

Refreshing the retail experience beyond Omicron

With the Omicron wave of Covid infections expected to subside in January or February, retailers will be looking at the growth opportunities that 2022 may hold. The volatility of these times means that leading retailers should take a flexible approach to position themselves to deliver great customer experiences through different phases of the pandemic, says Steven Heilbron, CEO of Capital Connect.



Source: Getty

“Until we hit high vaccination rates in South Africa, the retail industry will need to adapt to the ebbs and flows of the virus, while delivering customer experiences that meet the consumer’s always rising expectations,” he adds. “Now is the time for forward-thinking retailers to plan strategically for how they will attract and retain customers during 2022.”

“After two years of pandemic and four waves of the Covid-19 infection, South African consumers would want a refreshing approach to shopping this new year,” says Heilbron. “Omnichannel retailers that offer exciting in-store shopping experiences and reliable online channels will be best positioned to thrive. Given that the economy is still tight, the best option for growth is to expand wallet share among existing customers.”



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How to sharpen the shopping experience

Heilbron says that there are many ways that retailers can sharpen their shopping experience to offer a more educational, engaging and hassle-free experience to their customers in 2022.

- **Interactive store displays:** In a world of easy online shopping, one of the major advantages a physical store has is that it can give customers a chance to get hands-on with a product. Consider the example of a sports goods store that has a court surrounded with nets at its centre. Here, customers can slam dunk a basketball, swing a cricket bat, or test the comfort of a new pair of takkies.
- **Livestreaming:** This form of shopper-engagement emerged as a major retail trend during the pandemic, particularly with restrictions on movement. Retailers can livestream content such as product unboxings and demonstrations to give e-commerce a bit more of a human feel. Sales reps can be on hand to answer customers' questions or show them how a product works.
- **Free in-store Wi-Fi:** Free in-store Wi-Fi can be a great way to attract browsers into a retail environment. Retailers can use the Wi-Fi signup and login process to capture data about their shoppers and promote relevant products and specials to them.
- **Expert demonstrations:** Retailers in sectors like homeware and DIY can attract traffic and increase sales by showing customers their products in action. Rather than simply leaving a lot of pots and pans on its shelves, a homeware dealer could hire an influencer in the culinary space to demonstrate how to use its cookware to whip up quick, nutritious meals. The content could be recorded to share on YouTube.
- **Pop-up stores:** The flexibility of the pop-up store format is a great match with uncertain times, allowing retailers to have a physical presence during times of relative Covid safety and to pack up when infection rates are high. It enables retailers to expand into new areas or position themselves in high-traffic areas (public events, for example), with minimal risk and capital outlay.
- **Omnichannel shopping:** Omnichannel players that offer customers a choice of channels and deliver consistent experiences at each touchpoint will be the big winners in 2022. Home deliveries, click-and-collect and e-commerce are all great growth opportunities in a changing market. Now could be a good time to join a home delivery platform or set up an app or e-commerce store if your shop isn't yet online.



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- **Build-your-own:** Shoppers are looking for personalisation and customisation. One way to engage them is to offer build-your-own experiences, like Build-A-Bear Workshop, which lets children assemble their own fluffy toys, and Dresden, an Australian company that lets shoppers create sunglasses from interchangeable lenses and frame parts.
- **Commerce without friction:** Many stores could get an edge by improving the basics, such as offering more payment options, streamlining the point of sale or online checkout experience and training staff to provide friendly, expert advice.
- **In-store destinations:** A great way to add revenue streams and attract shoppers is to offer a coffee shop or bistro, where they can relax with a drink or snack.
- **Value-added services:** If a retailer sells a product that requires installation, configuration or assembly, providing services

is an opportunity to differentiate from the competition and increase revenue. Ikea for example, bought TaskRabbit, a platform that connects consumers with people who run errands, to profit from assembly of its products.

Heilbron adds: "For proactive retailers, every day is a chance to grow their business and move it to the next level. There are many opportunities and business funding is available to take advantage of them."

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