Deliver world-class customer experiences with a unified commerce platform

ADD TO CART

Unified
commerce

LS Retail

It is our fundamental belief that systems supporting the unified commerce vision are the **future of the industry**.

Jerry Sheldon, IHL Services

To compete in today's fast-moving retail landscape, you must be able to keep up with consumers. But how can you know your customers' preferences and habits, if the tools you use don't support that visibility?

Retailers collect large amounts of valuable data on consumer preferences, customer habits, inventory, marketing campaigns. But in most retail enterprise setups, every single system the company uses – think Point of Sale (POS), e-commerce, CRM, inventory management, and more – stores data into a separate database. These systems are often custom integrated or even homegrown, and as a consequence they **cannot communicate seamlessly and instantly** with each other. As the databases are disconnected, putting the data together, making sense of it and analyzing it becomes a complex, costly and lengthy manual process. In other words, a tasks that many businesses don't have the resources to undertake. As a result, a wealth of **knowledge is left untapped**, leaving retailers none the wiser on what goes on with their customer base.

Until recently, this was the norm in retail. Businesses would run a multitude of disconnected business applications, which were hard to maintain, and which made it extremely costly and complex to see customers across the channels, follow changes in the business, and deliver personalized, seamless experiences.

This was how things worked – until **unified commerce** entered the stage.

Do you know your customer base?

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What is this unified commerce?

You may be tempted to believe that unified commerce is just the latest buzzword in the industry.

It's not.

In the past decade, retailers have gone through multiple transitions. First retail became **multichannel**: businesses started selling through many sales channels, but handled each of them in a different way. The result was a scattered, inconsistent brand image.

The next step, **omni-channel,** focused on creating a cohesive branding and user experience across channels. The physical store, online shop, brand website, social media presence and mobile apps started to be managed as one, with the same look and feel and brand image. The different back-end systems used for each channel were linked through integrations to facilitate communication. Unfortunately, these integrations were often patched together, leading to data discrepancies, problems accessing information, delays, and quickly rising costs for the retailer.

With **unified commerce**, the software used to run the business finally **supports and facilitates the cohesive brand experience** that is delivered to consumers. Unified commerce is a **holistic platform** that enables you to administer and oversee every aspect of your retail business within **one** software system that encompasses your whole enterprise, from back to front, to every customer touchpoint. No matter which or how many sales channels you use.
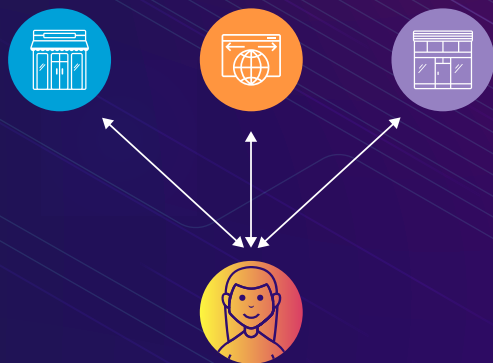
Multi-channel
Online and offline channels are managed as separate. The products, prices, discounts and promotions available may be different on each channel. There is usually little consistency when it comes to branding and overall shopping experience. To customers, each channel feels like a separate brand.
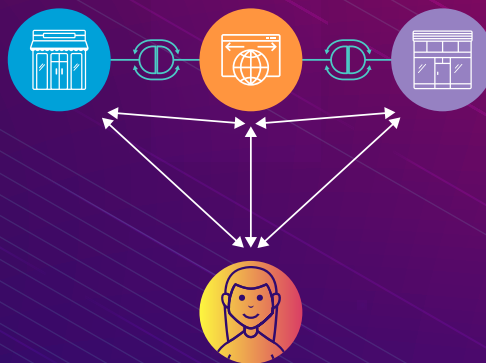
Omni-channel
Retailers try to create a consistent customer experience across sales channels by integrating the stand-alone software solutions which are used to run each channel. The customer journey improves, but the use of separate solutions means that retailers are still unable to build a single view of their consumers across channels, can't keep track of what is happening across their enterprise in real time, and do not have one single version of the truth.

Unified commerce
The customer experience is put at the center. All sales channels and customer touchpoints are managed within a single retail software platform, which covers the whole business. By having all data stored in one database, retailers can have the real-time, enterprise-wide visibility they need – and offer it to consumers, too.

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This e-book discusses six ways a unified commerce solution can completely transform your retail business, enabling you to deliver an experience fit for tomorrow's consumers.

1. Put the customer experience at the center
2. Become as flexible as today's shoppers
3. Easily manage returns across the channels
4. Give consumers the visibility they demand
5. Offer experiences that go beyond traditional retail
6. Know your customers and get personal

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Put the customer experience at the center

89% of retail businesses believe that, by 2020, most competition will be centered around the **quality of the customer experience**, Gartner reports. When it comes to designing a shopping experience that follows and supports the way people shop, the main point to keep in mind is that **consumers do not think in terms of channels**. When they interact with you, they expect consistent information and the same quality of service, no matter if the point of contact is online, in a physical store, of through your call center. They also expect to be **recognized**, and given information, advice and offers that are relevant to them.

Picture this: Louis, a frequent customer of your brand, decides to shop on your online store for the first time. He logs in with his loyalty program credentials, but instead of getting recognition and personalized product suggestions, he is greeted by the system as if he were a new customer – with no acknowledgement of his long, well-documented purchase history. Louis tries to buy a pink jacket, but his size appears to be sold out. He knows the jacket is available in at least a couple of your downtown store locations; unfortunately, the website doesn't offer visibility into the inventory of physical stores. Frustrated, Louis decides to buy a pack of socks using a voucher he got during his last in-store visit; but alas, there is only a barcode on the voucher, and no code to insert on the website. Apparently, the discount can only be used in-store.

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#1

Hey Louis :)

Click
and collect

Get it
delivered

Now imagine you are using a unified commerce system to run your business. Upon logging in, Louis is immediately greeted with his name and shown recommended products in his size based on his previous purchases and interests. When he clicks on the pink jacket, the system finds it available in one of the store locations, and asks Louis if he wants to have the item shipped to his home, or if he would rather pick it up in any of your stores. At checkout, the system reminds Louis he has a valid discount he may want to apply to this purchase, and asks him if he'd rather pay using his loyalty points, cash, or a combination of the two.

Providing a **unified brand experience** across all your sales channels doesn't simply mean having the same look and feel. It also means providing the same all-round access to information, the same level of personalized service and the same seamless, high-quality experience at all times, on all channels.

With a unified commerce platform, you can do that. Simply.

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Become as flexible as today's shoppers

Shopping today is not what it used to be a few decades, or even a few years ago. With the boom of mobile devices, the weekly trip to the mall has been replaced by a **daily multitude of shopping micro-moments.** Today's consumers don't dedicate a specific day of the week to browsing and shopping for goods: **they use their time as it becomes available**. A shopper might flip through the new arrivals on their mobile device while waiting for the bus, check current sales and offers of their favorite brands during their lunch break, and in the evening, look up online details of the products they saw while ''window shopping'' on their way from work to the subway station.

To stay top of mind with today's consumers, you must **be there** during all these micro-moments. This means ensuring that:

Your brand **pops up** when customers are looking for product ideas	Consumers can easily find **all the information** (product specifications, availability, delivery, and so on) they need while they are still deciding which item to buy	When customers are ready to buy, they can do it **easily and snag-free –** no matter what channel they decide to use

When you are using disconnected systems, offering the above can be very complex. It will require costly integrations – and even that may not be enough. To deliver the instant, smooth shopping experience that is now the norm, your systems must communicate **instantly**. When a customer decides to buy that new treadmill online, all the information they need must be available, clear and visible, on your e-commerce portal. If they need to phone your store to find out the measurements of the piece of equipment; if the delivery and pick-up options and costs are not transparent; if there is no way to check stock availability; you risk losing the sale. And the heart of the matter is, when you are using separate systems for your e-commerce, Point of Sale, back office and inventory, you simply **cannot** offer a large chunk of this necessary information in real time.

With unified commerce, all information is shared from a single database. This means you can give real-time, transparent, reliable product details at all times, on all touchpoints.

#2
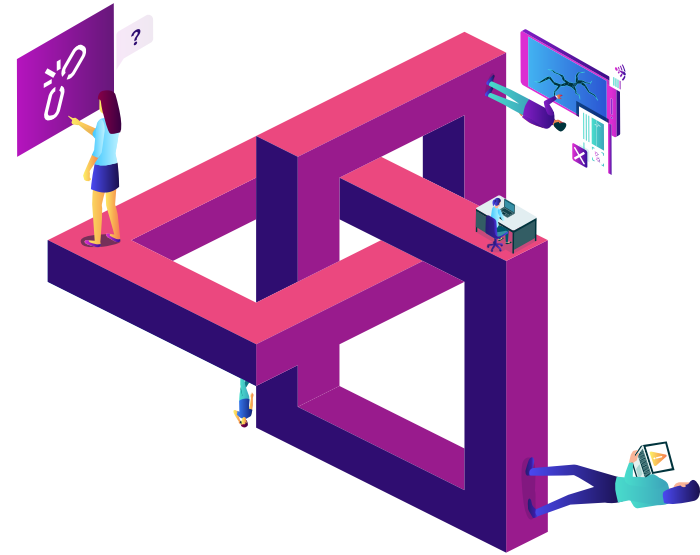
Consumers think of terms of a brand – not channels. Retailers have responded by shifting their focus to unified commerce because it is now a **requirement for survival.**

Boston Retail Partners, "Customer Experience/Unified Commerce Survey"

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#3

89% of repeat customers who have a good return experience are likely to buy again.

Shopify

Easily manage returns across the channels

Your relationship with consumers doesn't end once a purchase has taken place. Post-purchase moments such as **product returns and exchanges** are fundamental in cementing loyalty. Do you make people jump through hoops to return an item they didn't like? Or do your store locations accept and exchange products bought online, no questions asked? According to research from Shopify, 67% of shoppers **check the return policy** before buying from a retailer. If they don't like, they may simply decide not to buy.

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The MIT Sloan Management Review conducted a research comparing customers who had made legitimate product returns, and customers who never return items. The results were surprising: people who never make product returns tend to **buy less overall**, and have a significantly **lower lifetime profitability** for retailers. Online shoe retailer Zappos, known for its generous 365-day, free return policy, agrees. "Our best customers have the highest returns rates but they are also the ones that spend the most money with us and are our most profitable customers," says Craig Adkins, Zappos' VP of Services and Operations. In other words, it makes perfect business sense to offer easy and pain-free ways for your customers to return and exchange items.

As regards the specifics of returns, UPS's latest Pulse of the Online Shopper study reported that consumers are split on whether they prefer to return items **online or in-store**. Offering **across-channels exchanges and returns** is therefore increasingly essential to guarantee consumer satisfaction.

With traditional disconnected systems, returns in multiple locations and channels can be complex to handle. If inventory is maintained in a separate database for each store, taking back an item in a store location other than the one where it was sold can mean confusion, lost inventory, and complex accounting. Even worse, your system may not allow you to accept items that were sold in another store!

A unified commerce solution gives you the **across-channel visibility** that you need to offer the quick, flexible service that is expected today. As key information such as the customer's **purchase history**, **inventory availability** across the enterprise, and **loyalty data** are maintained in one database, you can easily accept returns in all your locations. No hassle for the consumer – and no confusion and lost stock for you.

"In the next five years, the **most successful** retailers will embrace [unified commerce and cloud computing] wholeheartedly".

Jerry Sheldon, IHL Services

#3

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#4

No stock!
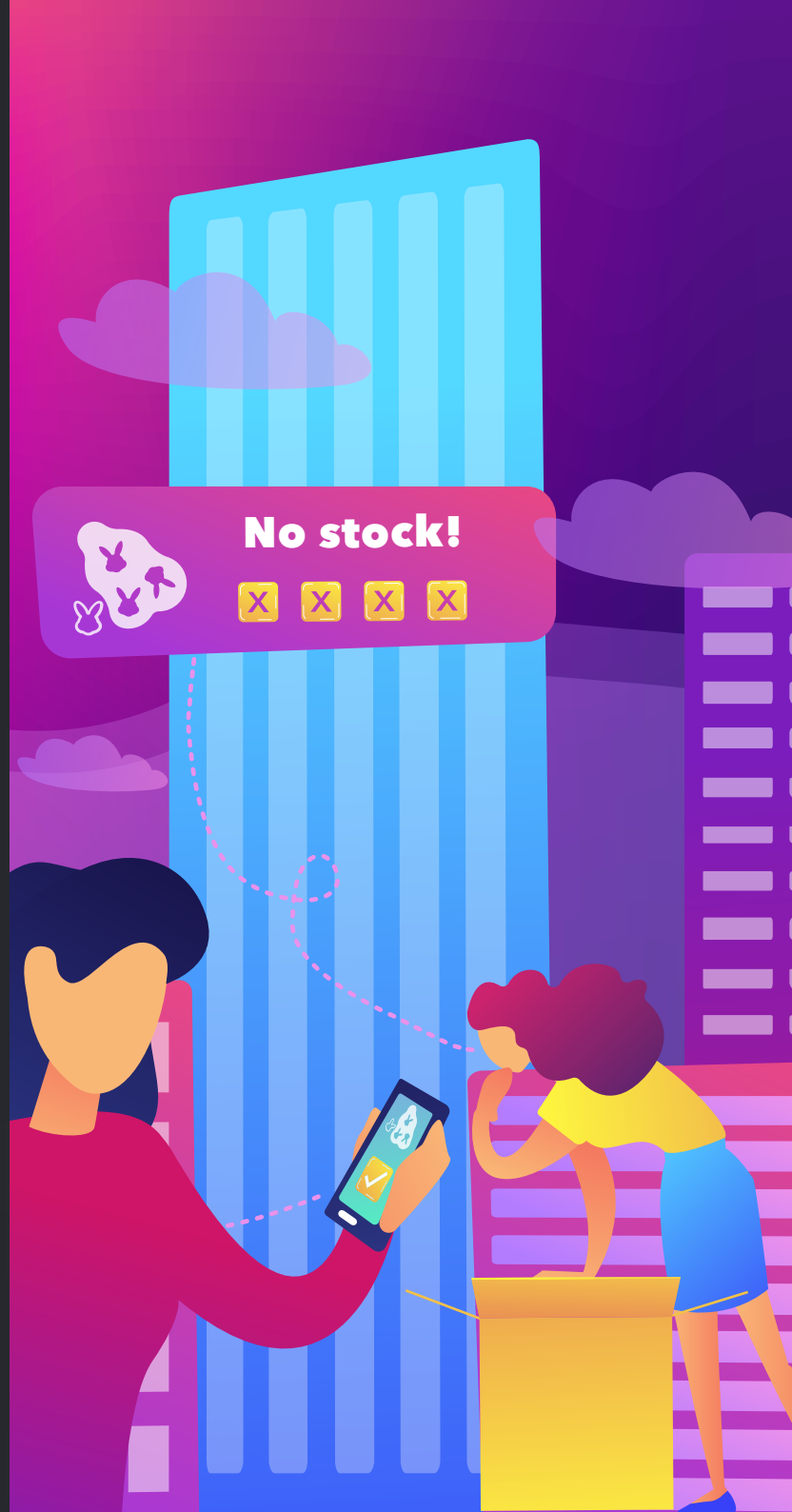
Give consumers the visibility they demand

Maria is browsing your website in her lunch break. How lucky! The animal cookie cutters she was looking for are back in stock – and just in time for next week's charity bake! To avoid the risk that the cutters won't reach her in time, she decides to visit your nearest store location after work and buy them there. However, when she enters your store, the staff informs her that they haven't yet received the cutters, and don't know when, or if, they will get them.

As many as 88% of consumers **research and select options online** before heading out to a store, according to a recent report by the Ecommerce Foundation. As a consequence, **inventory visibility** and **transparency of information** across all touchpoints have become a **must-have**, while channel disconnects and unexpected out-of-stocks are increasingly seen as unacceptable. A study by the IBM Institute for Business Value reported that 66% of consumers want to **know** that the item they are looking for is available **before** they even enter a store. Not only: 46% of shoppers expect store associates to be able to **fix out of stocks instantly**, for example ordering a replacement item on the spot.

With a unified platform, it's easy to fulfil modern customers' expectations, and avoid a disappointed – and perhaps lost – customer. When all your locations are managed through a single system, information is **shared and distributed instantly** to all touchpoints. This means both your staff and customers can have access to the same, real-time data, including what stock is available, where, and even how many items are left in each location. And as soon as the last available flowery dress or marble-top coffee table is sold, the change is instantly reflected on the website, mobile app, and in-store Points of Sale. So your staff and your customers always know what is in, and where. No delay, no disappointment, no ''sorry – we can't fulfil the order you sent in three days ago, because we just realized that the item sold out last week''.

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Offer experiences that go beyond traditional retail

In an effort to add new revenue streams, and to maintain steady customer interest and footfall, many retailers have been **diversifying** their offering, expanding their horizons beyond pure retailing. Some of the most popular, and effective, tactics include:

• **Pop-ups:** From temporary shops-in-the-shop, to appearances at fairs and festivals, to one-time-only in-store events, pop-ups have successfully transitioned from retail experiments to well-established ways to extend a brand. In the era of generalized ''fear of missing out'', their blink-and-you'll-miss-it nature makes them inherently exciting for consumers.

• **Courses, workshops and classes:** A great way to satisfy consumers' desire to learn something new – perhaps how to do a glamourous makeup look, or how to take great sunset pictures with the camera equipment they just bought –, use your store locations in a novel way, and create a community around your brand, all in one.

**Manage events, reservations and courses within your unified retail platform**

Read more

#5

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#5

• **Forays in other verticals:** From watch retailers opening own-brand hotels to sportswear brands setting up gyms inside their store locations, more retailers are trying to increase engagement creating their own across-industry mix. The most successful experiments arguably fall into the **foodservice-retail blend** category. Spending on eating out keeps on growing among modern consumers, Bloomberg reports. Unsurprisingly, more retailers are trying to get a piece of the pie. By using their store locations as eat-in areas, they also get the added bonus of a low-cost, high-value **showroom**, as customers get a chance to live the brand's products (and perhaps get so used to them, they will want to take some home) while they are relaxing and having a bite. As a result, in the past few years we have seen dine-in areas appear in grocery stores, cafés popping up across furniture, DIY, and even jewelry stores (breakfast at Tiffany's, anyone?), and well-known brands such as Armani, Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus open up their own high-end restaurant concepts. As a result, **in-store dining is now one of the fastest growing segments in the hospitality industry**.

To deploy these diverse operations effectively within a consistent, unique brand experience, retailers require unified software solutions that enable them to manage it all in one platform. Being able to **unify retail sales, restaurant operations, in-store event management and cross-channel customer accounts** into one system means simpler processes, lower costs, and fewer mistakes. All operations, from accounting, to staff training, to reporting, become quicker to perform, simpler, and more accurate when there is just one version of the truth – and it is easily accessible to all.
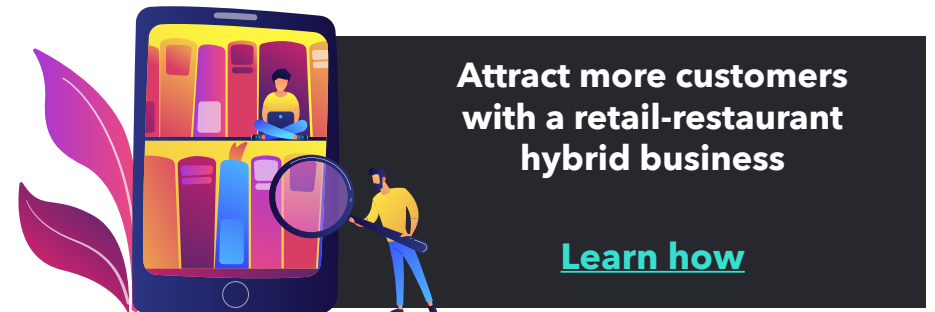
Attract more customers with a retail-restaurant hybrid business

Learn how
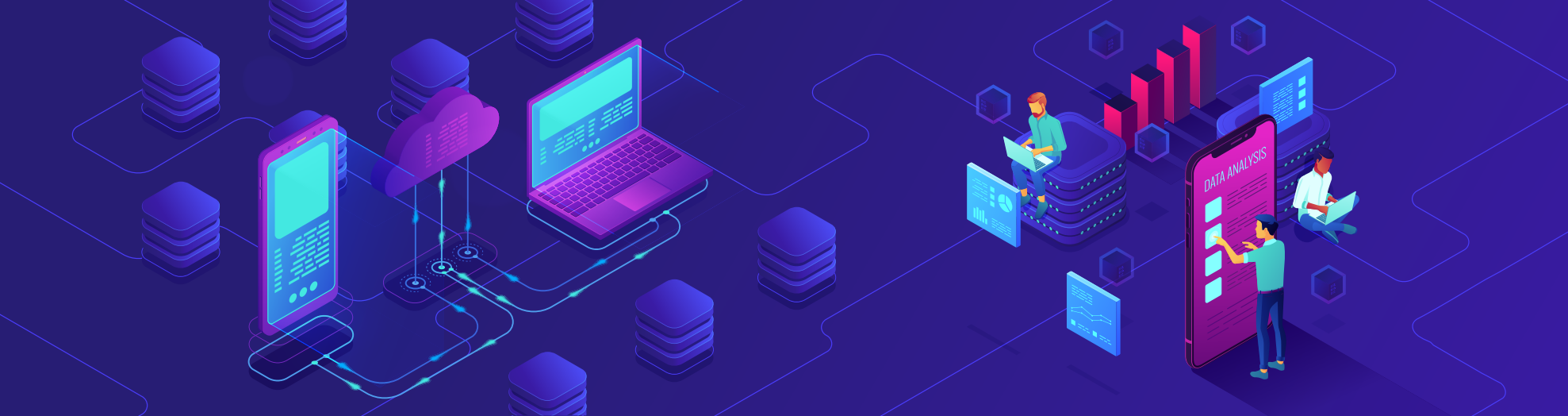
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Know your customers and get personal

Every day, retailers collect a large amount of valuable information on consumer preferences and habits through webpage visits, in-store purchases and returns, items favorited by loyal consumers, and even more customer touchpoints. Unfortunately, this data is often stored across different databases, which makes it very hard to access, link together and analyze. As a result, business are left with a treasure of scattered, untapped information that they don't have the time and resources to transform into business decisions.

With a unified system, all your customer data is collected in one place. When all your customers' shopping behaviors, interests and purchase history across your online and offline channels are captured by one system, it is much easier to link all information and create a **complete 360-degree view of your customers**. And once you have clear, timely insights into your customer base, you can leverage them to suggest relevant products, deliver personalized communications, and **tailor the shopping experience to your customers' expectations**.

Although you don't have to go as far as greeting loyal customers by name at the door, knowing about their purchase history and shopping habits can help you anticipate your customers' wishes in ways that can be both **innovative and personal**.

With real-time data from all your different locations and touchpoints, you can also **predict shopping behavior**. If you then use your analytics tools to cross-reference your findings with external trends and data, you almost have a crystal ball that can help you foresee spikes in purchases, upcoming fads, and ultimately know what your customers are really looking for, before they even know it themselves.

#6

Predict, personalize and impress using the power of AI

**Discover
LS Recommend**

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A unified customer journey

Unified commerce is not just a new type of software platform. At its heart, it's a new way of running your business, understanding your customers, and creating experiences that resonate with them.

To start, a unified commerce platform can help you create a meaningful, consistent **customer journey that always has the same look, feel and level of service**, no matter which channel your customers use to interact with you.

Beyond the shopping experience, unified commerce also brings benefits inside the enterprise, as it can quantum leap both the **quality and speed of information** that is shared internally. In a traditional, disconnected setup, where multiple systems are used to manage financials, Points of Sale, e-commerce, inventory and warehousing, management might have to wait for days or weeks to get the report they need. And once the report is ready, it may or may not have all the information needed – and is often already outdated. With unified commerce, there is **no delay** between the information being collected and reaching management. Not only. **No complex manual work** is needed to make sense of the data. The system collects the information across all touchpoints, stores it in a **consistent and non-redundant** form in a single database, and allows all the key players in your business to access it immediately. So you can always keep your performance in check, and steer the course exactly when you need to.

The benefits of this clear, rapid stream of information ultimately cascade down to your customers, who are able to find the information they need, the products they desire and the promotions that suit them best across all your channels, at all times.

Greg Buzek, President of IHL Group, the global research firm on retail and hospitality, recently underlined how unified information across the retail enterprise is at the heart of meaningful customer experiences. "Retailers are racing to get to a **single version of the truth** for the customer information and order information," he said. In order to do this, "**smart retailers** are investing in all different aspects of **unified commerce**."

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Don't let the wrong technology spoil your customer' experience

It's hard to deliver a great shopping experience when the technology you are using stands in the way between you and your customers.

Make a strategic decision for your business, and invest in a system that helps you understand your consumers and create wow experiences.

We can help you find the right solution for your needs.

Contact us

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LS Retail is a world-leading provider of business management software solutions for retail, hospitality and forecourt businesses of all sizes.

Our all-in-one management systems power tens of thousands of stores, restaurants, cafés, bakeries, pubs, food courts, cafeterias, and more.

For further information on the company and the products, visit www.LSRetail.com

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