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California Management Review (CMR)

Special Section on

Meeting the Omni-Channel Retail Challenge

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In the USA and western economies, Amazon, and more generally, the move by consumers online has transformed retailing with new online retail concepts emerging (e.g., Netflix, Bonobos) and gaining share. On the 20th anniversary of Amazon, online retailing is now considerably mature.

Online retailers have put substantial stress on traditional brick and mortar retailers as the latter struggle to integrate their existing extensive offline footprint with their online operations in a profitable manner. For example, despite a whopping \$11.5 billion online sales in 2017 for Walmart, these sales were seen as earnings dilutive (reducing the overall profitability of the company). Yet, those traditional retailers who have not adapted adequately to the online threat seem to have no future. Toys R Us is the latest example of a bankruptcy, which follows on the heels of many other US retailers (e.g., Blockbuster, Payless, RadioShack). The year 2017 saw traditional retailers in the USA seeking bankruptcy protection at a record pace.

Despite the tribulations of traditional retailers, even Amazon has realized they need an offline presence as demonstrated by their acquisition of Whole Foods and many other experimental initiatives (e.g., Amazon Go, pop up stores, bookstores, treasure trucks). With customers demanding a seamless experience, retailing is, by default, becoming omni-channel. Thus, while a naïve view might consider online and offline operations to be in conflict, within a firm, they have enormous potential for synergy and complementarity.

In contrast, emerging markets are following a different trajectory. For example, in India, and especially China, online has evolved rapidly to overcome the infrastructure challenges and leapfrog the big box retail domination stage. The online operations, their integration with social media, offline, and search, as well as the fulfilment and payment models of companies like Alibaba and Flipkart are highly sophisticated and elaborate. Many, including myself, argue that a late entrant like Alibaba, relative to Amazon, had the advantage of being born as a “platform” rather than being forced to evolve into one. The innovations (cash on delivery, diversification of revenue, digital payments) of Alibaba and Flipkart have now been copied by western online players, including Amazon. While conceding each other’s home market (e.g., Amazon and Uber have withdrawn from China), India is evolving as the “must win” country for both the Chinese and US internet retail giants.

As a result of the above, there are many interesting case studies and academic research projects in the area of online retailing as the race for successful, sustainable omni-channel models becomes imperative. Omni-channel retailing covers, among others, topics such as:

- Providing a seamless experience across online and offline touch points – click and collect, pricing integrity, minimizing returns, and ease of returns
- Transforming brick and mortar retailers – M&A, store restructuring, store experience enhancement, and developing profitable omni-channel models
- Re-imagining of physical retail spaces as experience-centric (smaller footprint, tech-enabled, etc.) rather than fulfilment-centric locations
- Leveraging digital to enhance the physical in-store experience - endless aisles and displaying real-time online reviews in offline stores
- Cracking the last mile fulfilment – developing new delivery models, optimizing supply chain, inventory and warehouse management, adopting robotics and drones
- Innovating new business models - developing identical mobile apps and in-store interactive displays using virtual reality, digital signage, message and text-drive commerce and Internet of Things (IoT)
- Using big data effectively - search optimization, recommendations and cross-selling, rethinking supply chain, integrating structured and unstructured data, proactive and reactive analytics
- Understanding customer acquisition costs and customer lifetime value – search for profitable customers, categories, and business models
- Adopting emerging payment mechanisms – technology and consumer perspectives

We envision a special section composed of analyses of real cases that illuminate the successes and failures of particular strategies, practices, and organizational solutions to the omni-channel retail challenge as well as conceptual and qualitative empirical studies that further our understanding of the evolving online retailing scenario. The case studies and papers should be of relevance to both academics and thoughtful practitioner audiences. Moreover, it should provide material for in-class discussion and catalyse further cross-disciplinary research in the area.

The guest editor(s) will rely on the endorsement of a prestigious **Advisory Board** made of top scholars in the fields of strategy, retailing, operations, and marketing. If you are interested, we request that you submit **a full draft no later than January 15, 2019** to the attention of Nirmalya Kumar or David Bell (omnichannelCMR@gmail.com) according to the following guidelines.

The draft must run between six and 10 thousand words, double-spaced, font-size 12. It should clearly state (i) the purpose of your study; (ii) the particular issue related to omni-channel retailing addressed in your study; and (iii) the relevance of your study for practitioners, academic scholars, and CMR readership. Case studies (the company must be identified) and emerging market perspectives are encouraged. You are also welcome to contact the Guest Editor for further information.

Based on these drafts, the Guest Editors and CMR Editors will select those that are most likely to result in first-rate, high-impact submissions. Authors of potentially interesting studies will then receive an official invitation to submit **their paper online through the CMR portal by March 31, 2019** to be peer reviewed.

Authors whose papers receive a revise and re-submit will be invited to a special developmental conference organized in Singapore by the Guest Editors under the sponsorship of Singapore Management University Retail Centre of Excellence. At this conference, authors will receive developmental feedback from each other and the invited discussants. Subsequent to the conference, authors will revise and resubmit their papers to include comments from reviewers and conference participants. The papers will then be reviewed again externally, with final decisions made in this third and final stage.

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