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Retailers as ‘experience designers’: Brian Solis on shopping in 2030

Brian Solis

In the future, the most successful retailers will employ experts in video-game design and spatial computing, predicts Salesforce.com’s global innovation evangelist.

Only if retailers stop thinking like retailers will they truly innovate. So says Brian Solis, a self-described “digital anthropologist and futurist” who joined Salesforce.com in March 2020 as its global innovation evangelist. The author of several books including *X: The Experience When Business Meets Design* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), Solis recently shared his views on the future of shopping with McKinsey’s Cindy Van Horne. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

McKinsey: You have an unusual job title. What does it mean to be a “global innovation evangelist”?

Brian Solis: At Salesforce, I study how technology is changing markets and behaviors. I then reverse engineer trends to help executives and decision makers understand how to get in front of those trends—through technology investments or by reimagining business models, operational models, and leadership mindsets. In other words, I help people see the future of business differently.

McKinsey: Today we’d like you to help us see the future of retail differently. Walk us through the shopping experience in 2030. How will it be different from the shopping experience in 2021?

Brian Solis: There are two ways that 2030 could play out for a retailer. One is, “We’re just going to keep iterating with all of this incredible new technology.” On that path, the retailer gets stuck on iterative investments and incremental designs that build on the past, which limits the possibilities. The other path is, “We’re going to innovate and reimagine what shopping should look like in 2030—in a way that the customer either already wants or doesn’t know yet that they want—and once they have it, they’ll feel like they can’t live without it.” In my work, I focus on the latter.

The problem, when we imagine the future of retail, is that we tend to think about it as retailers. But there are other possibilities. For example, we could look at the most innovative amusement parks and translate that guest experience to the inside of a store or across other channels. Think about all the artistry and science that go into virtual reality, augmented reality, video games, or theme parks like Disney World. There's a lot of "Imagineering," as Disney calls it, that has to take place to marry technology with the customer's experience in special ways that a company can then own and make a part of its brand. What do consumers love about those experiences? What's the wow factor and how can we re-create it in retail in ways that didn't exist before? As developers, as retailers, we're only limited by how much we allow ourselves to break away from the conventional definition of retail itself.

By 2030, 5G will have given way to 6G. We'll have sensors, computer vision, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, immersive and spatial computing. How can these worlds play together in a way that is almost fantasy-like? Figuring that out takes imagination. It takes experience architecture—a new type of discipline and expertise. I wouldn't be shocked if the best retailers in 2030 are employing game designers or spatial-computing designers.

McKinsey: What does all of that mean for retail stores? What role will physical stores play in the future that you described?

Brian Solis: Retailers can no longer just build fixed structures and rely on a business model based on, "How much can we squeeze out of this design before we need a remodel?" The business model *is* remodeling. It's about being agile, evolving, staying culturally relevant. It's about reimagining space and flow: How will people come through this space? What will they feel? What's the draw? What's the attraction, beyond just stuff on shelves?

Let's look at a current trend like microfulfillment, for example. The spirit of microfulfillment is essentially freeing the shopper of the confines of stuff: I can walk around and shop and experience things, and then microfulfillment will just take care of my purchases on the back end—by putting them in the trunk of my car, delivering them to my home, or figuring out some other way to get them to me later. By offering microfulfillment, you just changed the dynamic of how I'm going to operate within your retail space.

In futuristic movies like *Minority Report* and *Blade Runner*, a character walks through retail settings and he's greeted by name; there's technology that knows who he is and tries to sell him things, and it's very intrusive. That should give us cues from a design perspective: technology shouldn't feel intrusive and suffocating. It should just be in the background. Those technological capabilities already exist today. Technically, a retailer could know me by name when I walk into a store. It can know what transactions I've made and it can look at other types of data points in real time to know a more inclusive me, a 360-degree me, beyond just what I've bought at that store. It can offer me new products and services based on that broader view of me.

The technologies exist, so the question becomes, "How do we use them?" It's about creating magic. Great retailers, in the future, will make you feel like you're in a special place, designed especially for you, so that you take time out of your life to go to that place because it feels like the right place to be. It's aspirational.

McKinsey: You've mentioned many different types of technologies that retailers could invest in. How can they strike the right balance between "creating magic" and staying profitable?

Brian Solis: Of course, retailers have to think about profitability—but also growth. When we get caught up in profit, we start getting caught up in costs, and then the conversations about innovation and the future of retail sound a lot like, “Let’s just do what we’ve been doing, but slightly better.” When we’re not willing to give up any profitability or shareholder return, that can hold us back from potential growth. It forces us into a cycle of short-termism—thinking only about performing better than we did last quarter.

When we’re imagining the future of retail, we have to stop thinking about these efforts as a cost center. We need to think of them as an investment. The “I” in ROI can stand for ignorance—what’s the return on ignorance? What’s the opportunity cost if we don’t move in new directions? Will it be good enough for us to be incrementally better? No. We have to break out of the profitability box and instead think like an investor.

A retailer might say, “Oh, that’s just too much to get my mind around. I’m bleeding money over here. The COVID-19 pandemic caused us to shut down so many stores.” I get it. But consumers in 2030 won’t want to shop the way they did in 2020. Consumers have learned how to shop more digitally; they’ve dealt with brands and start-ups that offer personalized experiences. They want to see their shopping experiences brought to life in ways that take full advantage of the technologies that we’ll have in 2030.

McKinsey: Retailers will need design and tech talent to make all of that happen and they’ll be competing with many other companies in other industries for that same scarce talent. Any advice for retailers on that front?

Brian Solis: I did some work with Westfield, the shopping-mall developer, when it was launching an innovation center and a lab in San Francisco. The company wanted to not just imagine the future of retail but also set the stage for the type of talent it wanted to attract. So it opened a collaboration hub and invited entrepreneurs to work there, which created energy and a sense of belonging. That’s one way to start thinking about the talent question: What are you, really? Are you a retailer? Or are you an experience designer and retail just happens to be a facility of how you transact?

I believe that it’s a mindset. In the 2000s and 2010s, Domino’s Pizza realized that it had to be a technology company first. How does a pizza company attract top software talent? By attaching innovation to the brand. Domino’s started to demonstrate radical possibilities, like self-driving pizza-delivery vehicles.

You have to demonstrate imagination as part of your brand. People don’t see themselves as just engineers or developers; they see themselves as architects of the future. They’re attracted to brands that have similar values and visions for where the future can go.

Brian Solis is Salesforce.com’s global innovation evangelist. This interview was conducted by **Cindy Van Horne,** global communications director of McKinsey’s Marketing & Sales Practice.

For more from Brian Solis, see the videos accompanying this article on McKinsey.com.

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