HX: Humanizing the Digital Commerce Experience

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ELASTIC PATH × BIGCOMMERCE

Introduction

What comes next after digital transformation? Rapid development of the e-commerce landscape in the past few years has made it easier than ever for customers to browse and acquire goods all around the world.

It has also made it harder for brands and retailers to stand out.

As we advance further into the Industry 4.0 era, in which artificial intelligence will be able to anticipate our every need and immersive technologies open up new worlds of engagement, those who can put what we call *HX* — the human experience — first can stand apart from the crowd.

To address this pivotal inflection point in retail, e-commerce platform BigCommerce has teamed up with creative futures agency FS to put together this guide to the innovation sweet spots where cultural trends, the latest technologies, and consumer values converge.

Anchoring this playbook is one urgent question:

How can you design more desirable and responsive shopping experiences without losing sight of the *human* at the center?

By recalibrating and considering all sides of the equation — the overall context, the tools available, and the individual layer — retailers can start to build unforgettable experiences that, instead, *transform us*.

01 Bridging Realities

As increasingly connected devices open up new points of sale and immersive technologies collapse the boundaries between digital and physical, we take a look at the latest best practices and innovations for omnichannel experiences that prioritize customer over medium.

Topics covered:

- Enhanced immersion
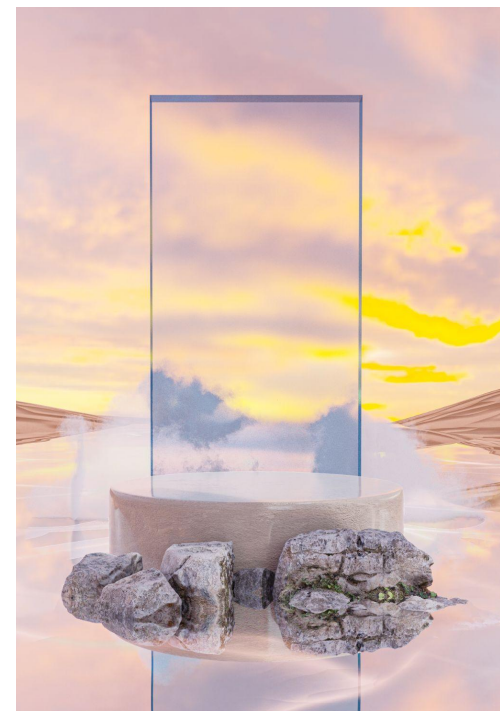- Continuous experience
- Intuitive interactions

Enhanced Immersion

Accelerated by the pandemic, advancements in immersive technologies — namely virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) — have revolutionized how we interact with digital experiences. While the idea of the metaverse has lost some momentum, its building blocks are still widely applicable and provide a blueprint for connecting digital and physical spaces and enhancing immersion.

At the core of the metaverse is the idea of telepresence — mechanisms that can make a person feel "present" or a sense of "realness" in digitally mediated environments. As the lines between digital and physical continue to blur for shoppers, **it will be imperative for retailers to keep telepresence top of mind in the design of experiences and to treat these touchpoints as one shared reality engaged in constant dialogue. Accepting this convergence can open up a wealth of inventive engagement and design integrations, including:**

- **Interactive 3D** - Three-dimensional assets are the main cornerstone of telepresence, powering everything from augmented reality try-on to the virtual environment itself. Complete 360° views of product are quickly becoming a must-have across the fashion and home markets, especially combined with interactive capabilities. It is estimated that such media can decrease returns by up to 35%. As a bonus, this bank of 3D assets can be further leveraged for marketing, generative AI applications, and to even power future product customization.

- **Scrollytelling** - In a bid to enhance immersion, websites are incorporating more dynamic features influenced by metaverse environments. Short of creating a fully 3D world, retailers can bring dimensionality to the web experience in subtle ways, such as multi-directional interfaces that use parallaxing to create the illusion of depth. Standout applications of this "scrollytelling" technique include watch brand Longines, who take visitors on an aviation-inspired journey on their site, and interiors company Moooi, who employ multiplane layering to bring to life the rich textures of their furniture and home accessories.

- **Unlocking community** - In its ability to convey weight and presence, 3D assets can also power more meaningful engagement. The world of gaming provides a proven use case for bringing people together through digital avatars. From user profiles to customer service agents, avatars can establish a shared sense of humanity and open up another avenue for self-expression. For example, Web3 platform Elynxir cleverly combines 3D avatars and AI to give its users their very own music "companion," who helps them discover, collect, and trade music, as well as serves up personalized remixes based on their listening preferences.

While the idea of the metaverse has lost some momentum, its building blocks are still widely applicable and provide a blueprint for connecting digital and physical spaces.
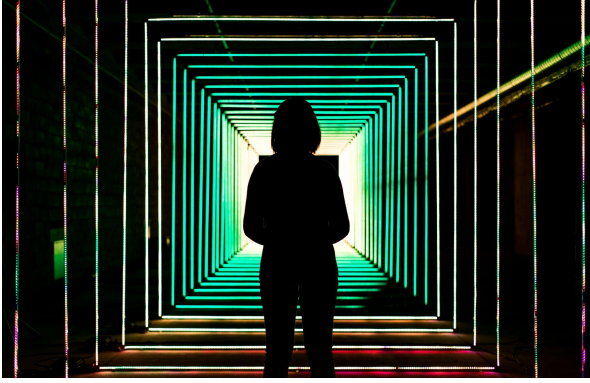
Continuous Experience

Within this shared reality between virtual and physical, new channels and interfaces for commerce are emerging every day, including social media, messaging services, smart TVs, connected cars, and video games. Additionally, with the newfound relevance of QR codes, almost *anything* can instantly connect to a transactional experience.

Rather than seeing this expanding array of consumer touchpoints as an obstacle, retailers should embrace it as an opportunity to extend their reach and to connect the dots between initial inspiration and final sale. **The next frontier of the omnichannel experience will be about creating a fully coherent end-to-end journey through a distributed system spread across several devices**.

A popular example of designing for this multistage journey is the ability to start a Netflix show on your TV and then to pick up where you left off on your mobile device. However, much of this cross-channel activity relies on traditional account sign-on — something that can bring significant friction to the shopping journey as the touchpoints for any one retailer continue to grow. **There are new technologies on the horizon, however, that are poised to facilitate his seamless, continuous journey through the commerce landscape:**

- **Biometrics** - More retailers are tapping into biometric-based authentication for purposes ranging from payments to entry into autonomous stores. Popular methods include scanning of the face, iris, palm, or fingerprints, in addition to validating things like handwriting and voice. While users are accustomed to using biometrics to, say, unlock their smartphone or at the airport, they've shown some resistance at the retail level, with early adopters of the technology facing varying levels of backlash due to privacy and security concerns.

- **Decentralized digital identities** - Many applications of biometrics still rely on a central source of truth, often powered by major platforms like Amazon, Google, and Meta (a federated model). Decentralized digital identities (DDID) have emerged as an alternative to traditional accounts that promise greater privacy and interoperability. Enabled by blockchain, the decentralized nature of this model allows individuals to control their own digital identity and what parts of it get shared without being dependent on any service provider, although major entities like Microsoft and IBM now provide DDID solutions.

Rather than seeing this expanding array of consumer touchpoints an obstacle, retailers should embrace it as an opportunity to extend their reach and to connect the dots between initial inspiration and final sale.

Intuitive Interactions

The ubiquity of mobile phones and other connected devices has expanded the palette for user interaction. Rather than confined to physical touchpoints, digital experiences can now occur in this in-between layer: the spatial web. While this cloud of connectivity has liberated user interaction, it also presents a unique challenge to retailers in creating a seamless, interconnected experience.

As we move away from purely touch, rather than introducing a whole new set of rules for user interaction, the key for designers now is to work with what is already there and to harness the natural, intuitive rhythms of daily life. **What are some key developments in user interaction that retailers should prepare for in this new reality of ambient commerce?**

- **Motion-based** - Stores are already incorporating gesture recognition, using AI computer vision to track our interaction with products and spaces, and this is only the beginning for motion-based shopping. In the past few years, Samsung phone users were able to use their palm to take a selfie, and Google added facial gesture ability to the Android 12 and recently introduced Project Gameface, which allows gamers to play using head and facial movement. Elsewhere, AR platforms are using machine learning to perfect hand-tracking accuracy, such as Handy.js, which enables visitors to set their own hand gestures and their resulting actions. This new set of interactions presents significant opportunities to improve accessibility and deepen user engagement.

Rather than confined to physical touchpoints, digital experiences can now occur in this in-between layer: the spatial web.

- **Voice** - Similar to face and eye tracking, voice assistance systems have the potential to help users with motor disabilities. As of 2022, 35% of Americans 18+ owned a smart speaker, amounting to around 100 million people. In addition to this number increasing every year, individual time spent using smart speakers is also going up, with the use of voice commands claiming a greater share of activity. On the horizon for VUI is interpreting accents and speech impairments, multi-language support, and multimodal translations.

Natori *Creates* an Inclusive Omniverse

Designer lifestyle brand Natori immerses visitors into their sprawling universe through a web experience that is integrated *and* inclusive.

Right upon landing on the homepage, visitors are presented with an accessibility menu powered by UserWay that allows variables like contrast, text size, and image functionality to be adjusted to one's needs and preferences.

The brand also sets an example for merging traditional online retail with social commerce, offering shoppable TikTok-style **videos that show products in motion and on real people**. The social shopping aspect continues on to their program of regular livestream events — facilitated through Firework — which highlight special occasions and needs, from Care+Wear, their line of scrubs, to bra fitting how-tos.

By hosting social commerce events on their website, Natori can optimize the interface and functionality specifically for shopper needs. For example, while viewing a livestream on demand, a line sheet of the products featured immediately comes up for viewers to either click through to navigate to the relevant part of the video or to shop now. Furthermore, the sessions also come with a chat box, where viewers can ask questions and interact with hosts live — all of which remain preserved for on-demand sessions.

The result is a **rich asset library and a living FAQ** for their products and an intimate experience that makes customers feel welcomed and informed.
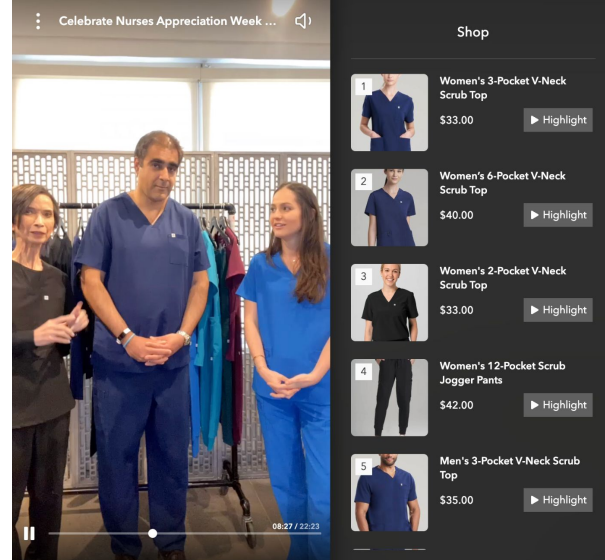
> By hosting social commerce events on their website, Natori can optimize the interface and functionality specifically for shopper needs.

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Tap Into Organic Movements & Behaviors

Teaching users new interactions and behaviors at this stage of our technological maturation is an uphill climb. To keep up with the emergence of new channels and innovations, base your interaction design on existing mental models that people are intuitively familiar with.

### Use Mixed Reality to Close the Accessibility Gap

AI and mixed reality technologies, such as voice and haptics, have the power to fuel adaptive solutions. In implementing the latest innovations, retailers have an opportunity to make accessibility a baseline consideration — designing for universality can make new experiences more palatable for *all*.

Find Ways to Digitize the Physical

Tap into the wide range of new tools available in digital media, from interactive 3D formats to motion animation, to capture the rich tactility of real-life experiences. Push this even further by taking advantage of the instant interactivity that digital provides.

Make It Easy for Shoppers to Surf the Omnichannel

Find points of interaction between the digital and physical storefront, such as via QR codes, but also make it easy for users to jump from channel to channel through easy, secure, and interoperable account log-in solutions.
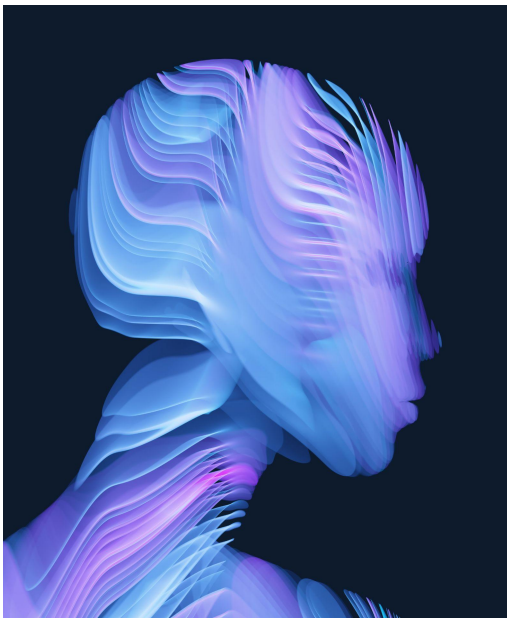
02 A Holistic Path to Purchase

While there is often a right answer or metric to the most optimal path to purchase, the quality of the journey along the way is what can ultimately differentiate you as a retailer and instill positive feelings in the customer that make them *want* to come back. In this section, we make the case for a more holistic approach to the purchasing journey that puts the human first.

Topics covered:

- Balancing hyper-personalization with privacy

- Validation at every step

- Considerately closing the loop

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Balancing
Hyper-Personalization
with **Privacy**

Web 2.0 opened up a world of choice to consumers, from endless rabbit holes of content to expansive marketplaces touting goods in every size, color, and shape — all easier than ever to access but increasingly difficult to sift through.

Enter a new age of curation and hyper-personalization. **The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has slingshotted us towards Web 4.0**, which will be defined by a symbiosis between man and machine. As AI language models get more sophisticated and come to anticipate users' every want, **dynamic personalization will become a necessity, not just a nice-to-have**. In the next evolution of customer-centricity, the right products and services will *find us*, rather than waiting for us to find them.

Conditioned by addictive algorithms on platforms like TikTok and Spotify, consumers are already expecting heightened levels of responsiveness throughout their shopping experience, and that expectation only grows with younger generations: 75% of Gen Z report that they would stop using a brand if the experience isn't personalized, compared to 66% for all consumers.

At the moment, the main obstacle for AI is the amount of data available, especially as privacy regulations continue to tighten. While consumers express an overwhelming desire for personalized experiences, that need is tempered by escalating unease around AI and use of personal data — a concern expressed by 7 in 10 Americans. **Retailers who can be transparent in their practices, communicate clearly, and find creative solutions that are *also* ethical can get the edge on consumer trust in the long term**.

In the next evolution of customer-centricity, the right products and services will *find us.*

What are some ways that retailers can start to up the stakes on personalized experiences — without losing sight of the *human* at the center?

- **Microsegmentation** - Taking a page from Spotify and their many "microgenres," AI can help brands drill consumers down to more granular levels of segmentation that unite first party data compiled from many touchpoints — not only that, but groupings that are fluid, dimensional, and don't rely on outdated binaries.

- **Conversational browsing** - ChatGPT is on its way to revolutionizing search, with companies from Google to Microsoft fast-tracking development into AI-aided query. Retailers should prepare for a reality in which automated, conversation-based chat will become an important — if not *the* main — means for customers to shop in connected spaces. As an added bonus, this kind of dialogue can open up opportunities to develop a deeper relationship with customers and build a library of zero party data .

- **Curation + discovery** - From Etsy, who recently tapped Martha Stewart to curate their massive marketplace, to Shoptrue, an AI-aided platform built on the concept of "fashion playlists," retail is headed in the direction of narrowing the scope of choice for customers. A survey by Synchrony found that 62% of shoppers are open to fewer choices in the service of ease and simplicity. Whether through content or various filtering tools, retailers have many spaces to deliver a more curated experience to customers, while still allowing room for the surprise and discovery of IRL experiences.
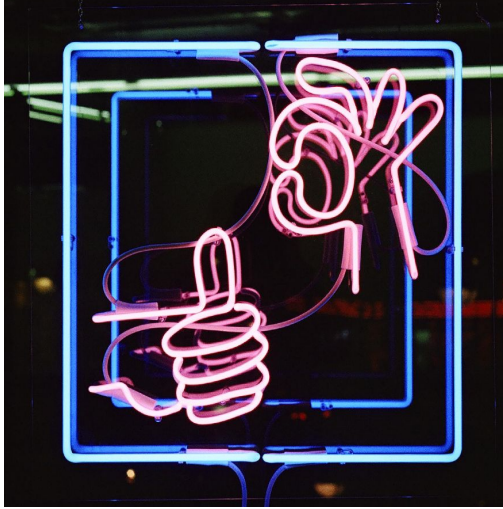
Validation at *Every* Step

While personalization and curation can make the shopping process more manageable for the consumer, there is room within this narrower scope to deliver a deeper, richer experience.

For one, it is estimated that 40–60% of sales are lost due to customer indecision. **Retailers can tap into the psychology behind "choice paralysis" by equipping consumers with tools that provide validation at every step** so that they can feel confident in their decisions.

If we think of these validation points as service stations along the path to purchase, the major stops might include peer reviews, internal and external product comparison tools, visualization aids, and chatbots. **Each is integral in getting the customer to their final destination and areas where retailers can make significant gains.** For example, 80% of businesses believe they provide superior customer service, but only 8% of customers agree. The opportunity cost? To start, Millennials say they are willing to pay 21% more for excellent customer service.

In considering the human aspect of the experience, along with new technologies, there come many opportunities to refresh and introduce tools that create an affirming journey for the customer — some key areas to keep an eye on:

- **Intelligent virtual assistants** - The next stage of AI we are embarking on is on a quest to better understand the nuances of human emotion and respond accordingly. For example, one thing that AI has become adept in is detecting "angry clicking." But what can it do next to act on this insight? As conversation-based AI tools become commonplace, intelligent virtual assistants (IVAs) will replace current chatbots that run on static and linear logic. With the development of generative video, we can also expect to see live, human-like interfaces enliven customer service automation.

- **Generative visualization tools** - Visualization tools, from AR filters to lite versions of design apps, have become a staple in the fashion and home markets, especially as the pandemic stalled in-person shopping. Now users are taking matters into their own hands and using generative tools like Midjourney to visualize their own dream homes and outfits. Rather than gatekeeping the activity, retailers can build on these technologies to create visualization tools that are more individualized, open-ended, conversational, and inspiring.

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Considerately
Closing the Loop

As we've already explored, there are many factors that can contribute to users abandoning a shopping experience. If they've managed to make it to the virtual checkout line, this becomes a crucial area for retailers to put their best foot forward.

While the last few clicks can make or break a sale, it is worth remembering that the checkout experience can (and should) start when the customer enters the "store," whether in a digital, physical, or hybrid environment. Throughout the entire journey, there are plenty of opportunities to address the various transactional elements of checkout, such as payments, registration, delivery, and discounts.

By centering empathy in the checkout process, retailers can bridge the wide, invisible gap that exists between them and the digital shopper. From payments to fulfillment, retailers can stand out in the digital landscape by keeping these values top of mind:

- **Transparency** - Among the top reasons for cart abandonment are high, unexpected extra costs and slow delivery times. If the customer has invested significant time in building their cart only to be deterred at the end, this could leave a lasting negative impression. In keeping transparency at the core, retailers can create experiences that are respectful of customers' time and attention and make them feel like they are in control. For example, Modernist Pantry leads off with delivery information and real-time shipping updates on their homepage, turning these features into almost a sales tool to capture visitors upfront.

- **Flexibility** - We are going through a payments revolution, with digital wallets, BNPL schemes, and even cryptocurrencies developing into standard checkout options. Combined with the plethora of fulfilment options that the pandemic opened up, such as curbside pickup, there is no longer a one-size-fits-all policy that retailers can rely on. The key for retailers will be to prioritize these various options, make room for new pathways in their customer journey map, and to clearly communicate this throughout the experience.

- **Interoperability** - With the number of shopping channels and alternative payment options expanding, as well as accounts for customers to keep track of, interoperability — especially combined with security — is fast becoming a must-have in this hyper-connected ecosystem. Interoperability is what has given rise to comprehensive, one-click digital wallet solutions, such as Paypal, Stripe, and Bolt. In the future, we can see the US following in the footsteps of the super apps like Alipay that have taken off in Asia, which have the potential to bridge transactional divides between retailers, countries, and channels.

EYE MASK
PILLOW
QUILTED BLANKET
FLAT SHEET
FITTED SHEET
MEMORY FOAM TOPPER

Burrow *Masters* Content *Clarity*

As a digital native, it is no surprise that DTC furniture brand Burrow sets an example in the home market for a holistic path to purchase, balancing an information-rich experience with clarity of language and clean design. Most of all, **the experience puts the customer's perspective first rather than the company agenda**.

Up front, visitors are presented with the Burrow's unique value proposition that spells out exactly what's in it for them:

- Fast and free shipping
- Modular, easy-to-move design
- Durable, premium materials

The ethos continues through to the product detail pages, which feature an intuitively arranged hierarchy of media, snappy copy, clearly illustrated technical specs, peer reviews, and expert recommendations. A notable feature is the customization menu, in which a variety of product assets — stills, gifs, videos — are updated live as the user navigates through options. Visualization tools often exist as a separate experience, and so the real innovation here is that Burrow has incorporated this essential tool en route to the path to purchase. **The result is a 360° understanding of the product that takes much of the guesswork and cross-referencing out of the shopping experience.**

When customers are ready to complete their purchase, a "SECURE CHECKOUT" button takes them to a four-step process that is actually as simple as it looks. Burrow does not rely on dark patterns like forcing the user to create an account in order to purchase an item. The checkout process also emphasizes value by highlighting the cost savings throughout — a small touch that leaves the customer *feeling good* about their purchase.

Up front, visitors are presented with the company's unique value proposition that spells out exactly what's in it for them.

Explore Ethical Applications for AI

With all of the developments going on, it is hard *not* to get swept up in the excitement around AI. While retailers *should* jump on the technology ASAP, it is important not to lose sight of ethics along the way and find ways to wield these powerful tools for the betterment of their customer.

Adopt More Nuanced User Profiles

Societally, people are growing more resistant to being flattened into broad generalizations, specifically Gen Z. Revisit the user profiles that form the foundation of your UX and business strategies and see where you can add more dimension and give nods to individuality.

Find Ways to Boost Consumer Confidence

The commerce landscape is vast and reaching a point of over-saturation. All things being equal, retailers who can provide an affirming experience that makes consumers feel informed and confident in their decisions can gain a competitive edge.

Consider the Whole Experience as One Long Checkout

In taking a more holistic approach to digital commerce, checkout shouldn't be an afterthought but a key consideration — and even a selling tool — that is integrated throughout the entire experience so that there are no unpleasant surprises for customers waiting at the end.

03 Connecting Emotionally

Plug-and-play technologies have leveled the e-commerce playing field and raised overall standards, but they have also made it harder for individual experiences to stand out. In this technology-mediated environment, retailers who are able to connect emotionally can cut through the noise. From visuals to content, we uncover inspiration and ideas in this section that leave a lasting impression.

Topics covered:

- Strengthening trust
- Designing for better
- Relating through stories

Strengthening **Trust**

As social media has given rise to a bounty of small e-tailers, dropshippers, and individual sellers, authentic connection has become an important prerequisite for purchasing. For larger retailers and institutions, this means that **trust needs to be rebuilt brick by brick and constantly tended to, especially as consumers grow more skeptical of not only big business but big influencers**.

Given a marketplace rife with competitive products, "dupes," and unethical practices — compounded by economic uncertainty — **consumers now require more assurance before spending their money**. Once trusted, user-generated content (UGC) has also come under scrutiny, with the public more heightened to fake reviews and influencer "sponcon." As extensions like ReviewMeta and AI tools emerge to help consumers dig through to find validated products and content, retailers will need to be prepared to meet evolving standards of trust. **What are some tactics that retailers can take to start to rebuild consumer trust?**

- **Elevating UGC** - While much user-generated content is coming under question, it remains one of the most important sales tools, with 65% of shoppers in a recent survey saying that they have purchased fashion items based on UGC from real customers. Candid, unfiltered images and video are invaluable to this content pipeline — consider how you can incentivize your customers to safely and easily share these assets. Looking forward, retailers can also leverage UGC in building the corpus for future bespoke AI solutions.

- **Engaging with deinfluencing** - The influencer economy has met its match in a "deinfluencing" movement that has taken over social, which aims to debunk viral products and influencer endorsements. Retailers can start to navigate this heated environment by erring on the side of radical transparency and accountability: Engage with criticism and be quick to own up to mistakes and shortcomings. As an alternative to professional influencers, seek out real experts in the field who can speak from a knowledgeable and objective place.

- **Encouraging community** - Built on the idea of moving power and influence away from centralized sources and into the hands of the community, Web3 is driving higher expectations for user engagement. Beyond featuring UGC in your digital commerce experience, think of how you can organically plant the seeds for a thriving community among your audience, whether on official or unofficial channels. It is through these authentic connections and interactions that new advocates for your brand can grow.

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Designing *For* **Better**

According to research by Adobe, appealing design sensibilities are even more important to a successful web experience than personalization. Today, traditional online retailers are competing with a growing number of content providers and commerce upstarts for visitor attention. **Through elements like color, typography, shape, texture, and composition, the visual design of a digital experience can provide the most direct line to consumer emotions**. As micro aesthetics and creator culture collide online and give rise to a more design-savvy consumer, the time is ripe for retailers to refresh their UI strategy and revisit their core design principles.

While the fast churn of the social media landscape has made it a challenge to track and act on trends, a few key design priorities have come to the surface. **Rather than trying to keep up with the latest aesthetic trends, retailers would be wise to ground future design in these new macro values:**

- **Unique expression** - Social platforms like Instagram and Pinterest contributed to to an overly curated and filtered sameness in visual design; and the clean, modern plug-and-play web templates favored by early DTC companies only added to what has become known as "blanding." In reaction to this decade-long movement, consumers are now yearning for more unique, freeform, and maximalist expressions. For example, major brands like Burberry are returning to traditional, ornate typefaces after experimenting with modern sans serif for a while. New drag-and-drop website builders are also encouraging fluid, out-of-the-box compositions. Retailers who can balance novelty, a consistent brand identity, and usability can distinguish themselves.

- **Well-being** - Wellness has become a key consideration in almost every consumer category, and the design of digital experiences is no exception. For one, designing for accessibility and neurodiversity can unlock features and visual details that benefit all. Biophilic design is another surging influence across all disciplines, as we come to recognize the connection between psychology and elements rooted in the natural world. For example, think of how the shape of a tree could be applied to more intuitive navigation systems or even how pebbles could inspire organic shapes for buttons.

- **Sustainability** - Information and communications technologies currently account for around 2% of global greenhouse gas emissions — on par with the aviation industry pre-pandemic — and it is forecasted that this number will balloon to 14% by 2040. The average page weight, or the number of total bytes (comprising the HTML, media, CSS, Javascript, and/or third-party resources), has increased by 356% over the past decade, requiring websites to use proportionate amounts of storage and energy. When you consider the computing power needed to fuel our AI future, we can expect sustainable design — e.g. dark mode, pared-down assets, mobile-optimized — to become standard practice across digital experiences. In introducing these parameters, however, there comes vast potential for design innovation.

> When you consider the computing power needed to fuel our AI future, we can expect sustainable design to become standard practice across digital experiences.

Relating *Through* **Stories**

In freeing the UI from the rigid grids and linear logic that has dominated digital design, experiences can open up new room for storytelling. Whether it's a TikTok-style "edutainment" piece or a customer profile, stories can make your message more memorable and humanize your brand. One famous experiment found that pairing a story with a product could increase its perceived value by up to 2,706%. Why? Listening to a story triggers the release of oxytocin, a hormone associated with trust and connection. **As digital technologies intensify feelings of isolation and AI threatens to dilute aspects of humanity, forming a personal connection with your customer through stories or other means will only grow more important.**

Luckily, retailers can now call on an arsenal of media, such as gifs, 360° images, animation, and compelling infographics, to bring narratives to life. As an added benefit, the digital setting offers easy ways for users to interact with content and take immediate action. **In examining the emerging landscape of technologies and social trends through a human-centered lens, several opportunities for next-level storytelling immersion come to the forefront:**

- **Customer as main character** - It's not enough to tell your brand story and expect your audience to consume it — the most important thing is to allow customers to see themselves *in* the story. Aspects of gamification can be an effective way to get customers to feel invested in your commerce experience; however, the key is to deploy it with purpose and in the right context. For example, rather than taking the typical route of presenting a feed of recommendations, retailers can take a more creative approach through algorithmically powered personalization quizzes. Instead of asking the obvious questions about product preferences, let these questions speak more to the unique personality and emotional qualities of your customer. By allowing customers to play a part in crafting their own recommendations and highlighting their individuality, they are given a *real* stake in the commerce experience.

- **Content-forward commerce** - In an era where almost every digital touchpoint, from social media posts to video ads, is shoppable, the traditional e-commerce site must offer another layer of value and entertainment to capture today's customer. The well-known Bill Gates quote "content is king" rings truer than ever, as content — whether it is a how-to article or shoppable UGC — can provide an extra layer of context to your offering. Taking an editorialized approach to how you present the shopping experience can allow customers to easily connect more meaning to your products or services.

Mud Australia
Cultivates Trust *Through* Storytelling

As a handmade ceramics brand characterized by a timeless simplicity, Mud Australia's storytelling takes a front seat from the moment visitors enter their site. **Rather than pulling customers in with promotional deals or gimmicky microtrends, Mud Australia integrates an editorial format into their homepage that reveals their commitment to social responsibility, sustainability, and craftsmanship.**

While clickable images that lead to their key product areas appear first, this menu occupies minimal real estate compared to the articles that make up majority of the brand's homepage. In an unconventional move that reveals their purpose-led ethos, the first section that appears below the product menu courageously proclaims the brand's support of Australia's original settlers, the Gadigal peoples, and links to an initiative to introduce a First Nations Voice to the Australian Parliament. The homepage also contains detailed articles that expand on the brand's origin story, their carbon-neutral initiatives, and their handmade processes. Finally, visitors are encouraged to explore their journal, "a quiet place to share inspiration, stories and recipes."

The site's soft and modular grid design allows the site experience to feel just as much like a magazine as it is a shop. Gently rounded forms and a clay-like color palette only add to the the serene, calming ambience. By prioritizing content that reveals who Mud Australia is and what they believe in, the brand builds trust and allows their story to sell their product. Ultimately, Mud Australia's approach demonstrates an understanding that, **in a sea of endless options and marketing noise, it is the care that you put into your storytelling that will resonate with the customer on an emotional level.**

> By prioritizing content that reveals who Mud Australia is and what they believe in, the brand builds trust and allows their story to sell their product.

Show Up Authentically & Transparently

In a digital environment crowded with fluff and misinformation, consumers are reluctant to trust brands. Craft your voice to align with your true brand persona and be straightforward about your social and environmental initiatives.

### Design Experiences that Break Convention

Having now adopted digital commerce at an accelerated pace, consumers are growing bored of typical site interfaces and will find delight in unique approaches to design that incorporate moving elements, creative typography, and sensorially engaging visuals.

Go Beyond Commerce with Content

Today, consumers look to brands and retailers to not only fulfill their utilitarian needs, but as an extension of their lifestyle and identity. Make your site experience more than a transactional space, by expanding on your brand universe with integrated content.

Immerse Your Customer in Your Story

It's in our nature as humans to make meaning and connect with one another through stories. Weave an intentional narrative into your site experience, not only through your content, but also through interactive elements that invite customers to take an active part in their shopping experience.
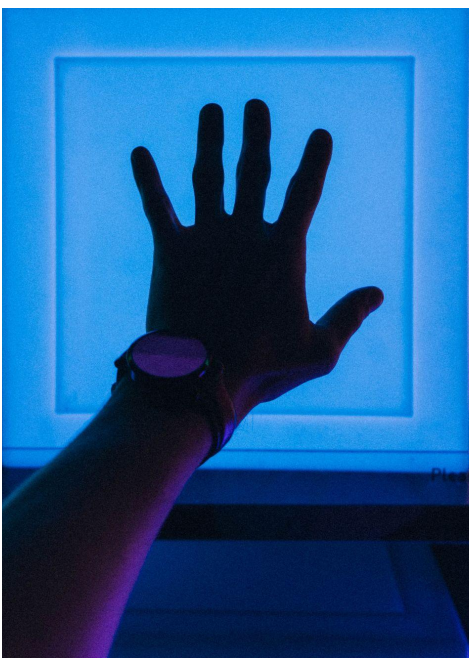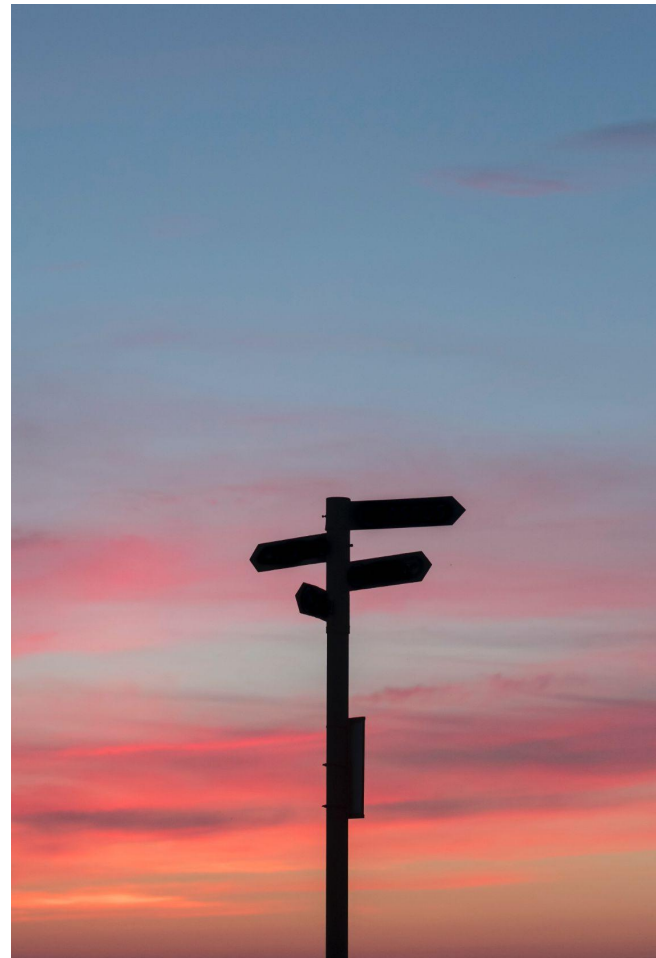
The current AI boom caps off many decades of an innovation-driven mindset that has dominated the business environment. While these advancements have benefited us immeasurably, the technology-mediated landscape has also carried us further away from the human-to-human interaction that the retail industry was built on.

Post-pandemic, traffic in physical stores has picked up, and projections show this trend continuing, while e-commerce sales have slowed. For customers who are returning to stores, in-person shopping offers the immediacy of touch and other sensory stimulation, in addition to a much-needed social outlet. For both digital natives and traditional retailers, nourishing these qualities in the commerce experience and bridging the expanding array of touchpoints between virtual and physical spaces will be crucial.

By leading with values, rather than trends or technology, retailers can craft experiences that are meaningful, authentic, and made to last.

The events of the past few years have shown us how futile it is to try to predict the future. What we *can* safely assume is that sales between online and physical channels will continue to ebb and flow and for change to be a constancy across all aspects, from technological to economical. Amidst this maelstrom of unpredictability, the one thing we can rely on to keep us anchored is our shared humanity. By leading with values, rather than trends or technology, retailers can craft experiences that are meaningful, authentic, and made to last.

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