

Pulling off a smooth and safe Black Friday mid-pandemic

Black Friday 2020. It's a date that, in the past, would herald long queues, close confines and fights over discounted television sets and kitchenware. Today, this picture needs to be framed by social distancing, masks, and reduced physical risk. But, asks Wynand Smit, CEO of Inovo, is the South African retail sector really ready for how these restrictions could impact on sales, customer safety and reputation?



Credit: Pexels

“The biggest question that should be on every retailer agenda is this – have they done what they need to do to ensure that customers are safe and systems are in place?” he asks.

“Most of the marketing materials that have launched Black Friday in the past have promoted offers that are not online. Most encourage people to line up outside physical stores in order to get physical discounts. This is not a viable option in 2020.”

Remote shopping with e-commerce and QR codes

First and foremost, retailers should be investing in solutions that allow customers to purchase discounted items remotely. For those retailers and customers that don't have access to online stores, an option worth investigating is the use of QR codes.

These could be printed next to items in brochures so that customers can purchase them using alternative methods. They

can then buy the items at the discounted price and collect them at another time, minimising the risk of contact and queues.

“Retailers could potentially take this one step further and look at ways of refining how customers engage with their stores and products outside of online shopping,” adds Smit.

“How can they get people to have the same experiences as online shoppers, even if they don’t have access to those technologies and tools? This challenge needs to be solved creatively, such as through the use of QR codes and shortcodes and by streamlining payment and credit options.”



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In addition to the risks posed by the virus, consumers are struggling financially after a long, tough year. Retailers should use the time leading up to Black Friday to find ways of streamlining or automating in-store credit applications so that people are not, once again, caught in queues on the day.

By providing self-service options, encouraging early credit applications and making them easier to do in-store, online or through the contact centre, retailers can improve customer access to credit and boost sales.

Transparency from purchase to payment to delivery

“There will be customers that are resistant to online shopping or who have limited understanding of the processes,” says Smit.

“This can be smoothed over by retailers if they can show a clear pathway from purchase to payment to delivery. Include stock levels on the website, make sure people understand any delays with delivery, and give people clear information so they feel that they’re safe. This will encourage them to try alternative ways of spending and limit the number of people queuing.”



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The post-sales customer experience

“Post-sales is actually even more important than sales,” adds Smit.

“Customers went to a lot of trouble to get that discount and the last thing they want is to sit on hold or be told that nobody knows where the products are or be given the runaround. Companies may be able to get away with badly designed websites and challenging routes to discounts if it is worth it for the customer in the end, but they can’t get away with bad after-sales service. This will only lose them reputation and customers.”

Contact centres can be leveraged to provide customers with solid support during and after the Black Friday sales. Using the right technology, enough skilled people, and supporting processes, the contact centre can provide customers with answers, insights and guidance around their orders, and ensure that customer satisfaction remains high.

“Finally, it is not only after-sales service, sales and customer support that will measure the retailer’s success at the end of the month,” concludes Smit. “This year, the benchmark will be how much effort retailers put into making sure that

customers feel safe. If the queues aren't managed and the risks ignored, it will reflect very badly on the store, no matter how large its footprint."

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