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What can a global fashion retailer teach you about the future of work?

The digital transformation of

BCBG**MAXAZRIA**

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BCBG Max Azria CIO: Fashion Retail Game Changer Drives Omnichannel Transformation

It's no secret that times are tough in retail, and the time for retailers to digitally transform is now. Just ask the man behind the digital transformation at BCBG Max Azria.

"When I joined the company, I knew what needed to be done," said Robert Fort, former Chief Information Officer of the fashion house. "I started working with our e-commerce team to flesh out the details of our omnichannel strategy so that customers could enjoy a truly seamless shopping experience."

E-commerce Alone Isn't Enough

BCBG already had an e-commerce platform in place, but it operated independently from store operations. So, in their first move toward digital transformation, BCBG managers rolled out tablets to all the stores. At first, in-store employees helping customers with online orders was the primary use of the tablets. That wasn't ideal, and the company wanted to push for a more unified, omni-channel experience for customers.

To execute that vision, the e-commerce team launched an Endless Aisle application that was available in all stores on the tablets.

"But, it wasn't what you typically consider a classic Endless Aisle application," Fort said. "If a customer in-store has a couple of physical items in hand and there's one item that an associate would either have to custom order, get from another store, or obtain from our e-commerce or main inventories, you ideally want the customer to be able to ring it up as one transaction, with one credit card swipe. We aren't there yet, but that's what we're aiming for in the future."

Mobile Becomes a Must-Have in Retail

Another part of the retail future, according to Fort, is even more mobile use in stores.

"That's the future of point-of-sale (POS) at BCBG," he said. "We'll have one fixed station but then the rest of the POS moments will be tablet-based. One challenge to overcome in mobile retail, though, is Payment Card Industry (PCI) rules. Specifically, retailers can use mobile technology to accomplish POS, but can't include other corporate applications on the device because the networks would be overlapping, which isn't allowed."

Fort added, "The other interesting feature we are seeing emerge is retailers using mobile applications built for persistent selling. It's almost like employees are carrying the website on a tablet around the store. If they encounter a customer in the aisle, they can visually show them what's available in inventory and start a conversation with them about it."

Connecting with Employees and Partners

BCBG also took time to focus on improving com-munication and collaboration with their employees and partners.

"We launched a brand-new online human resources system that covered benefits, so employees now have portals to use to understand that information," said Fort. "We also implemented a centralized online labor scheduling platform to replace the existing ad hoc scheduling that was organized on spreadsheets in each store."

BCBG is a vertically-integrated fashion retailer, which means they're also designing and making their own products as well as selling them. "Because we do a sig-nificant amount of wholesale business," said Fort, "we need to communicate with partners around the world."

The company implemented a collaboration platform that's specifically designed to handle massive amounts of high-res image files that can accurately represent things like the texture of a fabric, for example. "Those files take up tons of space—almost the equivalent of video," added Fort.

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The Future Is Unified Commerce

All of these efforts reflect an ambitious personal vision that Fort has for the future of retail: unified commerce. Ultimately, instead of having separate systems for point-of-sale, call centers, e-commerce and mobile, what Fort hopes to someday deliver to the industry is one core commerce system. It would support a unified set of data for inventory and customer records, which are then viewable using different presentation maps. Because all workflows draw on the same set of data, everything works faster, and the information everyone is looking at is consistent and up-to-date. There are fewer miscommunications and hand-off glitches that can ruin a customer experience.

When a sale is recorded on any platform, it's recorded across all of these environments and starts to facilitate almost real-time analytics. "When you start putting in a unified e-commerce system together in the future, you start reducing the duplicity of systems—and that's just going to solve so many problems facing retail today," said Fort.

"Today, it's possible to design and create applications that can work on a mobile phone, a tablet, and browsers," Fort said.

"The customer who is sitting at home, looking at their browser, should be seeing the same data that your associates see at the register and your call center employees see on their interfaces."

NAME:
Robert Fort

COMPANY:
BCBG Max Azria Group, LLC

TITLE:
Former Chief Information Officer

INDUSTRY:
Retail

EMPLOYEE COUNT:
2,650

HOW HE CHANGED THE GAME:
Working to bring the concept of unified commerce to retail, where all systems work together to drive speed and efficiency.

Visionary leaders are changing the game for the modern workforce.

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