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AI-POWERED ASSOCIATES

The Future of Retail's Frontline

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Your greatest asset is not a robot—it's a human and their artificial intelligence (AI) agent

As online shopping thrives, the in-store experience has been left to gather dust, particularly when it comes to AI investment. Yet 72 percent of U.S. retail sales still occur in brick-and-mortar stores, where associates—part guide, part fixer, part brand representative—are the unsung heroes of the shopping experience.

The reality is simple: Exceptional customer service depends on supporting the people who deliver it. When the in-store experience falls short, poor customer service is almost always the culprit.

Yet today's store associates are stretched thin, expected to troubleshoot technology, prevent theft, calm frustrations and manage fulfillment logistics. According to Salesforce data, **retail associates spend 74 percent of their time on activities unrelated to checkout.** Often, the very technological tools meant to help them only add to their challenges. Store associates must log into **an average of 12 systems daily,** which contributes to the 50 percent of hourly workers who plan to leave their jobs in the next year. Experts estimate that the average cost to a retailer for losing a single frontline employee is nearly $10,000.

AI agents—autonomous systems capable of making decisions, executing tasks, and interacting with external environments or data to achieve specific goals without ongoing human oversight—are already providing ROI for digital sales. **But retailers that overlook AI agents for improving the associate experience are missing a significant opportunity.**

By providing real-time insights, operational support and personalized resources, AI-powered mobile devices can empower associates to thrive, allowing them to be the ultimate brand ambassadors. The future of in-store shopping doesn't belong to robots. It belongs to humans, with powerful AI agents to help them every step of the way.

> **"We've been focusing all our investment and energy on e-commerce for the last 15 years, and the in-store experience has fallen behind. Knowing that brick and mortar is not going to go away and is going to continue to be a critical piece of a brand's strategy and growth, how do we now do better in-store and modernize the in-store experience? How do we use AI agents to improve both customer experience and associate experience in tandem to drive better outcomes?**
>
> —Jackie Walker, Publicis Sapient Retail Experience Strategy Lead, North America

Executive summary

This white paper delves into the evolving landscape of technology in the store associate experience, and how AI is poised to reshape the role in the years to come.

Empowering Customer Service

Over 7 million U.S. store associates lack associate apps for mobile devices, cutting them off from real-time customer, brand and inventory data. Equipping associates with mobile devices powered by custom large language models (LLMs) can turn them into skilled personal shoppers.

Rethinking Fulfillment

More than 42 percent of e-commerce orders in 2023 involved stores, overwhelming in-store associates. Retailers are reimagining stores as fulfillment hubs for same-day delivery, ship-from-store orders, and buy online, pick up in-store (BOPIS). Associates need AI-enhanced mobile devices, like pick-path optimization tools and instant notifications, to reduce order fulfillment times and errors.

Improving Loss Prevention

Around 84 percent of retail associates are concerned about loss prevention and criminal activity. AI-powered theft analytics and radio frequency identification (RFID) tracking for selfcheckout systems improve security and inventory accuracy. By automating theft detection, AI allows associates to focus on enhancing customer experiences while reducing risks.

Optimizing Inventory Management

AI tools like digital shelf labels (DSLs) and RFID provide real-time stock visibility and automate restocking, saving time for associates on the floor. Walmart's rollout of DSLs demonstrates the growing need for AI technology to stay competitive.

The Role of AI Agents

In the future, AI agents will simplify the 12-plus technology systems associates often navigate, connecting data and workflows to complete tasks autonomously. These agents will empower associates to focus on customer service—still the number one driver of in-store shopping experience.

Empowering customer service through mobile devices

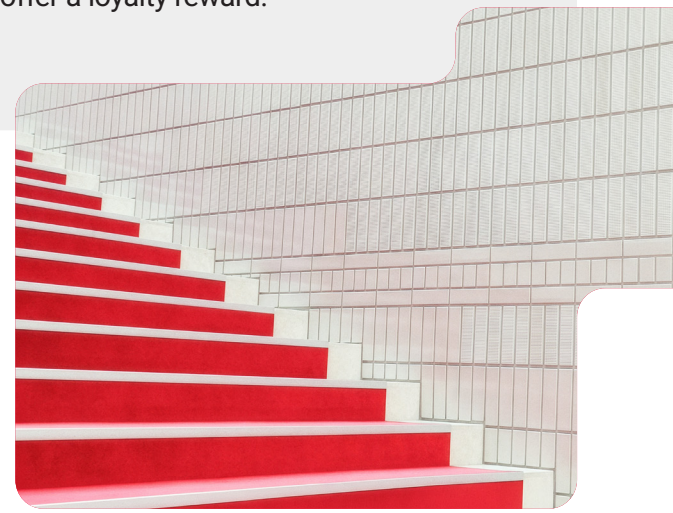
Walmart's My Assistant, an AI-powered productivity tool, helps associates save time by generating and summarizing documents, while its mobile disaster response units support associates and communities during crises.

Unserved employees—those without access to associate apps on mobile devices—represent a $2 billion annual opportunity for hardware, software and services in the U.S. Retailers report that, on average, 34 percent of their workforce operates without these essential tools.

With 90 percent of retailers now adopting or testing generative AI, those integrating it with mobile devices for employees are already experiencing transformative gains. Soon, these AI-assisted mobile devices will become a baseline requirement for store associates. The store associate of the future will have access to AI agents integrated with diverse data sources, including customer data, to significantly enhance the value and effectiveness of store associates.

What Does The Future Look Like?

A loyal online customer walks into the store for the first time, looking to buy yoga gear. **A new associate**, with zero knowledge of their preferences, taps a mobile device connected to the customer's phone number on their loyalty account. Instantly, the device pulls up the customer's size, purchase history, spending habits and loyalty status. **An AI agent** then suggests the ideal workout gear based on inventory and preferences, helping the associate recommend the perfect fit and even offer a loyalty reward.



Customer Service Agent

- **Enhanced support:** AI assists with routine inquiries, such as "How can I return a package?" This frees up associates to focus on more complex customer issues and personalized, face-to-face service.
- **Tailored experiences:** Generative AI improves chatbots and helps associates create customized responses, elevating customer engagement.
- **Clienteling boost:** AI tools simplify knowing the customer to recommend products, fostering loyalty and improving efficiency.

Rethinking fulfillment

Retail associates are not just required to be brand ambassadors but also the backbone of the online shopping supply chain. As e-commerce continues to grow and buy online, pick up in-store (BOPIS) adoption becomes an entrenched preferred fulfillment method for customers, retailers are relying on their associates to transform physical stores into critical fulfillment hubs.

Store associates play a key role in the fulfillment shift, managing tasks like picking and packing online orders for BOPIS, curbside pickup, and shipping—all while helping in-store customers and solving inventory issues.

AI technology is supporting this shift. For example, Michaels Stores, Inc. equipped associates with handheld devices with pick-path optimization and reduced BOPIS fulfillment times to under an hour, while their curbside pickups now average just 3.5 minutes. Customers who experience shorter BOPIS wait times and a more seamless experience are much more willing to use this fulfillment method again. Retailers who do this best are going to see increased adoption as customers abandon companies that fail to execute well.

The store associate of the future will have a mobile fulfillment AI agent to direct packing and picking.

What Does The Future Look Like?

In a big-box store facing a staffing shortage, AI helps reduce the stressful toll of the lack of staff. Instead of chaos from delayed orders and mislabelled shipments, AI-powered order management systems (OMS) guide associates in real time, optimizing picking paths, answering questions from new employees and helping managers with staffing—freeing associates to focus on customers.

Fulfillment Agent

- **Efficient operations:** AI streamlines picking, packing and managing inventory for online orders, optimizing fulfillment processes.
- **Specialized roles:** New positions like fulfillment managers highlight the importance of seamless store operations in meeting e-commerce demands.
- **AI assistance:** Voice-activated tools simplify updates and inventory management, enabling faster and more accurate fulfillment.

Improving loss prevention

Retail theft is a real concern for both shoppers and employees—and AI is a key solution. Store associates often double as security guards, handling theft-related incidents that can be stressful and risky.

The concerns are widespread. According to Zebra Technologies' 17th Annual Global Shopper Study, **84 percent of retail associates worry about safety threats** and the lack of tools to address them. Shoppers feel the tension too, with 71 percent expressing concern about crime and theft in their favorite stores.

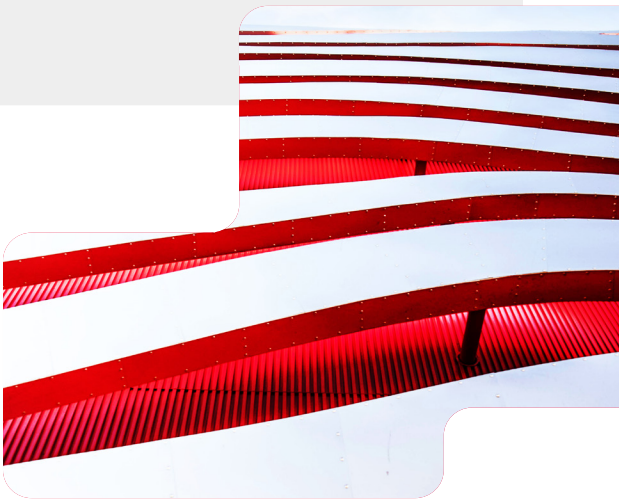
For retailers, the scale of **the problem is still unclear**. Poor tracking of inventory losses, inconsistent data collection and reliance on employees to log incidents make it hard to pinpoint trends. Sensationalized media coverage only adds to the confusion.

AI is perhaps the most promising tool for loss prevention, augmenting traditional methods like cameras and sensors. While just **38 percent of retailers use AI-driven theft analytics, 50 percent plan to adopt it within three years**. Similar momentum is building around self-checkout cameras, computer vision and RFID tracking systems, all of which aid in the suite of solutions retailers can adopt to help mitigate leakage.

These technologies monitor inventory, alert staff to potential problems and streamline store operations. By automating these tasks, AI lets associates focus on customer service, turning what was once a burden into an opportunity to improve the shopping experience.

What Does The Future Look Like?

In the store, AI-powered cameras (computer vision) become a valuable tool in retailers' arsenals in conjunction with traditional theft prevention techniques. These cameras will make theft prevention less obtrusive, and practices like checking receipts or storing things in locked cabinets won't cause as much friction for the shopper or employee.



Loss Prevention Agent

- Smarter tracking: RFID tags reduce shrinkage and improve inventory accuracy with real-time geotracking.
- AI alerts: AI detects suspicious activity through data analysis, alerting associates to potential theft.
- Proactive prevention: Associates can act quickly on AI insights, enhancing security and customer service.

Optimizing inventory management

Inventory management is also changing for store associates. It's no longer just about keeping shelves stocked—it's about having real-time visibility into stock both on the floor and in the back. More customers are buying online and picking up in-store and expect real-time inventory transparency in digital shopping tools. Digital shelf labels (DSLs) are emerging as key tools in this transformation, with associates becoming the primary operators of these systems.

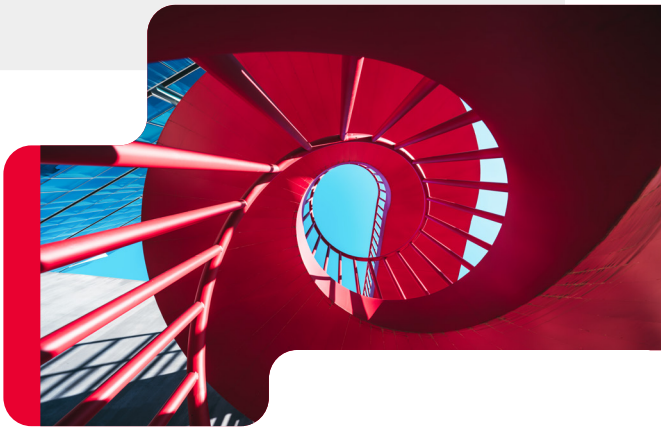
The future of inventory management lies in handheld devices that integrate both RFID and DSLs. While RFID is great for tracking inventory and preventing theft, **DSLs enhance customer interaction and streamline store operations.** DSLs allow associates to update prices via a mobile app, eliminating the need for manual changes, saving time and reducing errors. They also provide real-time tracking, helping retailers avoid stockouts and overstocking, improving inventory turnover and cutting costs.

Features like "pick to light" guide associates to the right items for online orders, while "stock to light" alerts them when shelves need restocking. By automating these tasks, DSLs free up time for associates to focus on customer service.

Walmart is leading the charge, planning to roll out DSLs across 2,300 stores by 2026. This move signals a major shift in the industry, and experts believe other retailers will follow suit or risk falling behind. In a competitive landscape, the ability to quickly adjust prices and manage inventory will become crucial for staying ahead.

What Does The Future Look Like?

There's a major hurricane hitting the southern coast of the U.S., and shoppers are eager to stock up on essentials—from Instacart to BOPIS to going in-store. Products are rapidly flying off the shelves, but the store keeps up in real time. DSL lighting systems help picking associates find the right item. Stock to light helps third-party shoppers see what's out of stock and alert the customer, and store associates receive pings on their mobile device to restock. Finally, customers are prevented from buying items online that aren't in stock, reducing order cancellations and subsequent frustration.



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AI AGENTS

Not just for e-commerce customers

Retail technology has evolved rapidly—DSLs, automated warehouses, mobile devices, RFID—leaving many store associates overwhelmed rather than empowered. Despite these advancements, some retailers still lack basic mobile tools for their in-store teams, while others cite employee skill gaps as a major barrier to utilizing tech already in play.

Yet 40 percent of retail workers feel their employers don't adequately invest in their technology needs, and 20 percent feel it's a non-priority. The stakes are high: Without intelligent systems, retailers risk profit losses compared to their AI-enabled competitors.

Agentic AI offers a solution to the average of 12 technology systems that store associates have to access daily. Specialized, autonomous AI systems, leveraging generative AI, natural language processing and machine learning, can pull together tools across systems and data sources—not only to provide information but to connect workflows and carry out retail associate tasks.

By taking on repetitive or complex processes, AI allows associates to refocus on what matters most: delivering personalized, high-touch customer service that defines the in-store shopping experience. AI agents, powered by platforms like Salesforce, are revolutionizing the role of in-store associates by enhancing clienteling and enabling meaningful customer interactions.

With access to a Customer 360 view—unified, real-time customer data—AI surfaces actionable insights such as purchase history, preferences and personalized recommendations. This empowers associates to engage customers with tailored offerings, suggest complementary products, or highlight relevant promotions based on prior engagements.

A comprehensive AI ecosystem ensures every touchpoint—whether online, in-app or in-store—is connected, giving associates a holistic understanding of each customer. By streamlining workflows and surfacing relevant insights, AI agents elevate clienteling, making interactions more efficient, personalized and impactful.

The future of retail lies not just in adding more technology to improve the bottom line, but in also using it to bring the human connection back to the forefront. AI-driven tools enable associates to focus on building relationships, delivering value, and creating the high-touch experiences that customers expect.

> **The key to a thriving retail operation is mastering the metrics that drive productivity and profitability while delivering exceptional customer experiences. This combination not only boosts loyalty but also inspires positive behaviors that fuel top-line growth**

—Jackie Walker, Publicis Sapient
Retail Experience Strategy Lead,
North America

How Agentforce and Publicis Sapient can help

Agentforce and Publicis Sapient provide complementary solutions to help retail store associates and enterprises leverage the power of AI and seamless systems, enabling full-stop integration.

The Merchant Agent, Powered By Salesforce

The Merchant Agent, part of Salesforce's Agentforce suite, transforms commerce operations by equipping merchants with AI-driven tools to optimize performance, automate workflows and enhance customer engagement. Built on Commerce Cloud, it streamlines processes and delivers actionable insights for smarter decision-making.

Key Capabilities

01. **AI-personalized promotions:** Leverages real-time data and AI to create tailored, data-driven promotions. By analyzing trends, customer behavior and inventory, it maximizes engagement, boosts conversions and improves store performance.

02. **Actionable insights and analytics:** Provides insights on product trends, inventory and purchasing patterns, enabling merchants to optimize product positioning, stock availability and pricing strategies.

03. **Automated task execution:** Automates repetitive tasks like product reviews, PIM updates and inventory syncs, freeing merchants to focus on strategic priorities like product curation and growth.

04. **Seamless integration:** Connects with partner systems and third-party tools to enable workflows for content creation, promotions and order management within a unified commerce ecosystem.

05. **Optimized customer engagement:** Uses real-time insights and AI to deliver relevant promotions, manage inventory and ensure accurate order fulfillment, creating seamless, personalized shopping experiences that drive satisfaction and loyalty.

Connected Retail Store Experience Solution, Powered By Publicis Sapient

Agentic AI holds immense promise, but **technology alone is not enough**. To truly unlock the value of agentic AI and other digital tools, retailers need a partner who understands the nuances of both front-stage and back-stage operations and how these elements work together to improve the experience for associates and customers.

Publicis Sapient does not just implement technology; **we design and orchestrate holistic solutions that put the customer and the associate at the center.**

Key Capabilities

01. **Service design:** We begin by understanding the "why" behind customer and associate needs, and then design services that flow through the space, supported by technology. This approach considers the entire journey, not just isolated touchpoints.

02. **Front-stage and back-stage integration:** We consider the entire ecosystem from the customer experience to the operational processes, ensuring that technology enhances, rather than complicates, both front-stage and back-stage operations.

03. **Associate empowerment:** We focus on providing associates with the right digital tools and data to successfully deliver on customer experience, reengineer processes to make work more efficient, provide training and growth opportunities, and improve communication to help associates understand the value they provide to the business.

04. **Holistic approach:** We combine our expertise in physical design, digital experience and technology implementation to create seamless, integrated experiences. We work across all channels to create a connected retail store experience.

Together, Agentforce and Publicis Sapient help businesses integrate AI technologies to automate workflows, drive better decision-making and achieve operational excellence, while ensuring seamless systems integration to maximize AI's true potential.

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Publicis Sapient is a digital business transformation company. We partner with global organizations to help them create and sustain competitive advantage in a world that is increasingly digital. We operate through our expert SPEED capabilities: Strategy and Consulting, Product, Experience, Engineering and Data, which combined with our culture of curiosity and deep industry knowledge, enables us to deliver meaningful impact to our clients' businesses through reimagining the products and experiences their customers truly value. Our agile, data-driven approach equips our clients' businesses for change, making digital the core of how they think and what they do. Publicis Sapient is the digital business transformation hub of Publicis Groupe with 20,000 people and over 50 offices worldwide. For more information, **visit publicissapient.com.**

salesforce

Salesforce is the #1 AI CRM, where humans with agents drive customer success together. Through Agentforce, our groundbreaking suite of customizable agents and tools, Salesforce brings autonomous agents, unified data from any source, accessible analytics, and best-in-class Customer 360 apps together on one integrated platform to help companies connect with customers in a whole new way. Salesforce is proud to be the market leader, but we're even more proud to lead in philanthropy, innovation and culture. Guided by core values of trust, customer success, innovation, equality, and sustainability, Salesforce is more than a business—we're a platform for change. **Learn more at salesforce.com.**