

Touch screens create online shopping experiences at stores

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Imagine browsing knife sets in an airport and then ordering one before you board your plane, or going to a department store to look at makeup without having to bounce from counter to counter to check out each brand's selection.

Companies including Macy's, HSN and Adidas are building large, TV-like interactive screens to give consumers experiences like these in an ever-increasing effort to bring the convenience of online shopping to the offline world.

"We are on the frontier of a really neat future of retailing," said Michelle Tinsley, general manager of retail at Intel, whose core processor is behind new shopping technology and [digital signs](#) from Macy's, HSN, Adidas, Kraft, Coca-Cola and others.

To enhance the in-store shopping experience, where the majority of retail sales are still rung up, retailers are looking for ways to bring the convenience, selection and ability for product comparison of the online world. For example, HSN's digital shopping wall could be set up in an airport and would allow someone to virtually browse knife sets while waiting for a flight, complete the purchase through their phone and have the item shipped home.

"It is a way to refresh the shopping experience without having to rebuild a new store," said Joe Skorupa, editor of retail publication RIS News.

While online shopping accounts for less than 10 percent of retail sales, consumers continue to demonstrate their preference for browsing, researching, sharing and buying in a [digital environment](#). Online holiday sales were up 15 percent over 2010, aided by record [Black Friday](#) and Cyber Monday sales, according to data from [ComScore](#). In-store sales rose 3.4 percent from the previous year during the same time period, data from Retail Metrics show.

Macy's Beauty Spot kiosk, a rounded, roughly 7-foot-tall, 4-foot-wide structure inlaid with interactive touch-screens on both sides, allows a customer to browse the department store's makeup brands in one place. Customers can look at top-selling products or shop for products involved in specific looks on the 40-inch screen.

"It is particularly aimed at a customer who comes into a department store but really prefers to shop on their own, as opposed to coming up to a counter and getting assistance," said Jim Sluzewski, Macy's spokesman.

Four kiosks installed in November are being tested in stores in Willowbrook, N.J.; Tysons Corner, Va.; and Houston, but Sluzewski says it's too soon to gauge how the technology has been received or whether it has increased sales.

In the two weeks Adidas previewed its virtual shoe wall in one of its London stores, it saw a 500 percent jump in sales of the soccer cleat available through the wall, compared with a similar shoe it launched six months earlier at the same price.

The wall stands just over 7 feet tall and is split into sections that can be detached to alter the width. So far, Adidas has shown 9-foot, 13-foot and 17-foot wide versions of the wall, which all include a touch-screen panel as well as a panel of actual "dummy shoes" customers can try on for size.

The touch-screen portion of the wall showcases digital representations of a product, including marketing content such as the inspiration behind the design of a shoe, size availability and price. It also pulls in Twitter feeds related to the products being sold to show what customers are saying.

Customers who already know their size can check out through the wall as if they were online, adding a product to their basket and entering size and identification information. The information is sent to a checkout counter designated for virtual wall purchases, where the customer pays.

Chris Aubrey, director of commercial experience, refers to the wall as an "endless aisle" that gives "customers access to the widest range of products that we possibly can" because it isn't restricted by the inventory bricks-and-mortar stores are so often bound to.

"The limitations that were there prior were based on how much product were in a physical location," said Mitch Joel, president of digital marketing agency Twist Image. "You no longer have to have that issue. You can have a store in Peoria and sell as much inventory as if you were in Times Square."

And bringing digital shopping to physical environments isn't just for traditional retailers. HSN, known for selling products everywhere but an actual store, developed a 15-foot interactive touch-screen that invites passers-by to play a virtual pizza-making game hosted by chef Wolfgang Puck using his products that are sold by the network.

While the pizza is "baking," users can learn more about the kitchenware and ingredients they used, such as a particular knife for cutting a vegetable topping or the ladle used to spoon tomato sauce on the pizza dough. They can then opt to get an email sent to their phone that will take them to HSN's mobile site to purchase the products they selected.

"The wall really allows us to bring the world of HSN to life in a physical location," said Jill Braff, executive vice president of digital commerce.

Right now the wall only offers the pizza game, but in the future HSN could re-tailor the experience around other products and personalities, such as a virtual runway to showcase the launch of a new designer, spokesman Brad Bohnert says.

While HSN doesn't have concrete plans yet for the wall to make its debut in a specific location, Braff said it could be successful in bustling spots such as airports, malls, food festivals or even film premieres.

As retailers forge into territory that combines online and offline experiences in one location, the key will be embracing the idea of self-serve shopping as a good thing, Joel said.

"You have customers going into stores that are very adept and knowledgeable about what they're looking for," he said. "They really don't need much assistance other than the ability to get in, get out and have a great experience."

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