

**“Capabilities are rushing ahead without us really knowing much about what will make a good customer experience.”**

Research by  
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# Connecting the dots: Integrating the digital, physical, and social realms to deliver stellar customer service

**P**rofessor of Marketing Ruth Bolton's research paper, "Customer Experience Challenges: Bringing Together the Digital, Physical, and Social Realms," didn't exactly start on the back of a cocktail napkin, but the story isn't far off.

While at a future-focused conference in Australia, she and some of her fellow attendees were so excited by the ideas being presented that they met and conceived the idea for the paper on the spot. "We started talking, and the paper unfolded very rapidly," Bolton says. "People were throwing ideas out and pulling things up on the internet."

They found that these three areas — the digital, physical, and social — are being studied and implemented in isolation, creating a fragmented customer experience. New technologies, such as artificial intelligence, robots, and virtual reality, are changing the way businesses interact with customers. But it's how effectively they integrate these new methods of engaging customers with existing face-to-face interactions that will determine their success.

"Capabilities are rushing ahead without us really knowing much about what will make a good customer experience," Bolton explains, and most companies aren't yet able to connect the dots. For example, if you shop online, the merchant doesn't necessarily know you're the same person who was in their store yesterday. Or, if you walk into the store and you've already done some research online, they don't know that. If you're shopping with a friend, but their immersive experience is just for one, the merchant is missing out on the social element. In this new world, managers will need to understand customer experiences across all three spaces.

That's where business experts are taking the baton from computer scientists. Instead of simply asking, "Can we do this?" marketers are looking at how the whole experience will affect the end user.

## A technological revolution in retail

Digital tools like chatbots, digital twins, virtual reality (VR), and virtual experts are being used in nearly every industry. But one of the places they have the biggest face-to-face impact on customers is in retail.

With digital technology, you can bring a social element — like a friend from far away shopping online with you — into a situation where social isn't usually present. You also can bring the digital realm into the physical with things like augmented reality in retail spaces.

The digital and physical also can intersect more simply to create customized experiences. For example, one customer may want to order an item online but pick it up in-store; another wants to see the item in person at the store, then have it delivered. Companies can use technology to create personalized experiences for both customers.

Here are a few other ways companies are merging the three realms to provide great customer service experiences:

- Marriott and AmEx are using VR to help customers imagine what it would be like to go to a beach or other destination.
- Ikea and Lowe's are using immersive experiences such as video kiosks and VR to show how their products might work in your home.
- Digital and social intersect at Sephora and MAC cosmetic sites, where you can virtually try on makeup, then snap and share a photo.
- Amazon's new ad format uses a physical sample box. The tech giant sells its data to brands who send free samples to

you based on purchase history.

- At Starbucks, digital preordering for people on the go, and social baristas to provide personalized attention for those who want to sit and sip, provide situation-specific service.

## Role revisions and trust effects

Another key factor Bolton and her colleagues explored was how people's roles are changing to react to new capabilities enhanced by technology. She says we all have scripts in our minds of how things should play out during a service interaction. But what happens when a robot greets you at the front desk? Or a virtual expert chats you up online?

Bolton says she regularly asks audiences when she speaks to raise their hands if they've ever talked to a robot. "People kind of look around and say, 'Well, we don't know. We're pretty sure we have but we can't tell anymore.' If there's that kind of uncertainty, what is your role? How do you interact in these situations?"

People are adapting to this type of digital social presence, she says. For example, most admit they don't find talking to Siri or Alexa all that strange anymore. And just like these handy assistants are gaining our trust, companies are leveraging technology in other ways to bolster trust levels damaged by digital breaches of privacy and other blunders. Airbnb and Uber that give customers the ability to provide ratings are flipping trust on its head. "We think: 'If 5,000 other people gave this person a 5, I guess I can trust them to take me to the airport.'" — *Jenn Woolson*



There's more to this story with Ruth Bolton. Watch the video: [news.wpcarey.asu.edu/connect-the-dots](https://news.wpcarey.asu.edu/connect-the-dots)