

THE SUCCESS OF SELF SHOPPING IN THE YEAR OF THE “NEW FRUGALITY”

The way people shop has changed dramatically, and this is clearly evident not only in stores as people go about their standard shopping routines, but also in new approaches to marketing and to "communicating" the different products. In the grocery sector, after years in which retailers seemed largely reticent to implement innovative marketing solutions and the corresponding tools to implement them, except for developments that were introduced strictly because in response to customer demand, we now finally have tangible evidence of a more proactive approach directly from the retailers, in a push for innovation independent of outside pressure.

One of the many reasons for this is the special symbiosis that is arising between consumers and retailers, a dynamic and lively relationship in which each party actively engages the other in an ongoing exchange of needs and ideas. We must also keep in mind that 2009 is a special year, with a return to a thriftiness in thought and behavior, based not so much on a reduction in spending, but rather on a desire for improved models of consumption. These are twelve strategic months in which companies can either change and compete in a frenetic and intransigent market, or remain immobile and sink into the stagnancy of a world view on its way to extinction.

A High Tech bosom friend that knows each consumer personally

In order to address this issue in a more in-depth and technical manner, an interview was conducted with Luigi Frison, marketing manager for Datalogic Mobile EBS, a leading company in the design and development of complete solutions for self shopping and consumer relationship technologies for retail.

Given this scenario, what is the new frontier in self shopping, and above all, where do we stand in this new age?

"2009 is a successful year for Self Shopping. It's the starting point for integrating this philosophy with shopping practices and for developing its potential based on a variety of different needs." With this, Frison begins by analyzing the context behind the development of what appears to be a "Copernican revolution" in purchasing. "The crucial requirement, not just to survive, but to become a leader in the world market jungle," he continues, "lies in the capacity to get recognized with an instant and automatic association of ideas. In other words, you need to immediately trigger in the customer's mind the idea that a specific store offers a unique service that can't be found anywhere else. Consider for example the pods used for self-scanning (and the self-pay kiosks associated with them), along with all the information consumers can get about products, promotions, nutritional content, recipes, the running total for purchases, and many other functions. It's a truly revolutionary service," explains the Datalogic Mobile EBS marketing manager, "in which technology is an aid and a resource to help people independently and intelligently manage their shopping, optimizing the time they spend selecting products, rather than wasting time, low on patience, waiting in line at the register."

Self-aware shopping then is an innovative formula that meets modern needs for speed, information, and interaction. Two questions emerge however, that touch on the ethical arena: can Self Shopping and its application tools lead to a reduction in human resources? And further, could it not be a dangerous weapon used to invade customer privacy?

"This technology is synonymous with intelligence, not invasiveness," replies Frison decisively. "We must remember that consumers are now 'mature'. They are fully aware of what they want, and it is always the customers themselves who grant permission for this kind of marketing, and who allow the service to be built entirely around them. For example, our Joya," he continues, "is a sort of bosom friend, a pod that knows each consumer personally. It's well aware of what his needs are, and can therefore offer suggestions interactively and in real time, keeping consumers actively focused on the best possible solutions for their choices and purchases. A real friend knows when to speak up and when to hold his tongue, and that's how we designed our futuristic personal shopper. With regard to the human resources question, it's crucial to take an in-depth look into this issue and to conduct wide-ranging assessments.

The marketplace has changed," Frison explains, "just as operating procedures and professions have changed. Especially in recent years, we have witnessed a reorganization in the machinery of employment and its positions and tasks. What's more, the new shopping tools give customers instant access to all the information they need, which is sometimes not available on labels or is difficult to read, so the pods make shopping a better-informed experience. On the other hand, store employees, whether they're clerks, cashiers, promoters, or whatever else, will still be a reliable point of reference in making purchases, because they can provide the kind of input that a pod, by its very nature, cannot. So staff roles will undoubtedly change, but positively, because every staff member will become a true consultant, a position in which professionalism, experience, and in-depth knowledge of different sectors are rewarded in a complete rethinking of each job and its duties. So again, not a risk," underlines the Datalogic marketing manager, "but instead a balanced and fruitful coexistence of people and technology."

Even though we are still on the launching pad with Self Shopping, the corresponding tools with more or less advanced applications have taken hold in many stores and shopping centers. Is it too early to get an initial assessment of the level of satisfaction expressed by customers?

"The numbers speak for themselves. Consider the most recent event: the introduction of Joya at the Auchan Center in Mestre. Customers were offered access to the CassaExpress service through loyalty cards. Well, in just a few months from the official launch of the project, 12,000 loyalty cards have been activated, and in the first three hours from inauguration, a good 150 customers requested the card in order to try out the service.

These figures seem to fully confirm a positive trend in consumers toward new interactive and self-managed shopping solutions," continued Frison, "especially in light of the infinite potential of our 'technological gem'. In fact, Joya can easily be used in a wide range of environments, such as in casinos, museums, or multiplex cinemas: one click will pull up information on the pod's screen about

the painting in front of you, or reviews and plots of the films on offer, or what stakes you should wager on one gaming table or another. If you consider that we're still in the pilot phase, and that many integrations are yet to come, especially over the web, then shopping truly becomes quick and convenient. I can make my shopping list on my home, or even using my mobile phone, and when I get to the store and pick up a Joya pod, my list will be there waiting for me. It's child's play!

Basically, it's clear that intelligent pods aren't just for shopping, but also serve to provide information, and even education in a certain sense, making users truly independent and aware in every choice they make. Are we perhaps talking about infallible tools that will end up conditioning our lives and even the way we communicate and advertise?

"Let's keep our feet on the ground and try not to exaggerate," says the Datalogic marketing manager, grinning. "We're not talking about a higher intelligence that will invade the world and enslave us all! This isn't a science fiction movie; it's a concrete, positive reality. Tools like Joya serve consumers, making shopping convenient and fun and providing information that is otherwise lacking in those contexts. Someone with a Joya pod is always an independent individual who decides on his own if and how to use it. The retail world is changing, and it's clear that advertising messages and language are adapting to the new society and the new world of consumption. But we still need to proceed step-by-step, working in concert with customers to avoid a backlash of rejection, which is the typical response when marketing is seen as invasive. To meet the new challenges in the retail world, we need formulas that set us apart from the competition," concludes Frison, "advantages which coincide with services that are helpful with simple daily tasks, are easy to use, and can adapt to the individual needs of each customer: a friendly technology that is the ally of retailers and consumers."