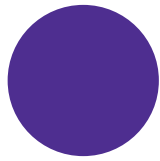


# THE : FUTURE : LABORATORY

- : : CURRYS
- : : CONSCIOUS COMMERCE:  
REAL LIFE, ROBOTS AND RETAIL



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# Part One: Foresight Overview

Hybrid living is here to stay and technology is central to its success. People work from home or even the beach. They shop online while in-store. They connect with others across the world while running in their local neighbourhood. And they control their central heating from frosty cars.

The majority (68%) of consumers polled in new research from Currys say their day-to-day life is dependent on technology, spending an average of eight hours using 11 pieces of technology each day. As technologies advance, living realities will evolve to become even more hybrid, straddling the physical and digital. It's essential that people have the right devices to do the job.

'The world is just becoming so much more hybrid: the world of work, the world of retail and everything in between. In the future, we won't know where the physical world ends and the digital world begins,' says Natalie Berg, Retail analyst and founder of NBK Retail.

Despite – or perhaps due to – the increased reliance on technology that hybrid living brings, consumers are overwhelmed by choice when looking for new devices and appliances, and struggle to find the right products for their ever-changing needs. They're also increasingly aware of electrical waste (e-waste). They want to extend the longevity of products and find recycling options that are as convenient as making a new purchase.

## 39% of tech consumers agree that post-Covid, more tech retailers should offer human online experts to help customers shop online

Source: Currys

Extensive online research and reading reviews has become the go-to for consumers navigating their options. A shopper study from GE found that 81% of consumers go online before heading in-store. But with fake online reviews at an all-time high, complexity of gathering information pre-purchase growing, and higher return rates when consumers don't speak to an expert beforehand, shoppers are noticing a convenience paradox, in which going it alone online is costing them both time and money.

Almost half (47%) of consumers say they now prefer to speak to a real-life adviser in-store when researching and before buying a piece of tech. This goes up to 77% if it gets them to the right product

more quickly. Post-Covid, 39% of consumers agree that tech retailers should offer human online experts to help customers shop online.

'People need guidance,' says Martin Raymond, Co-founder and editor-in-chief of The Future Laboratory. 'That's why we're seeing a new dawn for the expert economy. We're recognising that people's ability to specialise and advise is really meaningful. We understand how valuable face-to-face interaction is, whether you're seeking a medical diagnosis, studying for a degree or making important purchases.'

The future shopper journey will be expert-led, with shoppers demanding human intelligence (HI) over artificial intelligence (AI). It will encompass a mix of hybrid tech touchpoints, especially as more of our experiences straddle physical and digital environments. Half of tech consumers think it's important for retailers to deliver omni-channel shopping, but a third of these say it's hard to find.

We're on the cusp of a new era of truly seamless omni-channel shopping as savvy retailers grasp hybrid tech with both hands. With virtual, augmented and mixed reality (VR/AR/MR) technologies blurring the boundaries between physical and digital, the future path to purchase will transform with anytime, anywhere commerce reaching its full potential. The experience of shopping for the technologies that inform and enable our daily environments and lifestyles will evolve to meet consumers where they are. Sales staff will take on new roles in this future, growing in both importance and skills.

'The role of the store associate is going to change dramatically over the next decade,' says Berg. 'Just as the role of the store is no longer purely to sell, the role of the store associate also has to evolve so it's not just about shifting product or doing non-customer-facing tasks that will become automated. We'll call on associates to focus on more meaningful, customer-facing tasks.'

This report, created by strategic foresight consultancy The Future Laboratory in partnership with Currys, explores a future of conscious commerce. It investigates how consumer attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles are driving transformation and uncovers the tech shopper journey of the future.



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*‘The next generation of consumers are not only going to be digital natives, but phygital natives, constantly walking a blurred line between online and offline realms. They’ll be impatient with retailers who don’t offer service that enables them to pinpoint the right tech quickly’*

*Martin Raymond, Co-founder and editor-in-chief, The Future Laboratory*

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## Part Two: Tech Retail Now

People are increasingly aware of fake reviews, fake news and fake endorsements. They’re tired of targeted ads, algorithmic influence, ineffective bots and mindless consumption. When shopping for technology, consumers want to simplify the journey to getting the right product through real, rather than just perceived, convenience. Here, we explore four influential trends transforming shoppers’ needs, demands and expectations now.

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### **: The Convenience Paradox**

Online shopping has evolved to bring us almost instant gratification as we click and collect or receive delivery of items within hours. Now, physical stores are introducing the same frictionless experience with technologies that scan products in real time, resulting in zero need for human-to-human interaction.

Convenience has become king, but now many consumers are questioning whether the move to contactless – and almost subconscious – commerce actually saves time in the longer term. This paradox is amplified further when it comes to major purchases, such as technology products that are integral to day-to-day life.

Currys’ research finds that over the past 10 years, consumers bought an average of six tech items unassisted that didn’t do what they thought they did and spent over £650 on pieces of technology that weren’t right for them. For Gen Z and Millennial consumers aged 18–34, the number of products mistakenly bought unassisted doubles to 12. Younger people are used to shopping online and therefore don’t seek advice in the same way that older generations do. But this is set to change with the recognition of the convenience paradox.

‘The next generation of consumers are going to live in an increasingly hybrid way and they’re going to need more of the right – not just more – technology to do so,’ says Raymond. ‘They’ll not only be digital natives, but hybrid natives, constantly walking a blurred line between online and offline realms. They’ll be impatient with retailers which don’t offer service that enables them to pinpoint the right tech quickly.’

Subconscious commerce, in which we click and buy in a zombie-like fashion, will fall away as people recognise the convenience paradox. With 40% of shoppers returning tech items that aren’t fit for purpose and 15% keeping them while struggling to use them, the seeming convenience of unassisted shopping can quickly lumber consumers with unwanted and unusable goods or increase their need to return. Returns can in themselves add a layer of complexity that negates the speed of buying solely online without assistance.

‘If you buy seamlessly from Amazon, and then decide the product’s not for you, it’s a hassle returning it,’ says Trenton Moss, Author of Human Powered. ‘Also, if you have an issue with the product, it’s suddenly not at all seamless. You want a retailer to have your back when things go wrong, as well as helping to ensure that doesn’t happen in the first place.’

To minimise this hassle and truly save time, consumers are beginning to seek advice from knowledgeable assistants – be it online or in-store. Over half (57%) of shoppers that get human help are more satisfied with their purchase than those who don’t, and say that interactions with humans lead to them making the right choice first time. Rather than spending hours researching and reading reviews, they’re realising that it’s more convenient and enjoyable to speak to someone for a matter of minutes who can help them pinpoint the right product to match their needs.

Michelle Gorrings-Smith, Director of stores at Currys, adds: ‘With the tech products in our lives going from invisible to visible in the past two years we are now relying on them to do more to help make our lives easier and better, and therefore we appreciate spending more on higher specifications to be sure they are built to last. From washing machines to fitness trackers to laptops, they are all being put through their paces and consumers have been upgrading so they do the job in hand and keep life working.’

### **: Bot Backlash**

In line with the convenience paradox, consumers are becoming increasingly disillusioned with bots and algorithms. Only 13% of tech consumers say they prefer a chatbot when researching pre-purchase and just 25% of shoppers say they find these chatbots helpful when deciding to buy a piece of tech.

E-commerce became the only way to shop during lockdown. It grew by 46% in the UK alone last year, according to the Office for National Statistics figures, as national lockdowns forced bricks-and-mortar stores to close. While necessary, it also highlighted the value of the physical store, as many craved the social, tactile, and above all, human experience of shopping.

'It's not simply having a human in a shop, it's about those wonderful conversations that make us feel a sense of connection,' says Dr Dimitrios Tsivrikos, Consumer and business psychologist at University College London. 'It's that dialogue, that interaction. We might develop complete 100% convenience and incredibly robotic in-store behaviour, but as long as we have emotions and blood, meaningful interaction will continue to be incredibly important.'

**'We might develop complete 100% convenience and incredibly robotic in-store behaviour, but as long as we have emotions and blood, meaningful interaction will continue to be incredibly important'**

*Dr Dimitrios Tsivrikos, Consumer and business psychologist, University College London*

A quarter of consumers surveyed by Currys agreed that they now rely more on person-to-person advice when looking at tech products to ensure they make an informed decision. With research showing that life events and frustrations with existing products are the main drivers for buying replacement technologies and one in three tech consumers buying in distress; for example, when a family of five's washing machine breaks down, it makes sense that shoppers are looking for emotional and technical reassurance.

'You want staff who really understand the fear and anxiety that goes into buying something that A, is really expensive, and B, is an important part of your life,' says Tsivrikos. 'You need to make sure that you're safe with that purchase.'

For this reason, the bot backlash also encompasses automated physical stores like Amazon Go. Tsivrikos highlights the psychological phenomenon of the surveillance effect when it comes to distrust of machines and fully automated retail experiences.

**: Rise of the Genuinfluencers**

Consumers are increasingly aware of fake influencer and celebrity endorsements and are questioning the value of their recommendations. This is leading to a new breed of authentic influencers, dubbed genuinfluencers.

'The big problem is we now understand that, while influencers have the volume, they may not have the value,' says Raymond. 'Increasingly, we're realising that the value they have is inconsequential. Having three million followers doesn't mean having the solutions or knowledge to answer questions.'

Similar disillusionment is evident when it comes to online reviews. While more people are engaging with reviews than ever before and over half (56%) find reviews on tech websites helpful, one in four shoppers say consumer reviews are generally untrustworthy. This distrust seems to be well founded.

Research by Which? magazine uncovered a web of paid-for 'reviewers' manipulating the star ratings of nearly 50 Google business listings. These fake and untrustworthy reviews are leading to the purchase of products unfit for purpose, according to 37% of consumers, with almost half (49%) saying that consumers need to be protected.

**56% of tech consumers find reviews on tech websites helpful when deciding to do buy a piece of tech**

*Source: Currys*

This is where store associates will be integral to the future retail experience as they bring their expertise and authenticity to the hybrid commerce environment. 'Five thousand four-and-a-half-star reviews don't mean anything if you don't trust that they're genuine and they've come from an actual person,' says Berg. 'Then your staff become your greatest assets.'

Mainstream retailers are starting to hand over the social reins to store associates who can act as genuinfluencers – authentic relatable faces of their brand. Streaming content through TikTok or own channels like Currys ShopLive, these employees showcase products, provide behind-the-scenes insights and answer consumer questions in real-time video streams.

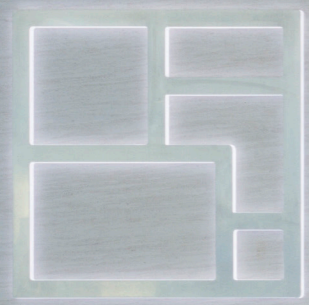
'At Currys we provide a seamless link between store and online, bringing together the strengths of all our channels to deliver a better experience than customers could get from a single stand-alone channel,' says Simon Peck, Head of omnichannel propositions at Currys. 'People are happy to shop online by themselves in some categories, but for others, particularly where they are spending a lot of money, like premium TVs, they want to speak to someone who knows what they're talking about.'

**: Socially Conscious Shopping**

Having witnessed the negative effects of panic-buying during the pandemic, combined with a heightened desire to make more sustainable choices, shoppers are waking up to the effects of their purchasing decisions.

'We were sleepwalking into shopping, into engaging with products, into how we view the world,' says Tsivrikos. 'Covid stopped us in our tracks and made





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*‘Five thousand four-and-a-half-star reviews don’t mean anything if you don’t trust that they’re genuine and they’ve come from an actual person. Then your staff become your greatest assets’*

*Natalie Berg, Founder, NBK Retail*

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us more aware of our own actions. We became more rational, we became a lot more pragmatic, and started asking not only is this product something I want, but is it truly necessary?’

This idea of only buying what’s necessary is now being enshrined in law. In February 2021, the UK government announced new legislative plans to ensure that parts for white goods are made available for at least seven years. The aim is to encourage home-owners to fix, rather than replace, appliances to reduce the environmental impact of e-waste.

With more and more e-waste being created and only about 17% being recycled, it’s now a global imperative to keep devices and appliances out of landfill. Young people are particularly concerned about sustainability and 66% of Gen Alpha want to buy from companies that are trying to do good in the world, according to Wunderman Thompson. Retailers are stepping up to ensure they’re providing convenient and responsible recycling and re-use services in line with sales.

Moira Thomas, Group director of sustainability and ESG, provides a viewpoint from her work at Currys. ‘We recognise the pressing need to improve the use of

resources. We have been a leader in extending the life of technology through repair, recycling and re-use for 40 years. But it is only by companies working closely with suppliers and other retailers that we will all reach a point where we are making the impact that is needed to help the planet by being responsible and accountable, through participating in initiatives like the Circular Electronics Partnership.’

A conscious and considered approach to tech consumerism will have a major impact on retail promotional events. During Black Friday 2021, tech sales in the UK were down 13% on 2020. Currys’ research suggests that UK consumers are cautious about where and how they buy tech products during the Black Friday shopping period, with 17% said they had experienced dissatisfaction with a product they’d bought unassisted during the event due to rushing to buy it. And 48% saying they tend to spend with more reputable retailers during Black Friday.

‘Consumers have cottoned on to the fact that Black Friday deals aren’t always deals,’ says Berg. ‘Shoppers are now realising from experience that getting the right deal is better than getting any deal, with frenzied buying ultimately not saving time or money in the long run.’

# Part Three: Tech Retail Next

Brands are rethinking the customer experience to fit multiple hybrid formats, recognising the long-term value of connecting with their customers by putting service before sales. To form these connections, retailers need sales associates who are genuine product experts with high levels of emotional intelligence. Here, we explore the trends that will define tech retail and the shopper journey in the next decade and beyond.

## : HI Experiences

Human intelligence (HI) is the number one factor consumers think tech retailers need to focus on. Retailers are responding by unlocking the true potential of their sales staff through investment in skills and knowledge.

### **59% of tech consumers say too many options make it difficult to purchase devices**

Source: Currys

Michelle Gorringer-Smith, Director of stores at Currys, agrees that just as tech has become increasingly visible, so have retailer employees. 'At Currys we are investing nearly £25m in training, wellbeing and reward programmes for colleagues, to provide them with skills for life,' she says. 'They are the front line in our hybrid/phygital world, helping our customers to choose, afford and enjoy amazing tech. They provide the right information and insight, and ask the right questions to help establish customers' needs, making it easy to shortlist the right tech for them. We have done this with the introduction of our LIFE selling framework [Listen, Inspire and Find, Enjoy].'

### **41% of tech consumers say retailers should focus on Human Intelligence**

Source: Currys

The human touch is particularly pertinent in terms of buying technology, which has features and applications that can be difficult to get to grips with. 'Consumers want to ask questions beyond the product,' says Raymond. 'They want to know about the speed or functionality of a device, the environmental rating of a domestic appliance or what the brand it's made by stands for.'

Tech consumers cite too many hi-tech features to understand and too many similar products on the market as the top factors that make tech products difficult to buy. This is closely followed by technical

jargon, a fear of making the wrong decision, and difficulty weighing up the pros and cons. Experts that can translate complex specifications to match consumer needs will be the sales staff of the future.

'Training staff in active listening and how to coach customers through their concerns, giving them those people skills would be revelatory,' says Moss. 'Then make it clear that these experts are not targeted with sales, they're targeted with customer experience – the experience of talking to somebody who's really passionate and gives expert advice in layman's terms without a pushy sales pitch.'

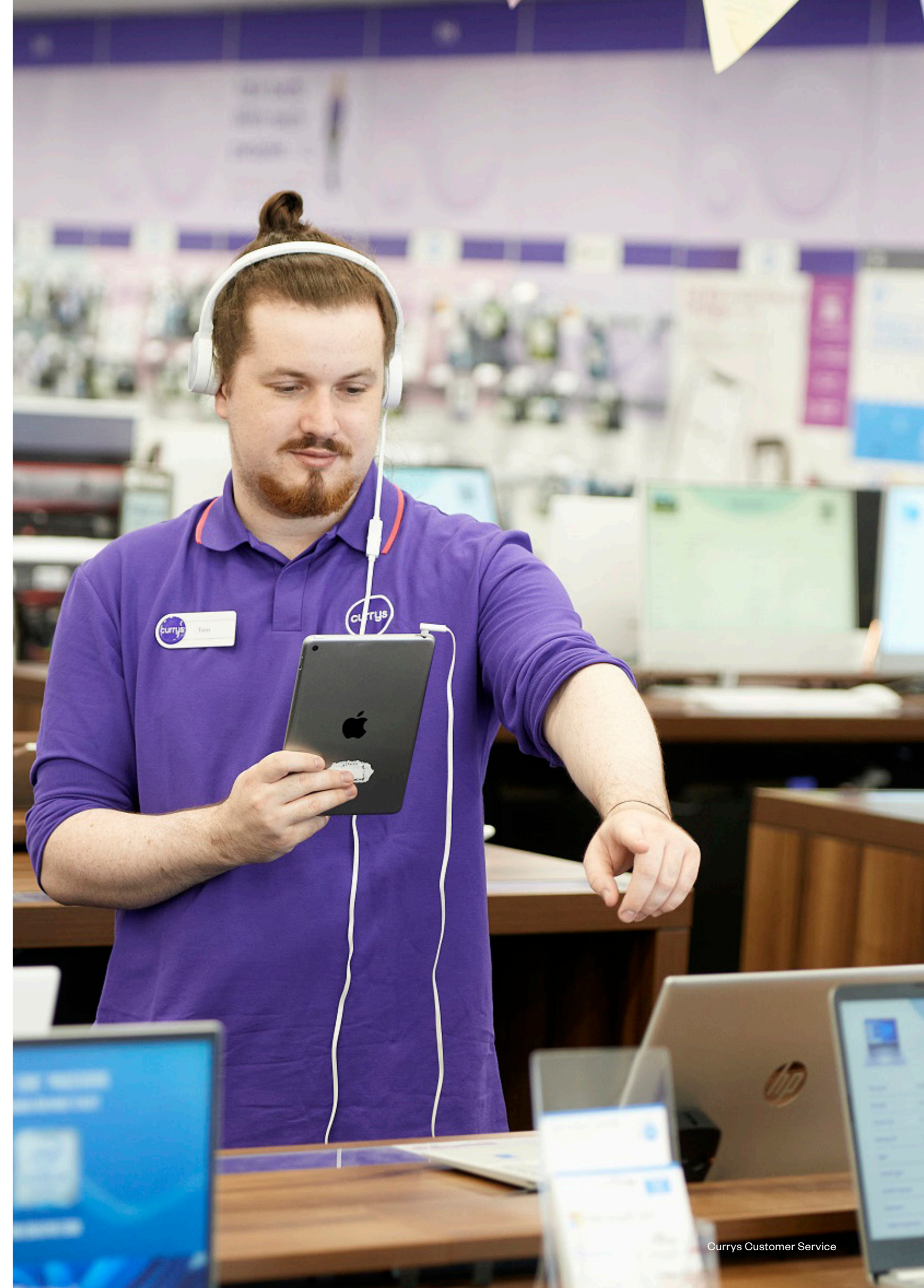
## : Specialist Curation

Some 69% of consumers say they've been spending more time shopping online over the past two years, but 36% think that online tech retailers need to improve online support to help them make the right choice. Only 18% say retailers are doing enough. The expert associates of the future will be easy to reach via multiple platforms, helping consumers to sift through an often dizzying range of products.

'Amazon is great for purchasing, but not so compelling for shopping. If you search for a black dress you get 40,000 results,' says Berg. 'That's where more social platforms come in and help to bridge that gap because, again, what online retail can't do generally is discovery, it's curation, community, and actually social platforms can do all of those things while still offering that seamless online shopping experience.'

A mix of expertise, personalisation, curation and serendipity will increasingly drive purchasing decisions in future as people crave services traditionally more associated with the high street than e-commerce. Curated is already on this path. The retail platform connects everyday consumers starting a new hobby with experts and enthusiasts in those fields.

Berg believes that more and more expert-led experiences will move online, especially as the lines between physical and digital continue to blur. 'There is this great opportunity to tap into that discovery, that curation, while still delivering on the basic expectations that we as 21st-century shoppers have today,' says Berg.





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*‘In three to four years from now, there will be VPs of live commerce in all major retail chains’*

*Sophie Abrahamsson, Chief commercial officer, Bambuser*

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## **: Genuinfluencers Live**

Building on previous iterations of live-stream shopping, new interactive retail concepts celebrate staff by creating direct lines of communication with consumers. Pre-sale customer service will evolve to be more rapid, reactive and personalised, meeting consumers using the mechanisms and media through which they naturally communicate.

More than two thirds (68%) of consumers surveyed by Currys say they would find a retail service appealing that allows them to connect with a human tech expert virtually who could provide recommendations on the best tech products to meet their requirements and needs. And 61% say they would be likely to use this service.

**68% of tech consumers say they would find a retail service appealing that allows consumers to connect with a human tech expert virtually**

*Source: Currys*

In 2020, Currys launched its 24/7 online ShopLive platform, which has so far been used by over three million customers. It enables consumers to connect with a Currys tech expert via a screen, wherever and whenever they need advice.

Simon Peck, Head of omnichannel propositions at Currys, adds: ‘The success of ShopLive, which we launched at the height of the pandemic, really highlights the relationship between shopper and retail colleagues. We have seen a four times higher conversion rate after assistance in ShopLive compared to unassisted buying and customers going it alone.’

The genuinfluencer associate trend will expand beyond broadcasting on TikTok through chat apps like Hero. The virtual shopping platform, acquired by Klarna in 2021, empowers in-store teams to engage directly with shoppers, combining the ease of e-commerce with a richer content experience. Move, a new members-only online grocer in the US, meanwhile, connects customers to a personal shopper via phone or email any time, who fields questions, helps with ordering and recommends products.

Beyond pure service, shopping live across networks will continue to thrive, with the global live-stream market expected to reach £181bn by 2027, registering a CAGR of 28%. According to Forrester, 59% of Europeans claim to have purchased through live-streaming via an e-commerce platform or would like to explore it. In 2021, Twitter announced live-stream commerce capabilities with Walmart as its first retail partner to go live.

‘All of a sudden we have something that can leapfrog – a way of doing e-commerce that reflects how we are consuming the internet and how consumers want to experience brands. There’s this dialogue in this interactive, genuine, authentic way,’ says Sophie Abrahamsson, Chief commercial officer at live video shopping platform Bambuser. ‘In three to four years from now, there will be VPs of live commerce in all major retail chains.’

We’ll also witness a customer service and shopping revolution with the widespread adoption of virtual and augmented reality technologies. There will be an estimated 57% increase in Gen Z shoppers who use AR before buying in the next five years. Snapchat and Facebook unveiled their AR glasses in 2021, with Apple set to launch its version soon. Meanwhile, the VR market is estimated to expand at a CAGR of 18% from 2021 to 2028, with revenue exceeding £51bn by 2028.

‘Switching to virtual advising sessions and using conversational channels to communicate with shoppers and offer that one-to-one service is becoming democratised, and that’s a really interesting shift,’ says Berg.

## **: Empathic Intelligence**

Research published in the Journal of Marketing highlights different scenarios where consumers are more likely to favour AI recommendations than human input. It found that when shoppers’ needs are more complex, human advice still tops algorithmic suggestions. This is backed up by research from Currys, which shows that 58% of people shopping for expensive and unfamiliar tech products would like to speak to a real-life human expert before they buy, whether that be in-store or online.

‘To provide real, personal support for a complex purchase decision like an expensive bit of electrical equipment,’ says Moss, ‘and in particular for those people that value a human relationship for a high-value, complex purchase, they’re going to want a personal expert adviser.’

But, as artificial intelligence (AI) advances, a fusion of human and machine abilities will offer the perfect customer service through empathic intelligence. This will be especially useful in online environments where emotional cues and body language aren’t easy to read. Empathic intelligence could pave the way for a new age of understanding as retailers empower frontline employees with AI assistance.

As AI becomes more advanced, future employees in the retail sector will benefit from increasingly sensitive digital support systems to better respond to consumers’ emotional state at any given time. Whether it’s being more sympathetic, positive or speeding up the conversation, this heightened

sentiment analysis will ensure that unspoken cues from the customer are not only being understood, but also acted upon most effectively. Early iterations are already in use, such as cloud-based coaching platform BetterUp, which uses AI to analyse sales associates' performance and train them in the art of conversation when interacting with customers.

### : Metamerce Media

In a future when brands and retailers act like media companies, dedicated e-commerce platforms could disappear and be replaced by a seamless stream of content, social media and conversation. 'Increasingly, media, in all forms, is becoming the store,' writes retail futurist Doug Stephens.

As we enter more hybrid and even metaverse environments – where digital, virtual and physical worlds become almost indistinguishable from one another – consumers will demand increasingly advanced forms of entertainment and interaction from retailers and their expert associates through metaverse commerce – or metamerce. Many companies are now preparing for this future.

Facebook recently announced that it is becoming a metaverse company, rebranding as Meta, and plans to open a number of stores to showcase new technologies and allow visitors to trial headsets as

part of a judgement-free journey. Nike, meanwhile, has recently filed seven trademark applications, indicating it will create virtual experiences, and make and sell virtual branded sneakers and clothing in the metaverse.

Social, shoppable gaming experiences will form a major segment of metamerce activity. With the video game industry expected to exceed £146bn by 2023, and in-game micro-transactions driving this growth, many brands are already embracing the medium as a new channel. The game Fortnite – which has over 350m registered players – has already hosted numerous brand collaborations.

Consumers in the future will shop in-game as their avatars, visiting stores in a virtual mall or high street and exploring products in a digital setting, or using AR and MR to try them out in situ at home. They'll want to chat with expert and genuinfluencer avatars through interactive entertainment formats, and see how well suited new appliances and devices are to their needs, homes and lifestyles.

'If you're watching a show and they're explaining how to set up a smart home in your living room and you realise you want to have it in your kitchen, or if it's how to use that hairdryer and then add that other accessory, it's easier to see the benefits of features and add-ons when you're in a conversational life show,' says Abrahamsson.

# 2035: Tech Shopper Journey

By 2035, next generation technology will have transformed the shopper journey.



## Part Four: Conclusion

As our lives become increasingly hybrid and dependent on technology, getting to the right products that can facilitate new ways of working, playing and generally getting things done is increasingly vital. Disillusioned with online reviews, wonky algorithms and ineffective chatbots, tech shoppers are once more seeing the true value of expert-led customer service.

Research shows that customer satisfaction is 2.5 times greater in stores with well-trained, well-paid sales associates, and the majority (71%) of shoppers agree that helpful customer service and sales associates are essential to an excellent shopping experience. But, at present, 69% of consumers feel they are treated like anonymous ticket numbers, while 56% think the companies they buy from don't know or understand who they are.

While seeking advice from knowledgeable sales associates may not be new, the ways in which these employees are trained and empowered are. Their freedom to broadcast is too. And as we move through the 2020s and into the 2030s, we'll witness a revolution in ways to connect with experts.

**77% of tech consumers say they would be interested in speaking to a human if it got them to the right product more quickly**

Source: Currys

Expert associates, trained in HI and armed with empathic intelligence and AI-powered insights, will provide personalised curation for tech shoppers. They'll be genuinfluencer guides able to get the right products into the right hands at speed. After all, 77% of tech consumers say they're interested in speaking

to a human if it gets them to the right product more quickly. There'll be fewer returns and just as much advice on convenient recycling and restoration solutions as new sales. All this fits with the future tech shopper's desire to be more conscious when making purchasing decisions.

In addition, with half of technology consumers thinking it's important for retailers to deliver omni-channel shopping and 68% saying they would find a retail service appealing that allows consumers to connect with a human tech expert virtually, expert associates will deliver their advice in novel ways; through live-streaming enhanced by MR, for example, virtual avatars and new metamerce media formats.

**50% of tech consumers think it is important for retailers to deliver omni-channel shopping**

Source: Currys

How shoppers connect will transform, but why they connect will remain. All in all, the future of shopping for tech will become truly omni-channel. It will be hybrid, just like the lives of those shopping for it. But it will by no means be soulless. It will use hybrid touchpoints to deliver heightened awareness and experiences. The future of tech shopping is the era of conscious commerce.



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