

Successful retailers are relevant retailers. (February 2018)

Over the past decade, technology has reshaped the retail industry in profound ways. Ninety-six percent of Americans are now shopping online, according to a recent study from CPC strategy. Which means today's business leaders face increasing pressure to keep retail spaces relevant and engaging for customers.

One solution to captivating today's consumer is a simple one: Build meaningful connections with local communities, says Etienne Veber, president of Field Trip Factory, a firm that helps design, schedule and promote interactive learning experiences within retail environments.

"Technology provides greater convenience and lower prices," Veber says, "but it is not a replacement for human interactions.

The increasing lack of human connections in our daily lives represents a unique opportunity for retailers to thrive in today's environment, he says, by identifying their core values and concerns, and then expressing them through meaningful learning experiences and a deeper sense of community.

We learn by doing and retail environments can be incredibly powerful at teaching platforms" Veber says.

The value of purpose

When companies express a sense of purpose to their customers, it has a profound effect on the confidence in the brand. Eighty-five percent of companies with a strong sense of purpose say they are backed by their communities, because they are seen as "good and helpful corporate citizens," according to a survey by Deloitte.

Furthermore, 89 percent of firms with a purpose say clients and customers trust the quality of their products and services — versus the 66 percent of firms that do not have this sense of purpose.

As a way to demonstrate its commitment to its local communities, grocery chain Giant Eagle developed an interactive program that connects with local school children. "[Be A Smart Shopper](#)" helps young students and their families learn about making healthy food choices.

Over the years, it has been a very effective way for the Giant Eagle employees to live up to their core value of "taking care of each other" in a community-centered way and so far more than 600,000 families have been reached across Pennsylvania and Ohio. Educators love the program because it supplements classroom curriculum and gets their students really engaged. 95 percent of them are planning to come back with their students next year!

"We often see these kids return to Giant Eagle with their families, eager to show them what they learned and bring these lessons into their own kitchens," says Laura Karet, Giant Eagle CEO. "To us, it's gratifying to see our core value play out in our stores and in our communities in such a meaningful way."

Expressing purpose in the retail space

A retailer can build trust and loyalty by expressing their values in innovative ways. Their stores are more than places to shop. They can build opportunities right in the towns and cities in which they serve.

Host in-store classes and events: Business leaders, store managers and longtime employees, with their industry knowledge, are community gurus. With that mindset, what better way to connect with the community than to open the doors for an on-site event? Things like hands-on demonstrations, seminars, consultations and even heading up an ongoing club are all engaging ways to share knowledge and help people solve their most common pain points.

Champion local causes: Transform company values and industry knowledge into a community asset, and direct resources to solve problems in the community. Reaching out to local nonprofits, being a major sponsor to make a local event even bigger and better, or paying employees for their time to volunteer are all ways a brand can build a meaningful community presence.

Find a partner: Most businesses do not have the in-house expertise to organize, plan and publicize in-house events and initiatives, which is why some turn to a trusted partner for expertise in that field. For example, as Giant Eagle planned its Be A Smart Shopper Program, Field Trip Factory took the lead with the curriculum (with input from educators), and created the online tool that makes it easy for teachers to discover the program and sign up their class for an event. Each participating store can easily set its availability on the Field Trip Factory platform and these educational events take place without disrupting their day-to-day business activities.

Today's retail climate is a uniquely challenging one, due to the rise in technology. To learn more about finding opportunities to engage with customers and communities, visit fieldtripfactory.com.