Retail and Digitisation: best friends or opponents?

The question of digital transformation in the retail sector was the subject of debate and discussion at a recent meeting of the Retail Forum

A special meeting of the Retail Forum was held in the new London offices of **Alibaba Cloud UK**. The session took the form of an open discussion and debate around the topic of digitisation in retail, exploring issues central to retailers both on the high street and online. The Forum is co-chaired by **Catherine Palmer** and **Alain Harfouche**, DUOLAB Managing Director, **L'Occitane Group**.

The session was an opportunity for senior representatives from UK retail brands and shops to exchange best practice, as well as compare the challenges they have faced in adapting aspects of their businesses through data and digital transformation. Also present at the session were representatives from companies who specialise in digitalisation and retail in the digital space.

As the high-level conversation entailed sharing privileged information, it was held under Chatham House Rules, and as such none of the remarks that were made can be attributed to an individual or organisation.

The Forum welcomed two special guests, **Chris Potts**, Business Development Director – Retail Industry, Alibaba Cloud UK, and **Giles Corbett**, CEO & Co-founder of Ksubaka, a technology & data platform that allows retailers and brands to remotely manage a fleet of interactive touch screens.

There was a lively debate around the pace of digital transformation, with some participants arguing that retailers can make changes quickly to their operations through leveraging consumer and staff feedback data in real time, while others felt that it was important to develop a wholistic data and digital strategy to drive their digital transformation.

In all scenarios, however, it was agreed that data points which reflect both consumer and staff behaviours and insights were key – with some examples given whereby effective transformation was driven in the first instance solely by staff feedback data.

It was also acknowledged that the transfer of real, physical goods to a consumer is fundamental to how retailers must address their digitisation. This core activity can also be an inhibitor that can encourage retailers to think that digital transformation may not impact them like other industries.

While it is acknowledged that disruptive innovation in retail is largely enabled by digital, this transformation is not one that necessarily has to happen at pace. Innovation is often centred in three areas, including 'product,' where retailers offer new ways to personalise their goods for the existing and new consumers. Innovation also occurs in 'channel,' including transparency in supply chain, and 'experience,' where retailers are leveraging a raft of digital tools to improve and enliven their customer's UX.

What is clear, is that to maintain a competitive edge in retail is a complex problem, and one where the current digital offering and pace of change is contributing to an ever greater challenge for many established brands on the high street and beyond. ∎

Alibaba Cloud UK

As a business unit of **Alibaba Group**, **Alibaba Cloud UK** provides a comprehensive suite of global cloud computing services to power both their international customers' online businesses and Alibaba Group's own e-commerce ecosystem. In January 2017, Alibaba Cloud became the official Cloud Services Partner of the International Olympic Committee.