

# TECHNOLOGY, TRANSPARENCY TOP 2015 CONSUMER TRENDS

By Kyle Shamorian

Smart technology, blurred channel lines, brand transparency and modernized gender roles took top billing at Mintel's recent Big Conversation as a panel of industry experts discussed evolving consumer trends for 2015 at the market research firm's U.S. headquarters in Chicago.

The continued growth of synced devices — not only smartphones and TVs, but also wearable technology like watches and health software that monitors fitness goals — will continue their forward march into the mainstream, and not just for consumers.

According to Mintel's Director, Innovation & Insight Lynn Dornblaser, in the coming year more products will feature QR codes that sync to consumers' personal devices, to offer not only specials and promotions, but also source-tracing information, recipes and even music downloads. Retailers and manufacturers have the opportunity to take full advantage of shoppers' desire to aggregate more and more of their consumer activity onto a single device.

Another trend carving out a substantial impact on global retail is the blurring of channels, in terms of brick-and-mortar, try-before-you-buy, pure-play online and click-and-collect. The panel made particular note of Seattle-based Amazon, which is expanding its Sunday delivery service to 15 additional cities, as well as Bentonville, Ark.-based Walmart, the world's largest traditional brick-and-mortar retailer, which is testing its own pick-up option in certain markets, a service that "answers in-transit purchases being spurred by increased connectivity," Dornblaser said.

Brands also have been using the online realm to test new products before expanding them to larger markets, Dornblaser added, including Pepsi True, the brand's stevia-sweetened answer to Coca-Cola Life, and General Mills' Veggie Blend-Ins.

As Millennials will command more buying power than any consumer segment in just a few years, it's important to consider that these younger shoppers demand transparency, the panel noted. Customer rights and corporate responsibility have taken center stage among consumers, and not only are manufacturers and retailers following suit, but they're also actually enlisting consumer input and responding accordingly.

In addition to what ingredients companies put in their products, consumers are also making buying decisions based on company values like LGBT issues, minimum wage, environmental responsibility, animal rights and the support of political parties. Many engaged consumers get involved in protests, social media campaigns and other such efforts, and offer up their money to those companies that heed similar calls.

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