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▲ Stuart Ramage, Ecommerce Director, Dixons Carphone

Dixons Carphone: Using technology to sell technology in store

Stuart Ramage, Ecommerce Director, Dixons Carphone, speaks to Emma Herrod about digital developments and the in-store-rollout of iPads for staff.

Staff across the Currys PC World store estate are being issued with tablets to help them assist customers with researching products in store. The tablets give staff access to a cut-down version of the retailer's consumer-facing website with functionality that will help them when talking to customers.

Similar technology is already in use in Carphone Warehouse stores enabling staff to access a guided journey for customers. Learnings from this installation have been fed back into the Currys PC World project.

Stuart Ramage, Ecommerce Director, Dixons Carphone, explains that the trial phase of the project has already

shown that customers appreciate interacting with staff who have access to digital assets since it has doubled NPS in participating stores. Anecdotal feedback from those involved in the trial reveals that customers believe they're getting a better quality of service when interacting with staff using a tablet because they regard it as a genuine interaction. Staff are able to use product comparisons and reference buyers' guides to aid customers in deciding which product to buy.

Use of these tablets is expected to help staff make more sales, too, since they can order products via the devices for store delivery and satisfy customers in a way that the retailer has been unable to up until now. "We know when customers are coming into store they are showing high intent to buy. They are highly tuned into a buying mission," says Ramage. Consequently, being able to make a sale even when the item isn't available in the store is expected to increase customer satisfaction as well as sales.

The project started in February this year with tablets being issued to members of staff in a number of stores that gave them access to the full consumer-facing website. "There is a wealth of information out there about the products and the services we offer, so consolidating that into a device made perfect sense," says Ramage.

It became apparent, though, that access to the full website wasn't the best option. Feedback from staff was that it wasn't as much of an aid as the digital team was expecting and take-up and engagement was also below what they anticipated.

"The website was built for non-assisted consumer interaction. But when you had colleagues there, who are able to assist with their own knowledge and their training alongside the information we have on the website, those two things were quite powerful. What was getting in the way was effectively the rest of the website," explains Ramage.

What was needed was a pared-down version of the website more suited to how colleagues work in store. Four stores of differing sizes and levels of footfall were chosen and staff from these stores nominated to help build a new application, sharing some of the challenges they had and how a digital device could help them deliver a high-quality service to customers in store.

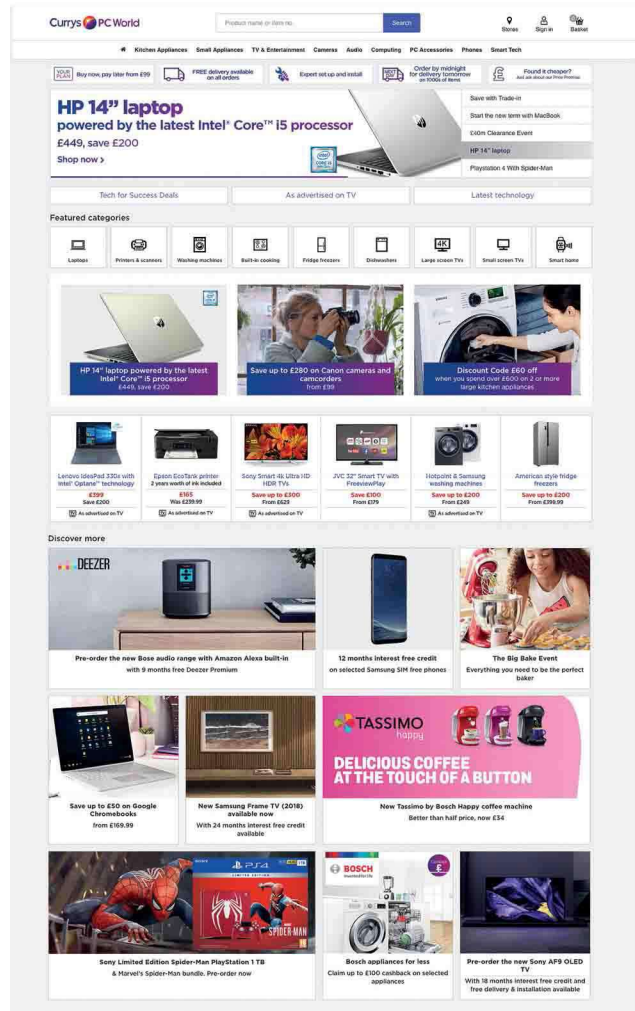
The development team, therefore, went back to basics, almost building a whole new version of the website from scratch using the things that colleagues found really powerful when interacting with customers in store.

"It wasn't a complex build in the end because we restructured some of the data that powers the website and changed the user interface. It has less content and really focuses on the things that will make a difference to the customer," says Ramage.

LEARNINGS

He says staff feedback was invaluable, adding that "they couldn't have done it without the colleagues in store". He believes that, in hindsight, it would have been better to consult with staff at the start of the project rather than

For consumers:



For store staff:

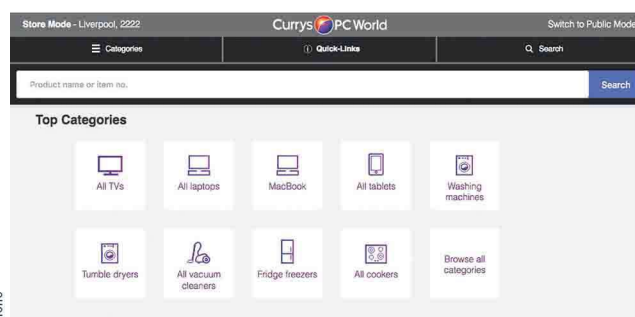


Image: Dixons Carphone

▲ The store mode website has less content than the customer-facing site and focuses on the things that make a difference to the store colleague/customer interaction

after the tablets had been issued in store. This, he adds, formed the core of the main learning from project: "We would have done this a lot faster if we'd put colleagues and the customer at the heart of what we were trying to achieve at the start."



Image: Dixons Carphone

▲ Tablets with a store version of the website will help staff when talking about products with customers

Ramage thinks that putting the website into colleagues' hands was a good idea, but "putting it into proof of concept without really understanding how colleagues are going to use it in front of customers probably put us back a little bit". He adds that he doesn't think that they'd have known without rolling out a certain number that the build had to be colleague-centric.

"Having put the initial rollout into those 50 stores and seen the relatively low engagement triggered the conversation to partner with a number of stores to really get under the skin of why they weren't using what we thought was a great opportunity, which is a fantastic website on a device for colleagues," he says. "We got a raft of feedback. It seems quite simple when you look back, but having sat down with colleagues and spent time with them understanding more from a digital perspective how they operate in stores has been the thing that has accelerated the project."

The project has proven the strength of combining two channels. "It shows that we have two fantastic assets and we are starting to unlock the value across the two," Ramage says. "There's magic when you can get the two powerful channels working together."

The store tablets are now at their fourth drop of the application having progressed from a minimally viable product at the beginning of the summer and going through a number of iterations as it was refined by the agile development squad using staff feedback. Tablets have

been gradually issued to a number of staff in 50 stores and they will be rolled out across the full estate of 340 Currys PC World stores by the third week of September. Initially, each store will get about 7 or 8 but eventually more may be issued so each member of staff has one.

The staff-centric site means that staff can quickly and easily interact with customers, showing them product details and accessing reviews, pricing and product comparisons, delivery availability, videos, stock levels in their own store and at other locations, credit calculators, services on offer and buyers' guides. Ramage explains that helping customers compare products using the product comparison tool on a tablet is much easier and clearer for everyone involved than for a store colleague to try and explain every small difference on their own.

The tablets use the same assets and data feeds as the main website, so functionality can be switched on and off easily to work in store as well as on the main website meaning staff can use the same data in store.

Customers can curate a shortlist or wish list of products on the website and save it under their account details. In future, this functionality will be accessible via store tablets enabling staff to view the list with a customer or compile one with them in store and email it to them so that they can review the products at a later stage.

"It starts to get to the pause and resume journey," says Ramage, since it's known that customers spend time researching products on the website before going into a store.

“Connecting those two things is quite difficult, particularly when the colleague is not knowledgeable about what the customer has done before. In many cases, the customer may need to go back to the beginning of their journey having spent many weeks researching, so if we can facilitate both the customer and the colleague in that situation we will be onto something quite special.”

He also believes the use of the tablets will change from being an assisted, information-led journey for the consumer and the colleague to a transactional conversation, so removing one of the friction points in store. The upgraded tablets will enable the same member of staff to take payment once the customer has made their purchasing decision. Currently, the customer has to be taken to a fixed till in store to carry out the transaction and be served by a different member of staff. A trial will take place before Christmas, according to Ramage.

“ We feel like we’re onto something that connects even more of our channels together by using this great digital asset that we have in the website and the technology we sell ”

The member of staff will also be able to take a customer’s order at the shelf edge for items that aren’t available in the store, making the journey quicker and more seamless since they won’t have to move to using the full website on a fixed PC in the store, as is the situation currently. “We know that customers want to be able to place an order in store if the item they are looking for isn’t available.” It also means that the customer can make their decision in store and then have their order delivered to their home, possibly with installation, too, if required.

Ramage says it is “unlikely” that further customer data will be incorporated into the store application.

The hardware being utilised has also changed with iPad minis being chosen for the full rollout. Ramage explains that they picked these due to the speed to market, the ability to update the software, Apple’s strong retail support and the security aspects of both the hardware and software which will provide a gateway to a transactional experience. “From an information security perspective, iOS and the Apple device are up there with best in class,” he says.

“The level of flexibility they gave us when we wanted to upgrade the software with updates we felt we wanted to keep the squad, the product team, running for an extended period of time and the ability to deliver those updates through Apple support is what swung it at the end of the day.”

BEYOND THE STORES

Ramage also explains how the same digital approach can be taken in other parts of the business, including the

WHY NO MOBILE APP?

Both InternetRetailing and new Dixons Carphone CEO Alex Baldock (previously CEO at pureplay Shop Direct) asked Ramage why there is no mobile app for Currys PC World.

The main reason, explains Ramage, is how often consumers interact with the business. “The discoverability and the usability of an app need to be pretty high,” he says. “You rarely get consumers with a retail app on their phone unless they are transacting weekly or monthly and that simply isn’t the case with us because of the nature of the products we sell.”

Dixons Carphone is working on initiatives such as range extension, content and features that would add value, such as the AR app.

The increasing breadth of the product portfolio into smart technologies which are smaller, low cost and more frequently purchased could change things, as could the increasing mix of services and credit facilities (which people interact with more frequently). He does add, though, that with customers wanting advice, services, guidance, FAQs, content, price comparison and product comparison an app “would really start now to make sense”, and it is something that the development team continues to discuss.

He adds that a Progressive Web App (PWA) could be “the route we go down” rather than building a separate app, with a PWA or native app launched “inside the next 12-18 months”.

contact centre and deliveries. The contact centre uses the full consumer-facing website when talking with customers so there is an opportunity to build a site specifically for it. The delivery drivers and installers visit 4 million customers a year so giving them access to digital assets would help them to have a better quality conversation with customers who may need extra items such as TV brackets or cables for their installation. “We feel like we’re onto something that connects even more of our channels together by using this great digital asset that we have in the website and the technology we sell,” he says.

Dixons Carphone is no different to other retailers in having a long list of digital projects in the pipeline. In fact, its list is 3 years long with project priorities constantly changing. Putting tablets in store, for example, has been on the list for a while but had been de-prioritised, although Ramage says now “is the right time to accelerate this project of work and it was a decision that didn’t take much convincing of the executive committee at all. We felt like we had to bring the next stage of retail selling to the fore.

“We found a solution that we could do quite cost effectively and quickly and we felt strongly about getting a solution in before peak season this year.”

The business case for projects has to be fully analysed and the expected improvements fully worked through before being put to the executive team in a bid for funding.

One project which will go live before this year’s peak trading is a single-page checkout. This incorporates all the stages of checkout that a customer currently goes through across 5 pages. Ramage explains that these pages used to load up separately so giving the customer plenty of opportunity to abandon their purchase, especially with



Image: Dixons Carphone

▲ An augmented reality view has been added to 800 products online

today's expectations of 1-click purchasing and frictionless checkout. "We've changed the UI, looked at the design and modernised it," he says.

The technology that the checkout works on has been upgraded, too. Part of the project was working out the best way to approach the checkout and the development team has worked through the different customer journeys. These range from customers wanting to reserve products for collection later from a store, small boxes which can be delivered by courier, larger items needing two-man delivery, and downloads and physical products in the same order with customers using discount coupons or credit or a mix.

Each journey calls on different applications and systems, explains Ramage, and the single-page checkout has been developed by looking at each customer journey end to end.

From a technical perspective, Ramage says this project "has thrown up technology challenges around the applications that we have to plug into that are legacy applications. Whilst we've been trying to run that programme in quite an agile state, it can be quite difficult when you are butting up against some applications that are a little bit more waterfall in their approach to development as well, so you have certain release schedules that have to align with other applications that exist in our IT stack. That has been a really interesting learning as well."

He adds that the single-page checkout has been "the most complex project by quite some way" of the past four or five years from a digital perspective "because of its critical nature in the customer journey".

AUGMENTED REALITY

Also new is the addition of augmented reality (AR) on the pages of 800 products across different categories. This functionality went live at the end of August following multivariate testing. It enables shoppers to see what items such as televisions would look like in their home or to view a life-sized rendition of the product and see all around it. It also enables them to rotate the products to see things such as cable connection points.

The retailer has worked with EyeKandy, which uses ARKit, so customers using iPhones (from 6 upwards)

and Samsung Galaxy S8 onwards can view products. All the customer needs to do is click on the 'see the product' button next to the 'buy' button on the product page and this will direct them to download the Currys-branded Point and Place app. The product will then 'appear' in front of their phone.

Ramage explains that they first thought about using an AR measuring tool which would be able to assess which products would fit in a space in the customer's home, such as whether a certain fridge would fit into a recessed area of a kitchen. However, the existing technology is not accurate enough to do this.

Ramage says that the company felt that the addition of AR was "worth the investment in time", especially since there was limited cost to the company. He adds that it was also an advantage to partner with a smaller, innovative company.

"We get approached quite frequently with a number of different opportunities," says Ramage. The difficulty for Dixons Carphone, he adds, is working out which technologies will bring real customer value.

There are many more projects on Dixons Carphone's digital list pinpointed by analytics as areas necessitating further investigation to explore the advantages of improvements and whether they are worth the investment. Currys PC World staff have the website in their hands now and the company has the opportunity to join the channels further.

Alex Baldock, who joined the firm as CEO in April, is well known as being keen on investing in digital and this has already been seen in a faster website and the addition of a team that focuses on the mobile experience.

The retailer, though, is driven by the experience it offers its customers. Ramage is aware that the company needs to keep up with consumer expectations, that are driven by what they experience across all online areas, and remain agile in the experience it offers digitally and as a business.

He concedes that Dixons Carphone has "probably, historically, treated our channels too independently". This project of putting iPads into stores for staff to use has helped the retailer to start seeing the value of connecting channels in a way that it hasn't been able to before. We can expect to see more developments in the future. 