



# Solving the crisis of immediacy: How digital technology can transform the customer experience

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**Abstract** Marketers are currently facing a ‘crisis of immediacy’ challenge: how to meet consumers’ need to receive content, expertise, and personalized solutions in real time during their shopping experience. Today’s digital technologies—such as video conferencing, location-based mobile apps, and augmented reality—provide a highly personalized and immersive environment that allows for interactivity and rich information exchange between the brand and consumer. We conducted in-depth interviews with over 35 retailers, large-scale surveys with international shoppers, and pilot projects with stores and banking institutions to study how companies are leveraging digital technologies to transform the customer experience. Our findings show that there are two main technology-based models that organizations are deploying to support customers’ immediate needs: the remote expert and the digital assistant. We provide company examples of both models, as well as when they are most appropriate and success factors to inform managers.

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## 1. What is the crisis of immediacy?

In late 2013, Amazon introduced Mayday, a single-click video chat solution that allows customers to interact with a remote tech support representative to solve problems with their tablets 24/7. The

service allows customers to see the tech support person in a small window while the support person can watch what the customer is doing online and can interact with the device. According to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, it is “actually very similar to having someone next to you” offering tech support (Biggs, 2013). Solutions such as Mayday—which provide the customer with real-time, personalized support through a remote expert—have the potential to significantly shape how customer service is delivered going forward. With Mayday, Amazon has been

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able to beat its response time goal of 15 seconds or less with an average response time of 9.75 seconds (Shaul, 2014).

The Mayday example illustrates the potential for today's immersive digital technologies to transform the customer experience by delivering real-time, context-specific expertise when and where the customer needs it. We define the *crisis of immediacy* as the need for consumers to receive content, expertise, and personalized solutions in real time during their shopping experience. We are living in the age of the informed consumer; because consumers are comfortable with using self-service technologies, they are much better informed today about the products and services they intend to purchase. According to HubSpot (2011), 89% of U.S. Internet users search online before making a purchase, even when the actual purchase process itself is conducted at a local business. Therefore, consumers are expecting higher levels of service from the retailer throughout their purchase journey. Roughly 50% of U.S. online consumers will abandon their purchase if they cannot get quick answers to their questions (Leggett, Schoeller, Band, & Bookstein, 2013).

Customers are increasingly becoming omnichannel shoppers, using multiple channels—such as physical stores, websites, social platforms, and mobile apps—to conduct a single transaction. It is estimated that 86% of global shoppers and 65% of U.S.-based shoppers currently shop across at least two channels (McPartlin & Dugal, 2012). Furthermore, online shoppers are spending more (Maxwell, 2013) and are more profitable (Graeber, 2013) when they use multiple channels.

It is no longer sufficient for retailers to think in simple terms of online versus physical stores and to strategize on how to optimize sales in each channel. The consumer experience is determined by a complex mix of touchpoints to the brand, and how the retailer engages with each user in terms of providing immediate, personalized, and emotional content will determine its success. Digital touchpoints can change how consumers interact with a company's products and services. A traditional challenge for physical retail sites has been *showrooming*, wherein consumers use the physical store to examine and determine which products and brands they want to purchase and then make the purchase online, often for a competitor's product. Consequently, retailers are starting to practice *reverse showrooming*, wherein they encourage bricks-and-mortar consumers to search their products online through kiosks or mobile apps, thereby increasing the likelihood of keeping the sale. With this practice, the physical branch or store can improve its value proposition by moving away from being tactical transaction

processors toward using a highly immersive, interaction-oriented model of providing advice and expertise to buyers on demand.

Our research indicates that leading organizations now have the technologies, processes, and customer analytics to provide expertise to consumers at their physical locations or anywhere customers may reside, such as in their homes. While physical stores certainly are not going away, they will have to rethink how to improve the customer experience delivered onsite in order to succeed and differentiate in an increasingly digital environment. By understanding both in-store and online behavior, retailers can provide a richer customer experience by delivering content-in-context, or the right information at the right time in the right place.

### 1.1. About the research

The insights provided in this article are based on research we conducted over the last five years with a number of organizations using leading-edge customer-facing digital technologies. We interviewed over 35 retailers across different industry sectors that have used video, social, and mobile technologies to interact with end customers across different channels. We talked with marketing, strategy, analytics, and information technology professionals in these organizations to understand effective practices and lessons learned regarding the design, build, and implementation of omnichannel technologies. In addition, we interviewed technology vendors—in particular those associated with the delivery of video conferencing and mobile solutions—to understand the impacts of location-based solutions.

We have included findings from the Cisco Systems Consulting Services (CCS) group based on years of in-depth omnichannel research and technology solutions in these areas. This research includes interviews and surveys in the retail space of 2,000 U.S. and UK shoppers and 3,000 shoppers from Brazil, Mexico, and China. The group also ran pilots involving the implementation of immersive in-store technologies, such as virtual mirrors, in retail organizations. CCS has also conducted research with leading retail banking institutions. Many of these clients have implemented or are in the process of using Remote Expert solutions, which is based on Cisco's customer collaboration and video conferencing technology.

## 2. The virtual expert can transform the customer experience

Today's digital technologies can provide the environment to enable *virtual experts*: agents who

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