

Humanising retail technology

 By [Alison Embrey Medina](#)

18 Feb 2016

Artificial intelligence (AI) is quite the dinner party topic of late. With highly publicised warnings of the risks of venturing too far down the AI trail from academic and business moguls like Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk and Bill Gates, the conversation of whether technology will eventually evolve beyond humanity's ability to control it can lead to quite the fascinating debate.

Walking the show floor at the National Retail Federation's show in January, I discovered that technology was a constant driver of wonderment and awe. From virtual reality goggles and magic mirrors to robots that walk on their own, the sheer pace at which technology is advancing is baffling - even compared to the same show last year. Talk of smart laundry rooms that reorder your detergent for you when it gets below a certain level, or smart refrigerators that essentially restock themselves (via mail order or in-store pick-up) when your staple items like milk, eggs or bread are near gone. RFID-enabled dressing rooms that send the item you've just tried on directly to your house in another colour, or beacons driven by LED lighting that can track movement and traffic patterns in your stores. And driverless cars. I'm not even going to mention how many people want to talk about driverless cars.

I got a first-hand view into IBM Watson's cognitive computing technology. The genesis behind the idea is simply asking the shopper questions - much like a human associate would inside the store - that can better help frame a mindset to picking items that would satisfy a need, a style, a desire, toward the final purchase. In essence, creating this context around the content helps create a more engaging, intuitive and relevant experience for the shopper, and ultimately aiding her purchase decision. And it works, too! I played around with the new beta test from The North Face offering a personalised intelligent shopper. After asking me some specific use-based questions on my needs for a jacket, including location, temperature, climate/weather expectations and personal style, the program was able to recommend to me - in gorgeous, high-definition 3D visuals, of course - three jackets that should suit my needs and style. And you know what? It was right on the money. (I am currently considering the purchase of two of them.)



Image credit: [Fluid.com](#)

A need to connect

But I contend that amid all of the evolving technologies and online conveniences already here and rising before us, we still as a society have an overwhelming need to connect. It's why people who work from home still sometimes camp out at coffee shops for the day. It's why stay-at-home mums arrange play dates. It's why we choose to have a quick sandwich and a nightcap at the hotel bar among other hapless business travellers versus ordering room service. The desire for

human connection is still largely a driver for the social interactions we choose, and shopping is certainly still one of them.

According to the Holiday Purchasing Trends study from the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), which was released in January, 91% of 2015 holiday shoppers made purchases in a physical store. And because we are inherently sensory and tactile-driven creatures by nature, seeing, touching and trying on merchandise was cited as the number one reason to shop in-store. As retailers, we can't be afraid to let our shoppers evoke that power to touch and experience in our stores. Make that moment as sensorial and experiential as you possibly can.

And while I won't be hiring a robot or purchasing a driverless car any time soon, I could certainly be into that whole refillable laundry detergent thing. When it, in fact, becomes a thing.

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