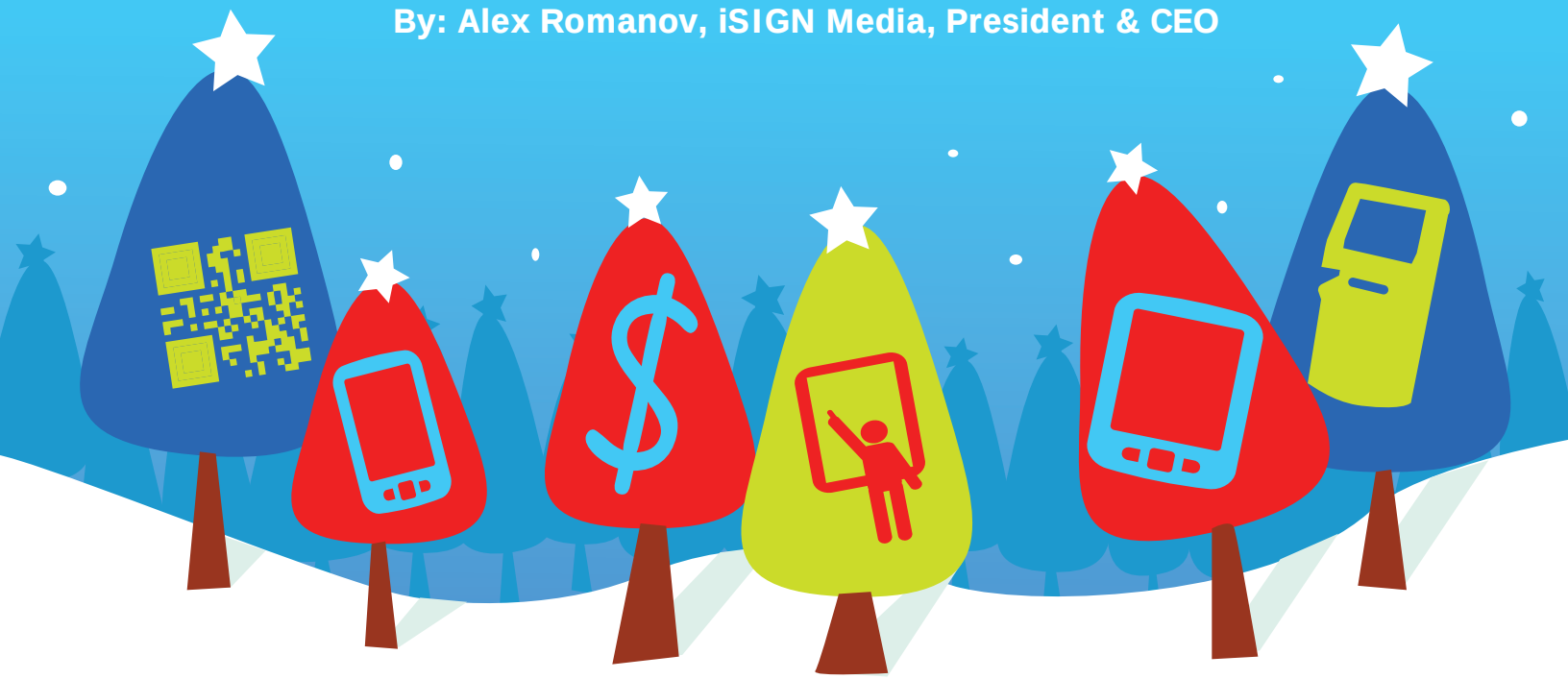
Deck The Halls

with Digital, Data, and Discounts

*How 2012 will usher in a **NEW** Holiday Season Shopping Experience*

By: Alex Romanov, iSIGN Media, President & CEO



Jot this down on your smartphone or tablet's notepad:

WIth the 2012 Holiday Season already underway, a wealth of incoming consumer trend data suggests that an entirely different kind of shopping season has arrived for shoppers, retailers, brands, marketers and advertisers.

What's changed you ask? The lines between online and offline continue to merge like never before. And to a very real extent, new mobile and digital signage technologies, as well as 4th screen and 5th screen advertising, are luring people of all demographics back into brick-and-mortar stores. As these types of technologies continue to evolve, so will the consumer shopping experience.

Take Thanksgiving weekend in the US for example. Only a few short years ago, the four-day break was bookended by Black Friday – largely an in-store experience, and concluded with Cyber Monday, a collective national online shopping spree that according to some estimates, cost businesses some $1 billion in lost worker productivity in 2011 due to nonstop web surfing and digital bargain hunting.

Rather than being siloed into a single day, however, consumers can now shop, compare prices, read customer reviews via social media and receive location-specific deals and offerings nearly anywhere they like... all of it in real time, giving retailers and advertisers a vital marketing edge all year-round. And while e and m commerce dominate headlines, online sales make up just 7% of overall US retail sales and is only predicted to limp toward 9% by 2016, according to Forrester Research. That suggests something else is going on. There's even been a flurry of reports that former online-only operations, such as Microsoft and eBay, are opening brick-and-mortar "pop-up" (short term commercial space) locations where presumably customer in-store engagement will be highly tech-centric.

Another example of the merging of commercial channels comes from IBM. In September 2012 the tech giant created an ecommerce ecosystem called "Smarter Commerce" whose goal is to bring about "Commerce 2.0." Commerce 2.0 speaks to the growing trend where consumers shop in store, but rely on a wealth of mobile digital data to inform them in advance of purchases. Smarter Commerce helps clients employ mobile, social, analytics and cloud computing with brick and mortar locations. And it's a blurring being aided by a wealth of technologies: DOOH signage covering buses, train stations, massive public squares, gas station pump TVs...and the fact that US smartphone adoption has reached 56%, while tablet proliferation hovers around 31%. Not only that, recent studies suggest 4 out of 5 consumers say they'll use their smartphone to access retail content this holiday season. And many are already performing mobile and digital signage-enabled tasks, augmenting their real-world shopping inside a physical store location.

Dashing For Virtual In-Store Deals?

When it comes to the merging of old and new, 154-year-old Macy's takes top honors. Only last year the mega department store began an aggressive technology upgrade adding test tablets, digital signage, handheld devices, kiosks and point-of-sale devices in 350 stores. Wi-Fi was growing at an accelerated clip, too, landing in 300 stores by October 2011. This year, with data suggesting that 66% of in-store shoppers will use their devices to compare prices with other physical locations while 50% will use their devices to read product reviews, Macy's revamped its mobile app to guide customers to specific in-store locations (floor and department) to find their preferred Black Friday deals. Herald Square shoppers (Macy's Manhattan store) had an additional bonus: complete maps to help guide them through confusing renovations.

Macy's isn't alone in its quest to use advertising, digital signage and mobile to attract customers back to their stores. Target recently announced that it would be adding quick response (QR) codes, enhanced barcodes, to the boxes of the season's top 20 toys. While physically in-store or nearby, new mobile solutions used via proximity marketing help to develop advanced data metrics and can indicate a shopper's in-store location, identify their price points and even determine the length of time they stay at a particular location, helping craft a more accurate shopper picture. So the next time a digital sign attempts to communicate with a smartphone, chances are the proper messaging will inspire a purchase.

Beyond Macy's and Target, retailers in general recognize that new technologies are central to attracting tech-savvy customers and vital if they want to remain relevant and competitive without appearing redundant. Even before the holiday rush some 33% of retailers in a CompTia study said they already use digital signage in their businesses and that another 20% intended to do so by the end of the year, overlapping the holidays. Overall, 72% of retailers said that technology was important to their business.

While that last statistic may not be the most pivotal ever, combined with the others it underscores that retailers fully appreciate that the old ways of doing business, of not having QR codes, of not having digital signage, and not having mobile apps or solutions that promote in-store and online purchases and product research will hinder future success. Only a strategy that mixes, combines and shares the best of these channels will ensure that customers are retained and engaged. When customers can easily embark on similar shopping extravagances from the comfort of their own homes, cars, or anywhere with reliable Wi-Fi access or a broadband, failure to innovate can cause them to tune out.

Santa, Silicon and Shoppers Working Together Like Never Before

On that note, the National Retail Federation predicts this year's holiday season will ring in $586.1 billion dollars, up 4.1% from 2011, and you can be sure that retailers and advertisers are clamoring to capture every bit of that year-end revenue.

But if 2012 isn't your traditional holiday season, just what is it? And how can retailers take advantage of this "new" opportunity?

Call it the "hybrid holidays" where a collection of tech-savvy consumers, traditional shoppers, marketers, retailers and advertisers are each contributing their shopping behaviors to a new paradigm, where commerce 2.0 is beginning to take flight. In order to achieve that reality, retailers should be mindful of these key takeaways during the holidays and beyond into 2013:

Smart devices will require smarter on-screen layout: Smartphones achieved critical mass in the US and many other countries in 2012 and tablets will do the same in 2013. Already owned by 31% of the US population, next year it's predicted 40% of Internet users will own them. That means retailers must optimize their mobile web pages and apps to accommodate smaller smartphone screens and larger tablet screens. A one-size fits all approach will no longer work.

Creativity with web optimization is key: While ecommerce will remain popular, with nearly 190 million Americans researching and browsing products online in 2013, growth rates will only be 2.9% above 2012. That means online saturation is being reached, underscoring that retailers must use the web and mobile in creative and compelling ways to bring customers back into stores - where they can use mobile technology to augment their in-store experience. But in order to prevent showrooming, retailers must take a "walled garden" approach to ensure the right content is in the right place at the right time.

QR codes are here to stay, at least for a little while: Don't quit on QR codes just yet. QR codes can be used effectively and placement is critical. More than just driving users back to a website, QR codes need to be fun and engaging. German retailer MyToy.de took this very seriously when earlier this year, it built QR codes out of Lego bricks, inspiring passersby to scan the code and buy Legos online. According to Econsultancy already 1 in 2 company marketers say they use QR codes.

Digital signage – more sign, lower price: 2,300% -- that's the percent increase in the number of digital signs installed in Wawa convenience stores in the last several months jumping from a 25-store pilot program in 2011 to more than 600 today. The reasons are simple: digital signage costs have fallen as much as 50% in recent years while durability (and hence longevity) has improved. Increasingly signs can send relevant information to shoppers' smart devices and they can also update displays and offerings automatically, in real time. If one convenience store chain can grow their digital signage reach 2,300% in a matter of months, other retailers shouldconsider this option as well.

iSIGN MEDIA CORP

M Commerce and mobile wallets will mature: Now may be the time to cash in on the mobile wallet movement – both for retailers and consumers. Almost daily, it seems, new virtual wallet competitors join the mix and Apple's Passbook embedded in iOS6, is one of the newest. Launched in September 2012 with only a handful of corporate supporters, (and many of them airlines) today the app is enjoying explosive growth as 20 retailers added Passbook-enabled coupons. The fact the mobile operating system is one of the fastest adopted technologies of all time, suggests that more consumers will be using Passbook in the months ahead.

QR Big data will be an even bigger deal: Of course, the union of new and old, of smartphones and digital signage, would not be possible without the consumer data generated and the "actionable inferences" that marketers, advertisers and retailers can deduce. Whether it's web click through rates, mobile opt-ins, a set-top TV box that tracks viewer preferences, or digital signage capable of sending and measuring proximity marketing, making sense of big data is key and will help to support and optimize future campaigns.

Whether mobile assisted, digital signage engaged or DOOH-aware, this holiday season will be as much about technology as it is about togetherness. Once siloed in separate camps, the digital world and physical world will increasingly become one. And a festive, decorated retail environment will still attract patrons, drive engagement and have the potential to increase ROI – much of it through the data collected and metrics acted on.

But it's hard to deny that whether at the dining room table or in the brick-and-mortar store, digital technology is radically altering the way we interact. The 2012 holiday season will have all the traditional trappings of home, hearth, shopping and family. But intertwined in those timeless staples will be digital data, discounts and mobile access blurring the online and offline worlds to a degree the likes of which has never been equaled.

About the author, Alex Romanov

Alex Romanov is CEO of **iSIGN Media**, a leading provider of interactive mobile advertising solutions that serves advertisers, manufacturers, retailers and advertising agencies throughout North America. Under his leadership, the Company has grown to become the largest owner/operator of in-store digital media in Canada with 5,600 digital signs in 1,400 locations. To learn more about the company's solutions or get in touch with Alex, please send an email to: **alex@isignmedia.com.**

About iSIGN Media

iSIGN Media is a North American leader in multiplatform advertising solutions that utilize Bluetooth , Mobile, WiFi and Location-Aware technologies to deliver rich media, permission-based messages to engage consumers more deeply and cost-effectively. The resulting business intelligence and real time metrics, gathered through **iSIGN**'s patent-pending advertising platform, deliver insights into emerging consumer behaviors that help advertisers measure their efforts and make better business decisions to increase ROI and customer loyalty.

iSIGN's solutions respect user privacy via opt-in functionality, and do not collect or require personal information such as mobile phone numbers or customer names. Information is instead associated with a unique technical identifier linked to a particular mobile device, and anonymously analyzed for subsequent business purposes and targeted marketing campaigns. This translates into customer peace of mind, yet gives businesses the power to understand their customers' needs and interests in unprecedented detail.

Delivering targeted, rich marketing campaigns to customers therefore involves less business risk and ongoing investment than ever before, while also yielding dramatically improved positive response levels when compared to traditional marketing platforms such as mass-mailing or telemarketing.

Headquartered in Richmond Hill, Ontario, with R&D and customer support operations in Vancouver, BC and Tampa, FL, the Company has also grown to become the largest owner/operator of in-store digital media in Canada with 5,600 digital signs in 1,400 locations. Partners include: AOpen America Inc. and IBM, with solution distribution by BlueStar Inc

iSIGN is publicly traded in Toronto (TSX-V: ISD) and additional information can be found at **www.isignmedia.com**.

Contact Information

For more information about **iSIGN Media**, please visit **www.isignmedia.com**, or call **+1.905.780.6200**

For media enquiries, please contact:

Vanessa Horwell
vanessa@thinkinkpr.com
tel: +1.305.749.5342 x232

Danielle Mason
dmason@thinkinkpr.com
tel: +1.305.749.5342 x 235