ANALYSIS

The end of the website is nigh

A website is a retailer's biggest – and most important – shop window, but new ways of online browsing call into question its future. **Matthew Chapman** reports

Predictions and stats about the meteoric rise of voice and visual search abound. As far back as 2014, the former chief scientist at Chinese search engine giant Baidu, Andrew Ng, was predicting 50% of all searches would be through images or speech by 2020.

Such an estimate would have been easily dismissed four years ago but the slew of new technologies coming on to the market suggest a seismic change is indeed underway.

Tech giants Amazon, Google and Microsoft are battling to dominate the voice interface, while visual search has come on leaps and bounds thanks to innovations such as the inbuilt 'Bixby Vision' functionality on Samsung cameras and Microsoft's cognitive services.

At the same time, the concept of social shopping appears to be finally gaining traction after a number of false starts. The combination of social media and shopping is best displayed by the popularity of WeChat in China, an app that combines messaging, payment and social features.

Social media platforms including Instagram and Pinterest have long been a place for shoppers to discover product, but could increasingly become somewhere to buy direct.

Pinterest has 'buyable pins' that let users buy products without leaving the platform, while in March Instagram expanded its shopping service to the UK to allow retailers to tag their products to sell directly to Instagram users.

It is a worrying time for retailers; the ecommerce sites they have ploughed continual investment in could wane in importance and result in them losing direct access to the customer.

There is no turning back the tide and retailers must adapt to changing consumer habits.

"We've had this Copernican shift where all of a sudden the customer is at the centre of everything," says Miriam Lahage, chief executive at Figleaves.

"There is the notion they should be able to find whatever product they want on whatever platform they are on."

Lahage believes there is a shift away from the notion of a consumer coming to a retailer's website and shopping in the way previously expected.

"We have structured our site with a traditional taxonomy, which is not necessarily the way the customer thinks about it," she says. "We have very little control over the way they are going to be looking for information."

Where to invest

Rob Barnes, managing director at Accenture's retail technology consulting practice, says there is now a "pervasiveness of retail".

"I don't have to visit a store or a website, I can just talk in my kitchen to a [voice assistant] device," says Barnes. "Pervasiveness is an arms race to invest in skills in a way that means you don't become irrelevant."

Figleaves is seeking to learn more about changing shopping habits through experimentation, which includes initiatives such as AI chatbots.

"That is not necessarily going to show us top-line or bottom-line growth, but is rather an investment for us to start to develop what it is we need to meet the future customer's needs," explains Lahage. "It is almost like an R&D piece of work we need to do."

Lahage envisions a future where a website becomes an "artificial construct" and retail operates in "a cloud based system where you deliver the most relevant offering to a customer and they don't even need to come to your

Amazon is battling to dominate voice search using its Alexa devices

website".

Barnes advises clients to prepare for the future by attempting to find "channel-agnostic" ways of investing in technology.

"What we've been seeing more recently is retailers recognising their product information should be ubiquitous and a single place where they curate and organise and store product information wherever it happens to get surfaced," says Barnes.

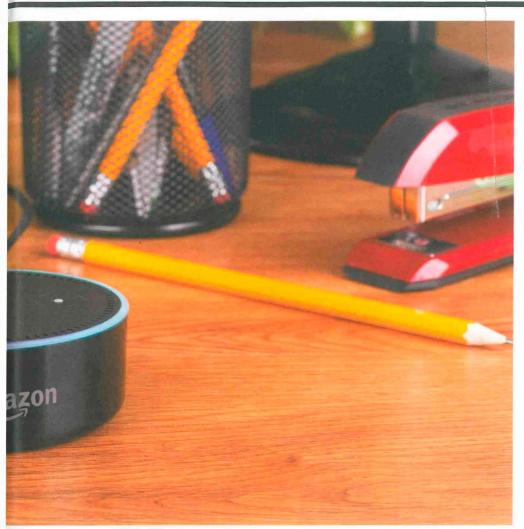A key to adapting to the emerging shopping is ensuring an ultra-flexible IT platform.

James Cannings, co-founder of UX, design and build agency MMT Digital, argues retailers need to "break out of that cycle of rebuilding your platform every five years and get towards the ability to iterate in a more agile way".

This can be achieved by investing in microservices and DevOps – an agile working relationship between developers and IT – rather than a single bloated platform.

"When you book an Uber, from A to B it is using up to 800 microservices," says Cannings. "There is not one massive Uber platform that is a billion lines of code; they use lots of third-party and little services they have built themselves. They can switch things out easily; they don't need to rebuild the whole platform."

Such flexibility is vital for those wanting to adapt to a rapidly changing environment where

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Jenny Barthe, We Are Social

Visual search on Pinterest

Instagram has expanded its shopping service

a new innovation can cause near-total disruption to the status quo.

Often technologies take a while to take off, but a retailer must be prepared once they do. For instance, visual search has been around for years and was something Lahage was involved with during her time at eBay at the start of the decade.

"We have to keep making sure we do not make assumptions that the way things that have or haven't worked in the past will define what is going to happen in the future," says Lahage.

"It only takes one application or one product group or industry to really nail it for it to become an extensive tool."

Social shopping

Jenny Barthe, strategy director at social media specialists We Are Social, believes social shopping is on the cusp of coming of age.

"Social shopping has only just left its teething issues behind, but it's growing up at the speed of light," says Barthe.

"In the last year we have really seen a step change, with social media platforms creating a much more effortless shopping experience. We will see a major paradigm change when social media platforms integrate blockchain technology, which will make them much more secure with people's financial data."

Barthe claims social platforms are offering consumers benefits not available to traditional websites.

"The one-stop WeChat social network seamlessly integrates group-powered discounts, exclusive flash sales, and consumer-customised products," she says.

A way to survive and flourish in this emerging retail environment of social shopping and voice and visual search is to ensure that content and services are geared towards these new ways of shopping and compatible with all channels.

For Figleaves that means focusing on its product credentials and the way its range offers customers self confidence and acceptance.

"We all need to decide are we product or tech or innovation companies," says Lahage. "For us, we are a product company. Our understanding of what a customer needs in a very specialised niche is the way we can differentiate itself."

A multichannel approach

Mark Steel, digital director at Sainsbury's Argos, believes the new wave of channels to reach the customer is making life exciting for retailers.

However, he believes voice and visual will be another part of a multichannel approach.

"But will one replace another?" asks Steel. "I'm not convinced."

Barnes likens the idea of the end of website to the discussion that has been ongoing about the death of the store.

"Stores are just playing a new role and the same applies to websites, they are another channel," says Barnes.

What is certain is that retailers need to be braced for each eventuality and a business' ecommerce site will die if it does not evolve and integrate new technologies.

The best way to achieve this is to invest in the skills and infrastructure to remain agile. Those who stand still will consign themselves to the annals of retail history. **RW**