategically implement initiatives that align with highlevel business outcomes, ensuring that digital upskilling efforts contribute to overall company goals and foster a digitally confident workforce.

IMPLEMENTING DIGITAL SKILLS TRAINING

When considering how to implement to upskill a team or workforce, it may prove advantageous to perform a thorough audit to identify specific gaps, challenges, and workflow bottlenecks. This assessment informs the development of targeted learning objectives that align with the retailer's business goals.

Training plans should be designed to integrate seamlessly with ongoing store operations, recognising that business must continue during the upskilling process. This may require creative scheduling or modular training approaches.

To gauge effectiveness, retailers should establish clear KPIs to measure the impact of training. These might include metrics such as increased sales, improved customer satisfaction, and enhanced workplace atmosphere. Regular assessment of these indicators helps refine and optimise the training program over time.

Forward-thinking companies like Barclays are proactively addressing this by upskilling their employees through its Digital Eagles training. They also are seeking to do their part to address digital literacy for its customers through its Digital Wings platform. This may serve as an example to aid ideation.

TO THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL RETAIL

To improve digital literacy and confidence, retailers should start to consider the landscape of their current operations and decide on how to implement (or improve) role-specific training programs. This could also include mentorship initiatives, where digitally savvy staff can guide their colleagues. Retailers may find it become crucial to stay informed about government initiatives and industry resources for digital upskilling, and to invest the necessary resources as part of business growth.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN RETAIL:

STOP FOLLOWING THE CROWD AND START LEADING

Jess Williams Chadwick

Jess is a networker, writer, mother, connector, friend, cheerleader, and when she was younger she wanted to be Dana Scully from the X-Files. Now she's pretending to be a grown up, she puts together killer detective files on ideal audiences and markets to them with forensic precision.

Let's face it, "thought leadership" has become one of those overused buzzwords that managers and marketers like to throw around without fully understanding. Even in the C-Suite. Every second brand claims to be a thought leader these days, but here's the problem: The majority of them aren't leading anything. Most retailers are either blindly following trends or recycling ideas that the real innovators pioneered years ago. In an industry as cutthroat as retail, that's a fast track to irrelevance. True thought leadership isn't just about talking a big game. It isn't just about talking a big game, it's about demonstrating expertise and leading the conversation in a way that inspires your industry. And in retail, a sector notoriously plagued by tight margins, fierce competition, and constantly evolving customer expectations, the stakes for thought leadership are higher than ever. As we enter a new era of retail, thought leadership isn't just a "nice to have." It's a strategic advantage. Let's break down what thought leadership in retail really means, why it's essential, and – most importantly – how to put it into action.

RETAIL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP STARTS WITH LISTENING

Here's where most retailers make their first mistake. They assume thought leadership means shouting their message from the rooftops, but the best thought leaders start by listening. The only way to lead a conversation is to first understand where it currently stands.

Retail is an incredibly dynamic industry. Consumer trends shift, new technologies emerge, and global events can change the landscape overnight (hello, COVID). The first step in becoming a thought leader is knowing your customers inside out and staying ahead of market trends. Glossier exemplifies this approach. The beauty brand started with a blog (Into The Gloss), listening to its community of readers and building a brand based on their feedback. They leveraged social media not just for promotion but for customer engagement and crowd-sourcing ideas for new products. By embedding customer feedback into their content strategy, they've positioned themselves as leaders who understand what the modern beauty consumer wants.

AUTHENTICITY OVER CORPORATE JARGON

The next critical element of thought leadership in retail is authenticity. Customers are savvier than ever, and they can smell corporate-speak from a mile away. If your thought leadership strategy is built on vacuous press releases and industry jargon, you're wasting your time. The most effective thought leaders are transparent, authentic, and even a little vulnerable.

Think about Patagonia, which has built its brand not on slick marketing campaigns, but on its values. Their "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign is a perfect example of thought leadership. It wasn't just a clever marketing ploy; it was a bold, values-driven statement about sustainability that resonated with customers and positioned Patagonia as a leader in the conversation about ethical consumption.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS NOT JUST JUMPING ON THE LATEST TREND

True thought leaders don't just react to trends – they anticipate them. In retail, this means you need to be constantly on the lookout for technological advancements, consumer behavior shifts, and economic factors that could impact your business.

Amazon Go, with its cashierless stores, is an example of a retailer that didn't just follow trends but created one. By leveraging advanced technology, they redefined the in-store experience in a way that no one else was doing. Amazon didn't just recognise that customer preferences were shifting toward convenience – they created an entirely new model of convenience.

EMPLOYEE-GENERATED CONTENT: THE UNTAPPED THOUGHT LEADERSHIP ASSET

Here's a tactic that hardly anyone in UK retail is doing well: Employee-generated content. And I'm not talking about getting your CEO to do another LinkedIn post. I'm talking about giving your team – from junior staff to seasoned pros – a voice in your content strategy.

The reality is that many of the freshest, most unfiltered insights come from the people working closest to your customers. But most retailers either ignore these voices or filter them through layers of corporate speak until all the authenticity is gone. If you want to lead the conversation, you need to empower your employees – especially the juniors – to share their unique perspectives.

Take Pret A Manger as an example. The company encouraged its staff, many of whom were on the front lines of customer service, to engage directly with customers through social media.

This resulted in a level of interaction that felt authentic and personal – something customers could genuinely connect with. It wasn't the corporate office talking down to customers; it was the employees themselves driving the narrative. I've been the recipient of a free coffee and croissant on a particularly bad day, and it really made a difference. You can't buy brand loyalty like that.

Imagine if more UK retailers adopted this approach. Your staff on the shop floor have insights into customer behaviour that the head office can't see. They know the pain points, the frequently asked questions, the frustrations, and the delights better than anyone else. Tapping into that knowledge can provide a treasure trove of content that not only feels authentic but positions your brand as in touch with the reality of its operations.

Using Thought Leadership Across your Company

Hopefully by now you have some ideas of how to implement thought leadership in your business, and why you should. Thought Leadership can be internal, to inspire and motivate teams, as well as external, as a moret traditional sales and marketing tool. If you'd like any advice or support specific to your business, please get in touch on jess@rocksalt-consulting.com or find me at https://uk.linkedin.com/in/jessica-williams-chadwick or https://www.instagram.com/rocksaltconsulting

TOOLS AND TEMPLATES

1 Ad Performance Tracking Template

Purpose: This template helps retailers measure the performance of their social media ads, focusing on key metrics such as ROAS, CPC (cost-per-click), and conversion rates. It can be adapted for platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

Ad Performance Tracking Template

2 Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) Calculator

Purpose: This tool helps retailers calculate the lifetime value of their customers, which is critical when determining how much they can spend on acquiring new customers.

Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) Calculator

3 SEO and Content Strategy Checklist

Purpose: A step-by-step guide to creating an SEO-friendly website and content marketing strategy. This template ensures that retailers can align their organic efforts with paid digital marketing.

SEO and Content Strategy Checklist

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