

The human face of retail: balancing tech and people can elevate retailers

By [Peter Ludi](#)

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There's widespread acceptance that improving customer experience will go a long way towards attracting and retaining customers, especially at a time when there's increased competition for valuable consumer spend.



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Naturally, all eyes turn to technology to remove friction, add convenience, automate, drive personalisation and much more. However, the deeper we move into the digital age it isn't technology and automation that will save and grow retail, it's the people.

The theme that technology should not replace humans but augment them is well understood, but there's more here than ordinarily meets the eye.

Balancing technology with investment in people isn't just a morally prudent approach, it is fundamental to a retailer's competitiveness and success.

Humans on the front line, those interfacing with customers, will absolutely make or break a customer's experience and loyalty.

At the recent National Retail Federations' The Big Show in New York, a recurring theme was the widespread acceptance of the importance of people. The world is waking up to this fact, which isn't surprising as front-line staff have never really received due credit for their role in attracting, retaining and upselling customers under very difficult circumstances.



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To be clear, though, no one is suggesting that "people trump technology". On the contrary, no retailer can possibly look into 2024, nevermind the future, without a clear digitisation roadmap.

Big data, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, automation, self check-out, biometric payments - these are all vitally important to improving systems and processes, and the experience for both customers and staff.

Finding the right use case, deploying and iterating, with the right partner to ensure the investment is in alignment with the retailer's strategy and core values, is frankly, non-negotiable.

Technology and people are not at odds. Robotics, for example, may well have the opposite effect than most fearmongers like to project: Instead of threatening jobs, it could enhance employment and widen the net of those who can be employed where advanced age and physical challenges would no longer matter, for example.



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Retail therapy

As mentioned, it's the front-line staff that will make or break a customer's experience. Motivational speaker Tony Robbins speaks about six core human needs, and that by meeting these needs humans feel fulfilled and happy.

On the contrary, not meeting these needs is behind dysfunctional or ambivalent behaviour. It could be the difference between a customer choosing to come to your store, feeling ambivalent about the experience, or actively (and loudly on social media) declaring that he or she will never support your brand again.

These six core human needs are certainty, variety, significance, connection (or love), growth and contribution.

The theory is that if we have some or most, or even all, of these needs fulfilled, we are happier.

Consider this: If I visit your store, and I am certain to find what I am looking for, with variety and new products to attract my interest, and your staff make me feel important and significant through a genuine human connection, one can see why the term retail therapy refers to shopping to improve one's mood or mental state. It becomes a social experience, as much as an exchange of money for services and goods.

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Now imagine that this retailer, which gave me such a good experience, has leveraged technology to empower the frontline staff with whom I engaged. Even something as contentious (in some circles) as self-checkout makes sense when read against this context.

Perhaps I just want to pop in and out, and having the convenience to be able to do so enhances my experience.

Similarly, if I enquire about a product, and the staff member has access to instant, real-time data to address my query to my satisfaction, technology has improved their experience to improve my experience.

And so, technology – and the holy grail of ambient technology that reduces all friction points and is there when and if the customer or staff member needs it – works alongside people.

In the South African context

Finally, in the South African context, consider that the retail sector is the second-biggest employer with numbers surpassing 3.5 million workers. This sector is absolutely fundamental to the security and wellbeing of the country. There's a big trend globally for retailers to make their efforts towards sustainability known, so that consumers can choose to engage and support them based on these efforts.

In the context of retail being a vital employer in South Africa, the case can easily be made for metrics to become available for customers to see what the business is doing for its people and their empowerment - much like large organisations do in their annual reports.



Peter Ludi, business development executive at redPanda Software. Image supplied

And so, as we rapidly move deeper into the digital age, the responsibility lies with the retailer and its technology partner to uncover which technology investments will best improve the shopper's experience, but while doing so, actively work to make the lives of the people in the organisation better and easier to navigate.

If retailers and their partners disconnect the work experience of their frontline employees from their growth and digital strategies, they simply won't achieve the types of results they need, and that their shareholders demand.

A retailer's unrelenting orientation should always be aimed towards getting the brand and product fundamentals in place and then striving to make their customers' experience better – in order to support growth and an increased market share.

The people in the organisation, including those on the front line such as tellers and floor sales consultants, are an important lever in improving customer experience.

In the context of South Africa it takes on added significance when we appreciate that by improving employees' lives, retail – as the second-biggest employer – is making a meaningful impact on the lives and livelihoods of millions of people.

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