

# To prepare for the future of retail, learn by doing

By [Graeme Brooks](#)

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We have used the term "retail ready" for most of my career in this sector, but never before has it been more critically relevant than right now in such a rapidly changing landscape.



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Over the last four years I have been lucky enough to be part of developing the beginnings of arguably one of the most powerful media opportunities that brands have to simultaneously engage in targeted conversations with consumers whilst leveraging the cognitive intent to purchase.

I would be remiss not to tip my hat to e/m-commerce and the leap forward in adoption and confidence we have all seen and experienced from the confinements and safety of our homes. The power of convenience-driven solutions is undeniable but the ability for brands to truly influence behaviour without leveraging price is limited. This is where the integrated combination of both physical and digital design presents a unique opportunity for retail.

"Imagine if you could be as targeted and agile in-store as you are on social media?" is how we best land the principle with brands. Remote and dynamic control of integrated digital in-store messaging and experiences has changed the way brands can converse with shoppers in-store.

But digital is not always better. It can also make things far worse, adding to the clutter and confusion for shoppers.

**Relevance** and **context** are key driving principles that any digital experience should be founded on.



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Working with FMCG brands and their respective agencies on a daily basis it is evident that we still have a long way to go in education of this medium and making sure relevant content is considered higher up in the strategic planning process. We still get the “can’t I just run my TVC on the screen” comment and have to go through all the reasons why that would be a failure for both our efforts.

Shopper behaviour measurement via facial recognition technology allows us to gather data from impression count down to dwell time at these displays. This is showing us two very clear layers in messaging opportunities.

### Layer 1: Reach and awareness

In FMCG nearly 80% of shoppers are visually engaging for 3 seconds or less (with non-interactive digital) so we need to be as targeted, relevant and disruptive as possible, and as simple as possible. This primary message or “hook” needs to be digestible within that time, or everything else at that touchpoint becomes deselected in the existing visual overload.

“Disruption” being the toughest and most important objective here. It only takes a few hours on a Friday afternoon standing in a liquor store to realise how difficult it is to break that pre-determined shopper mission with either static or digital tactics. This nasty little bug conservatively increased average screen time to an extra hour per day across all markets in 2020, so digital fatigue is real and likely at it’s highest levels today.

We need to do things differently to get that all-important glance, then try to hold that glance for just a few more moments! It’s about breaking the rules, doing things that make us feel a tad uneasy, and not playing it safe by following the 84-page global brand style guide to a tee. This is a new medium. We need to write new rules for it. The only way we can do that is through trial and data, and most importantly time.

To definitively develop a shopper behavioural “insight” we need to actively identify interesting findings then test and trail them in multiple versions, over multiple periods and across many brands to confidently publish any shopper truths. Taking this time and approach is crucial to any long term credibility, trust and value around this new media channel.



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### Layer 2: Storytelling

The good news is the other  $\pm 20\%$  are fully engaged and spending between 10-15 seconds interacting with the full experience (category variations obviously). These are your current brand loyalists or shoppers that resonated with Layer 1 and want a deeper conversation.

Don’t waste it. Here a second layer of messaging or interaction comes into play, maybe a bit more product education or usage inspiration, encourage some fun or interaction via mobile or proximity triggers. This is where historic category insights combined with “live” daily data plays such a crucial role.

We are entering both a challenging and exciting time in retail. Physical retail needs to rapidly evolve and will be under

pressure for obvious reasons going forward. But knowing we have the ability to remotely target and engage shoppers with relevant content through minimal or no physical contact is truly remarkable.

How far we can leverage digital in retail is still largely uncertain. There is a huge difference between what we can do with digital and what we should be doing. Companies and brands that learn by doing rather than just predicting will float to the top. They will harness the true insights. We are at warp speed and brands want to invest in real experiences, actionable data and relevant scalability.

The future of retail is whatever we as industry leaders do well today.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graeme Brooks is the retail strategic services director at [<https://www.barrowsglobal.com/> Barrows Retail Design]]. He has worked at Barrows for over 20 years. With an advertising and design background, Brooks moved into the more strategic shopper marketing space running workshops with global FMCG companies across both developing and developed markets. He's currently combining that experience and launching new digital platforms into the SA retail market.

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