

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

A Good Connection is not just for Christmas



Peak season trading this year is set to be more difficult than ever for retailers. Unprecedented supply chain disruption is threatening to decimate stock levels. Post-COVID customer behaviour is unpredictable – with some customers relying ever more heavily on ecommerce; others heading to the high street to get ahead on Christmas buying in response to fears of shortages. How can retailers attain control over the end-to-end business and meet customers' ever rising expectations and desire for a high quality and slick experience?

Reliable, high capacity internet connectivity is now an essential component of successful retail operations. From ensuring an inspiring in-store experience to enabling efficient, intelligence-led logistics, connections need to be continuously available, with the fast bandwidth required to minimise lag and ensure seamless operations.

From rapidly deployed portable wireless solutions to support seasonal pop-up shops or temporary warehouses, to bonded solutions that deliver the fast, resilient connections required for effective retail operations throughout the year, Nick Sacke, Head of IoT and Products, Comms365, explains how retailers can confidently achieve the resilient connectivity required to underpin every aspect of the customer retail experience.

Customer Experience Imperative

Retailers have been encouraging customers to get ahead this peak season – and many have responded, opting to [shop early](#) and stockpile items, from toys to food, well ahead of the usual spikes at Black Friday, Christmas and Boxing Day sales. Activity is both online and in-store, with changing behaviour driven both by a population desperate for face-to-face interaction and a recognition of the difficulties in getting goods delivered to homes and to stores.

For retailers, this is a perfect moment to enthrall these customers with an excellent experience; a chance to explore innovative new technologies such as digital signage and intuitive self-service to reinforce customer desire for an in-store interaction. Yet, how many retailers feel confident in their ability to deliver that experience during busy periods when every aspect of the retail experience is dependent on an Internet connection? Even a small slow-down in connectivity will affect the speed in which payments can be processed – adding to delay at the counter or checkout, leading to longer queues, tying up staff and deterring customers from making a purchase.

There is a 'future store' concept currently being trialled by major brands in the UK where there are no tills or staff to man them – products are picked by the customer and billed automatically to their accounts. More than ever, internet quality and resiliency will be the cornerstone of a good customer experience in these new retail environments.

And for those retailers still reliant on the more traditional experience, they don't want to be forced to choose between processing payments or playing Christmas music. They will be disappointed if innovative new digital signage or self-service kiosks have to be mothballed to ensure staff have access to product information and the ability to place orders for customers. This year more than ever, no independent retailer needs to make in-store trade-offs that reduce the quality of customer experience as a result of glitchy, slow or under capacity Internet connections. Particularly given the fact that a poor experience will, perhaps irrevocably, undermine the consumer opinion of the retailer's customer service levels and their propensity to shop there again.



Supply Chain Overhaul

And that is just one part of the complex retail model. Online sales demand continues to be strong, reinforcing the pressures on warehouse and distribution. With the well-publicised lack of HGV drivers – and [Amazon's recent £3000 payment](#) to attract peak season staff from the competition – retailers are not only considering new distribution models to add contingency, but also actively exploring automation to fill the gaps in available workforce.

Many companies have increased stock levels where possible, investing in smaller, local warehouse locations and designing local fulfilment models. Retailers have also embraced innovative warehouse management technologies to support the single item picking required for ecommerce fulfilment, alongside store fulfilment.

Yet despite the fact that – irrespective of the model adopted – all these changes and innovations are totally dependent upon excellent, real-time communications links, this vital component of efficient logistics is, more often than not, the last part of the puzzle to be considered. Even assuming that a fixed lined fibre optic connection is available – which is certainly not always the case, especially in rural areas and greenfield sites – it can take weeks, even months to get the service provisioned. Even then, one fibre optic connection is a single point of failure – and even a short break in the connection can result in massive upheaval, disruption and loss of revenue.

Continuous, High-performance, Reliable

Portable wireless connectivity can be deployed within days, providing stores and warehouse facilities with the capacity required to manage peak demand. But don't rely on a single connection – to achieve ultra reliability businesses of every size need multiple connections. Using a bonded solution that orchestrates these connections together, uptime is maintained and capacity maximised. And, where 4G (or 5G) wireless connections are used in tandem with existing fixed line resources, the solution becomes a fully resilient solution – using wireless to enhance capacity and performance, or as a failover when the fixed connection fails; reverting back to the fixed line automatically when it is available.

The great news is that this technology is inherently portable, adaptable and scalable – which means it can be deployed quickly and effectively to meet retailers' immediate needs, from pop up shop and temporary warehouse, and with business continuity plans in mind, provide a robust, scalable and resilient solution for long term business goals.

Conclusion

This latter point is key. Yes, the retail industry and its supply chain have an unparalleled challenge this year: peak trading will be difficult to manage at every level, from sourcing stock to managing demand. But reliable, high-performance connectivity is also a prerequisite for effective retail; without confidence in the ability to attain immediate access to data throughout the supply chain right into the store, retailers cannot embrace the innovation required to optimise the customer experience or the automation needed to improve logistics operations and minimise reliance on an increasingly scarce workforce.

Good, reliable and scalable internet connectivity will help retailers to manage this year's peak season but it should also be the bed rock of future strategy and operations planning. This is not a short term need: a good connection really isn't just for Christmas.

www.comms365.com
sales@comms365.com
01234 865880

