By Brian Dyches, Contributing Writer

The 'Smart Store' Age

What artificial intelligence means for the customer journey.

JIRSAK, SHUTTERSTOCK

FOR DECADES, MANY OF US IN THE DESIGN INDUSTRY HAVE GROWN dependent on basic knowledge imparted on us from professors, gurus, mentors and client experiences. In the world of shopper behavior, insights and conventional wisdom, we believe customers will take a certain path in a space and respond to well-lit displays in predictable ways.

But do you ever stop to think about whether all of this will remain meaningful in the age of "smart stores" (those enhanced with connected tech and artificial intelligence capabilities)? Could what we previously considered to be true of customer preferences and behaviors – and methods which have repeatedly worked for many of us – simply be a thing of the past? In the rapidly advancing world of artificial intelligence (AI), the design profession may need to realize that its own "disruption" may arrive sooner than anticipated.

AI is already in most of our lives, though you may not always recognize it. Thanks to Facebook, you are already in its presence every time you tag a photo. Or that Google search field that somehow knows what you're typing even before you finish – that's all AI.

So why am I making these prognostic claims for retail design? Because lately, every technology show and conference I attend fea-

tures products and experiences that I'm not seeing in even the newest designed spaces. It concerns me that there is apparently a widening gap between our industry and the one that's introducing the next iteration of the industrial revolution.

According to a 2016 IBM investor briefing, by 2020, there will be an estimated 29 billion connected devices, and that's just the beginning. This year's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) and the National Retail Federation's (NRF) annual "Retail's Big Show" were both full of devices that watch, track and adapt to the consumer. I talk to Apple's Siri and my Amazon Fire device almost every day, yet is that kind of technology being incorporated into our designs and practices? Don't we have the responsibility as innovators and designers to bring to bear these tools to create well-designed, tech-friendly spaces?

Look no farther than Armonk, N.Y.-based IBM. Like many in the technology experience sector, I became fascinated with its Watson computer when it debuted on "Jeopardy" in 2011. I'm amazed at how often I'm now seeing the Watson logo pop up in various places, as if it were any other well-established brand.

Just how prevalent is Watson in the lives of consumers? Also stated in a 2016 IBM investor briefing, Watson ingests 100 terabytes of new data every day; it connects to 2.2 billion locations and is involved in between 15 to 26 billion API (application programming interface) requests per day; and its new client base is growing year-to-year at an astonishing 72 percent.

Let's imagine what a Watson-assisted store design would look like in terms of methodology: The design team receives an RFP from a prospective client who wants to create a new food hall concept backed by a famous chef. Day one, the group tasked to develop the proposal meets in the firm's "design intelligence center" to review the project and ask Watson a series of questions. The studio leader speaks openly to the neural net system. For example, "Watson, tell me about the chef and display her social media accounts, comments from critics and images of her most popular dishes." Within seconds, Watson could aggregate thousands of data points to synthesize meaningful insights about the client's patrons.

Next, for the build site, designers could ask Watson to bring up information about the location. Seconds later, the city records of San Francisco (or wherever the site may be) are searched and the plan files are acquired. But wait, the record says the curtain wall was redone 11 years ago, but no images are on file. What to do? The studio leader could call their site inspection contractor who employs a worldwide drone fleet. Within minutes, a pop-up alert could relay the drones into position and provide live feeds and updated images of the building.

Moving on to the hypothetical design development phase, the Revit model is taking shape. But the client has just indicated that the chef now wants to add a cooking school and a raw food feature. In the past, this kind of variation not only meant delays and additional fees, but often a major rethink of the schematic phase. With AI, this process is simplified, and the team assembles once again to tap into a worldwide net of data, insights and metrics to update the model immediately. In short, gone are the days of waiting for research and sifting through papers.

Some of you may think this sounds like a science-fiction fantasy, but I can assure you it's coming. Preparing your firms and ensuring they understand the immense impact technology will have on all of us designers, as well as consumers, will help make sure the lights stay on in the long run. Gene Roddenberry of "Star Trek" fame was a true visionary: In the '60s, he knew one day we'd be talking to devices to facilitate our needs. And now, it's not about turning over decisions to robots, but rather, more easily accessing the core aspect in the acronym "AI": intelligence.

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