Tech Trends Ahead for 2022

[Thomas Mulloy](#)   December 14, 2021

While digital automation seems targeted toward large retail operations, simpler solutions for smaller c-store chains are emerging.

Retail technology is moving at breakneck speed, making it tough for c-store operators who must juggle running an efficient business while meeting rising customer expectations. Integrating loyalty apps, order ahead, delivery and point-of-sale (POS) systems, while tracking inventory and labor hours, can be daunting.

It doesn't have to be. New tech is emerging in the coming months that can help retailers test the digital waters without the information overload or busting the budget.

"Here's why I'm excited, right now, right exactly now in December as we face

this new year," explained Daniel Burrus, futurist, author, disruptive innovation expert and founder of Burrus Research. "There is more opportunity to grow your c-store and your business than ever in history."

Tech trends to watch in the year ahead include the rise of frictionless stores, chatbot kiosks that can respond to common customer questions, the ability to order out-of-stocks via automation and delivery.

If you do the same thing over more than three or four times, it can be automated, noted Burrus. Many of those things — like answering questions about what aisle to find a product, whether it's in stock or even carried at all by your store, directions to the interstate — can be performed by electronic systems.

"The key is," said Burrus, "if we can get technology to answer customer questions, to free the people that are in the store to do what humans do best — interface with other humans and take their cash — we can make more money."

Still, many of those systems can demand a heavy upfront investment — something that makes sense for the big chains. But does it make sense for smaller retailers?

"Sometimes the technology's cool, but it doesn't really pay for itself," said Anthony Perrine, owner of two Lou Perrine's Gas & Grocery stores in Kenosha, Wis. "Or it doesn't do anything that is really saving that much time and money for a smaller guy."

While much of the latest retail tech seems out of reach for Perrine, he stays on top of what's developing, anticipating the day when the cost lowers to the level of his budget. Still, Perrine is tuned into technology.

"I really want to try and get a frictionless store," Perrine said, explaining that he's applied for artificial intelligence (AI) grants to help meet the expense.

After recently building his second store, he now feels that he would like to build a store around the latest technology, instead of retrofitting an existing structure.

"So that's something I would absolutely pull the trigger on, if I could get my hands on something like that," he said.

Infinite Inventory

Integrating automation could become easier for smaller retailers soon. And cheaper, Burrus emphasized. Despite a store's size or its chain's wherewithal, Burrus sees the coming of what he calls "infinite inventory."

Shelf space is at a premium at c-stores — especially for smaller footprints — and getting the optimal product mix is a challenge. As retailers rotate seasonal items onto their shelves, Burrus sees in the very near future the ability to still offer products that have rotated out. With a flat panel monitor or even large tablet, internet access and a website, operators can have an in-store kiosk for ordering out-of-stock items.

Retailers could tie in a delivery service or other outside fulfillment service to cover the last-mile delivery of these items. That technology is available now.

That same customer convenience could extend to a mobile application. Burrus underscored the importance of allowing customers the option to pay with their smartphone, saying that the mobile payment transaction is as fast or faster, and just as secure. Plus, customers expect it and will ask for it.

"When you say no," Burrus said, the customer will be thinking, "I know that you're an old-fashioned store, and if I'm a more modern guy, I might try to go somewhere else that can do it the way I want to do it."

Voice AI is becoming more commonplace, too, especially with today's labor crunch. Team members need to be doing productive things — like processing sales, stocking product or maintaining the foodservice or beverage areas of the store.

"Time is money," Burrus said. "The more time you spend on one thing, the less time you're spending on something else."

Start Small, Plan Big

And while many of the latest digital platforms may seem financially out of reach for the retailer with fewer than a dozen or so stores, Perrine knows it's essential to stay on top of what's happening on the tech front. "I just try to see what's out there and try to play with it if I can," he said.

Budgetary hurdles are an issue for many retailers, but there are inexpensive solutions to automating customer in-store inquiries, advised Burrus. Don't have the budget for a big tech vendor? Start small. He recommends cash-

strapped retailers use a Voice AI bot system — like Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri or Google Assistant — to get started automating customer questions that distract employees from more important tasks.

Doing nothing could be your business' death sentence. Beware the comfort of the wait-and-see mindset.

"In the past, a wait-and-see attitude made sense because change was kind of slow," advised Burrus. "But today, change is coming faster and faster, and you can 'wait and see' yourself right out of business — because you're either going to be more relevant in the marketplace or less. There's no in between."