



CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

The New Rules of Customer Experience in the Age of Agents

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You’re in a clothing store, apparel draped over one arm, and your phone in your free hand. You are searching TikTok for gift ideas, while an AI agent is running product and price comparisons in the background. A sales associate asks, “Can I help you?”

This kaleidoscope of interactions helps define the shopping experience of 2026. The screen, algorithm, social media feed, large language model, and store all have important roles to play.

This is not a new story. Omnichannel shopping has been around for more than a decade. But the growth of self-executing agents and consumers' desire for a seamless experience have raised the stakes.

Consumers think in moments, not channels. These moments are guided by agents and AI and spread across digital and physical spaces.

Brands and retailers have two primary challenges. First, their approach must adapt to and anticipate consumer expectations and behaviors. Second, to do so, they must revise their underlying technology and operating architecture.

This article—the first in a two-part series—will focus on the approach to customer experience. The second article will examine their underlying architecture.

The Holiday Tipping Point

AI-enabled shopping went mainstream during the holiday season of 2025. Half of consumers were planning to use a GenAI chatbot in their shopping experience. US traffic to retail sites from GenAI chatbot tools increased by nearly 700%, compared with the year prior, according to Adobe. On Cyber Monday, AI traffic to US retail sites increased by 670%.

This meteoric growth recalls the holiday season in 1998, when Amazon's holiday sales quadrupled compared with the 1997 holiday season. Just as shoppers back then became comfortable buying goods online, they are now increasingly relying on AI and AI agents to enhance their shopping experience.

So far, the transition is more heavily concentrated on discovery than on purchase. More than three-quarters of US retail sales still occur in brick-and-mortar stores, where consumers value their ability to see, touch, try on, and compare products.

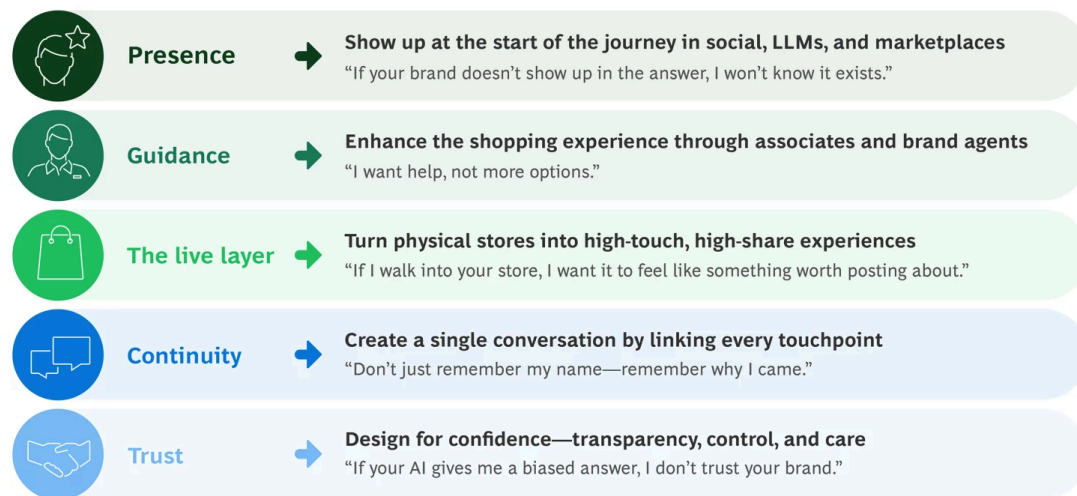
But consumers also value seamless guidance and personalization across all touchpoints. Even though brands no longer fully control the customer journey, consumers evaluate them as if they do. A brand's reputation is powerfully affected by what an AI agent says, what an influencer recommends, what a store delivers, and what happens after purchase. All of those moments matter.

The Five Rules of Customer Experience

In a world of 360-degree influence, brands and retailers need to adopt a new approach to customer experience. Five rules will define that experience. (See Exhibit 1.)

EXHIBIT 1

The Five Rules of Customer Experience



Source: BCG case experience.
Note: LLM = large language model.

Presence: Show Up at the Start of the Journey

In the old model, brands vied for the top spot on a search results page. In the new model, brands need to be part of the answer provided by large language models, social media, video shopping, and marketplaces.

If a brand isn't present where customers seek answers and information, it won't win their business. Not only has traffic to US retail sites from GenAI sources grown exponentially—with Adobe measuring a 4,700% year-over-year increase in such traffic in July 2025—but they also perform better. Notably, consumers who start their purchase journey through AI agents and chatbots spend 32% more time on the site, browse 10% more pages, and have a 27% lower

bounce rate. Leaders will master answer engine optimization, generating content that enables chatbots to understand, trust, and recommend their products.

Guidance: Enhance the Shopping Experience

Shopping no longer occurs in one place at one time. Commerce happens everywhere—in stores, in social media feeds, in people’s cars, on chats with large language models. Consumers will increasingly have their own agents on hand to manage everything from discovery, comparison, and purchasing to fulfillment and customer service.

Brands must respond by providing the right customer experience at the right time. For some brands, this means creating their own shopping agents that can act as a guide, narrowing the field, explaining tradeoffs, and helping people make buying decisions. The consumer will ask, “Find me a quiet dishwasher costing less than \$650 and available tomorrow,” and the agent will do the rest. These agents will have memory (storing a consumer’s prior preferences) and be able to take actions such as initiating a return or reordering a product automatically.

The Live Layer: Revive the Store

The store is becoming a place of experiences not just transactions. Consumers increasingly expect a physical and digital experience when they enter a store. Brands should strive to enhance the appeal of their products by creating high-touch experiences:

- Home Depot’s Magic Apron uses GenAI to bring the expertise of store associates to the digital shopping journey. The tool answers technical questions and summarizes reviews to help customers find products and tackle complex DIY projects with confidence. By linking these digital capabilities to physical locations, the retailer ensures that its brick-and-mortar stores remain vital.
- H&M’s Barcelona flagship store merges digital content with physical retail through massive LED screens and interactive “smart mirrors” in fitting rooms. These touchpoints create an immersive atmosphere that guides shoppers through a seamless, tech-enabled journey, transforming a standard store visit into a rich omnichannel experience.
- Immersive store design can encourage social sharing. Beauty brands are reimagining pop-up stores as social-first experiences rich with immersive storytelling. MCoBeauty’s escape rooms demonstrate how brands can create fun and engaging experiences to generate measurable consumer reach.

When planned well, the store builds its own momentum. Rich experiences create more trust and more data, which in turn improve the overall customer experience, which leads to even more trust and data.

Continuity: Create a Single Conversation

Customers want brands to remember them and their interactions. They don't want to repeat themselves or reenter information. They want the conversation to pick up where it left off—whether they move from social to store, from store to app, or from purchase to return.

Trust: Develop This Intangible Asset

Brands are built on trust. It is arguably their most valuable asset. As brands introduce agents that recommend and act, trust becomes even more valuable.

Customers are open to AI but worry about data misuse and biased results that steer them toward what's best for the brand rather than what's best for them. Trust is built on several principles, each of which addresses a core question that customers ask:

- **Value.** What am I receiving in return for sharing my data?
- **Control.** Can I opt out?
- **Transparency.** Do I understand how AI and AI agents work?
- **Integrity.** Am I receiving biased recommendations?
- **Accountability.** Where do I turn if the system fails?

These principles form the foundation of brand strength in the agentic era.

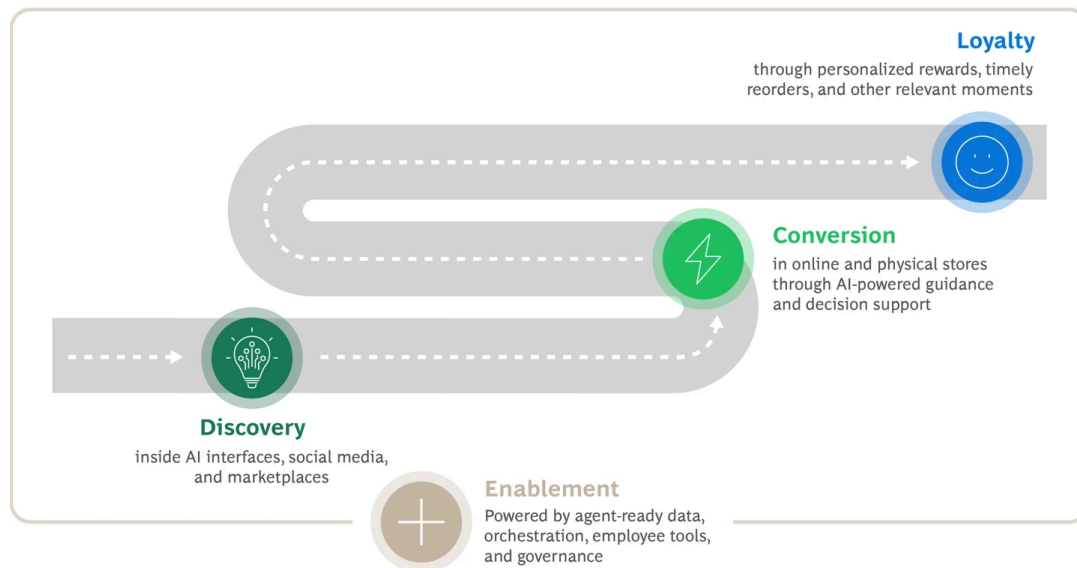
From Rules to Reality

The five rules discussed above describe what customers now expect. Meeting those expectations requires preparing for a new layer of interactions that cuts across channels to serve the customer

where they are—in physical and online stores, in their chats with AI agents, and in their social media and web interactions. We call this the agentic CX layer. (See Exhibit 2.)

EXHIBIT 2

The Agentic CX Layer Is Rich and Personal



Source: BCG case experience.
Note: CX = customer experience.

The agentic CX layer consists of four sublayers: discovery inside AI and social environments; conversion online and in physical stores; loyalty through timely, relevant moments; and enablement powered by data, orchestration, employee tools, and governance.

If third-party agents become the default window into shopping, brands will lose their relationship with customers. Creating an agentic CX layer will help brands preserve and enhance their connection to their customers.

What Leaders Should Do Now

Article two addresses how brands can build the data-based, technological, and operational backbone that will enable richer customer experiences. But before undertaking that project, leaders should diagnose their current capabilities. This involves several key steps:

- **Audit your presence in AI-powered discovery.** Evaluate your answer-engine optimization capabilities. Understand how AI can stand between you and your customer by becoming the customer's primary source of information.

- **Build destination-worthy owned experiences.** Ensure that your website, app, and stores are true destinations, providing practical guidance and expertise that an AI agent cannot. Invest in rich, exclusive content, intuitive tools, and personalized pathways so customers will come to you rather than to an agent.
- **Reimagine the role of your people and physical channels.** Define the role of physical stores and customer service centers as opportunities for expert consultation, hands-on experience, and brand immersion. Give your frontline teams the tools and training necessary to provide nuanced, empathetic support that agents can't match.
- **Map and connect the journey.** Examine your customer journey to identify where it forgets the customer. Ensure that there are no breaks in continuity between a digital interaction and a physical one or from one query to the next. Master the moments that create loyalty: returns, in-store pickups, service inquiries, and product replenishment.
- **Nurture trust.** Establish clear, public principles governing how you use customer data, how your AI models operate, and how you ensure that you serve the customer's best interest. To earn and retain loyal customers, communicate your commitment to trust.

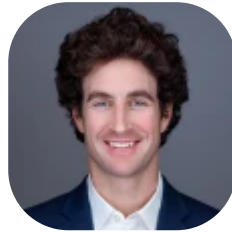
Taking these actions will help inform your ambitions and commitment to improving the customer experience. Without ambition and commitment, the most advanced tech stack will not accomplish its goals.

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