



TABLETS TRANSFORM RETAIL OPERATIONS

With well over one-third of employees working from home or the road, and with business itself becoming increasingly global, organizations must find new ways to improve business processes, speed decision-making, increase customer satisfaction, and drive revenues from all areas of the organization. Frost & Sullivan research shows that supporting new business needs is driving up costs, and executives are looking for ways in which technology can help improve those outcomes.

Retail organizations are at the forefront of this trend. As they straddle the line between online and in-store shopping, struggle to manage multiple suppliers and partners around the world, wrestle with the changes social media is placing on building brand, and continue to look for new ways to improve the overall customer experience, retailers must leverage new technology in innovative ways.

Tablets can offer retailers the opportunity to transform their business processes, improve sales performance, lower inventory and other costs, and increase revenues. A Frost & Sullivan survey of more than 1,000 IT decision-makers in the US and Europe revealed that in almost half of all companies, employees are using tablets for business purposes—and that number is expected to increase by more than 10% in the next two years.

By striking a balance between the usability of laptops and the portability of smart phones, tablets offer a new, often ideal, form factor for use in the retail environment. Tablets enhance the user experience with wider displays for multimedia communication and visual interaction; better battery life for all-day use; and more memory for information storage. The availability of thousands of mobile apps—and support for common business software—makes them valuable business tools on multiple fronts.

Retailers are wise to consider the ways in which deploying tablets throughout the organization—both on the front lines and in the back office—can help deliver measurable benefits.

Point-of-Sale Retailers can arm store clerks with tablets that are connected to inventory, supply chain and POS systems, allowing them to show customers merchandise that may be available at another store or warehouse location in different colors and styles; help them decide whether a product will fit with their home or lifestyle using CAD and other design programs; offer installation and other technical support before the purchase is even made; and check out customers as soon as they are ready to buy. Tablets can even be used as stand-alone, customer information devices located on the retail floor. This reduces walk-aways and returns, improving revenues and loyalty in turn.

Staffing management Retailers, including restaurants, fast-food franchises, big-box stores and supermarkets, can take advantage of real-time reporting capabilities built into many WFM applications. By walking through their retail locations with a tablet in hand, managers can see what's actually happening "on the ground," enter that data into the system, and adjust to changes immediately. GPS and other location-based services can aid in the management of store clerks, stock room employees, delivery drivers and more.

Training Retailers can put trainers into stores, virtually, by using tablets to educate clerks and store managers on new products, promotions and customer events. As employees walk through the store, remote trainers can show them how to properly display the merchandise, covering everything from in-store placement and window treatments, to then folding and pairing of specific items. This ensures every store offers the same look and feel to customers as soon as new items and designs are rolled out, without incurring lost time for the trainers or their students.

In-store customer support Retailers can use tablets within a store or other location to show customers detailed information about products and services; collaborate with experts at other retail locations or the company's headquarters to quickly get answers and solve problems; access video for easy troubleshooting; and check inventory and other back-office applications for replacement parts and other information.

With the remarkable growth in the tablet market, vendors are expanding their offerings to satisfy a wide variety of end-users' and corporate buyers' needs. Depending on what your goals are for using the devices, it's important to select the right tool for the job. Do you need to prioritize speed over battery life? Support for back-office business applications? A large screen for video consumption, or compute capabilities that rival those of a full-size PC?

While every company faces these choices, retailers have the added burden of thinking about their brand whenever they introduce new technology into their stores. If customers will be using the devices directly—or if they will watch as salespeople do—you'll want to pay extra attention to the appearance of the device. A large, HD screen with fast processing should be a priority, since customers will form an opinion about your organization based on their experience with the technology itself.

And, while IT departments still have a major role in software deployment and usage, more line-of-business employees (including executives, knowledge workers, and sales representatives) are influencing software usage in the business environment. As a result, organizations are increasingly taking into account employee and customer preferences when it comes to application and device selection.

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