Retail Rebirth-The Omni-channel

In 1991 the World Wide Web (www) became publicly available. Over the next several years, the information age drastically changed our world. Interestingly, 'The Information Mesh', another considered name for the www project, closely simulates today's integrated retail model known as the Omni-channel Loop. Omni is a word meaning essentially, "All in one or all in one place."

This term refers to the fused shopping loop where customers are engaged through a number of channels including bricks & mortar, online, catalog and/or mobile channels. Delivery may occur in the store or at the location of choice of the buyer. The buyer has many choices to receive buying satisfaction: 1) See/buy/take it with them, 2) See/buy/receive delivery from the store, 3) See/ buy/receive delivery AT the store, or 4) See/buy/and receive shipment elsewhere. The Omni-channel process fine-tunes the shopping experience for both consumer and merchant alike by offering consistent choice and convenience (to the customer) as well as extended customer reach and interaction by the Retailer. Finally, the integration of these types of shopping platforms is part of the solution to the age old problem of seasonal sales swings.

By definition, the Omni-channel shopping experience also referred to as, cross-platform or multiscreen marketing, will likely become a predominant trend in today (and tomorrow's) retail market. However, it wasn't always so. For some time, potential customers faced online and offline shopping with mixed messaging. Pricing varied frequently and many times, inventory sold online was rarely found on the shelves in the store and vice versa leaving customers confused and frustrated. The messaging pipeline was further blurred by Retailers' steep learning curve using social media—typically assigned to a young intern who knew little about the product line USP (unique selling point), business goals or customer service practices. Today however, the platforms have become interchangeable due to an increase in the effective use of online communication by both customer and business owner (where customer demand finally found its voice). The cross over between ecommerce and face to face selling has become an important part of the retailers' brand and product delivery mix.

This concept allows smaller retailers to more effectively go head to head with big-box chains. In a recent February 2013 USA Today report, giant retailers Sears, Best Buy, J.C. Penny will likely close 100's of their stores this year. Others on the list include Office Max, Office Depot, Barnes & Noble, Game Stop and Radio Shack, all suffering from the pangs of increased customer demands associated with buying preference and behaviors. Competitive same day delivery, price matching and "showrooming" (on-site and real time comparative shopping using an app on your hand-held search device, i.e. cell phone, iPad, tablet, etc.) has translated into a loss in market share, deeply cutting deeply into big box margins. Many of these big box stores including Wal-Mart, Sears, and Home Depot are working hard to promote 'Order Online' and 'Pick Up in the Store' service strategies to bridge the gap between the internet and the street. Now and in the future the retailer must seize the sales opportunity both in person and online.

Online transactions 10 years ago represented a single digit percentage of sales. This past Christmas (2012), online sales by small retailers accounted for close to a quarter of all retail sales. The growth trajectory for the utilization of hand held devices over the next 12 months continues to dramatically

trend upward. This is why a new vocabulary word was born, Omnichannel retailing. In short, it fulfills the long stated promise of giving the customer control of not only the purchase, but also of the process. Do not be afraid. Embrace the change. You wanted a leveled playing field. It's almost here.