Concierge services, traditionally reserved for the luxury space, are now being adopted by department stores to step up their customer experience. With cashierless and automated stores on the rise, personal shopping options are giving stores a much-needed human touch. By providing digital and in-person assistants to help shoppers choose and buy products—from AI-curated product selections to text-to-buy services—concierges are bringing individualized attention back to retail.

This month, Walmart launched Jetblack, a text-based concierge service for “time-strapped urban parents.” The invitation-only platform aims to simplify the shopping experience by using a personal shopper to do product research and place orders for clients. “As a parent, you mentally create lists of things you need to buy or do, and instead of putting it on a to-do list and buying paper towels later, you can just text and have a personal shopper take care of it,” Jetblack co-founder Jenny Fleiss explained to Forbes.com.

To personalize product recommendations, Jetblack schedules a 10-minute phone call with new customers to determine their brand loyalties, allergies and frequently ordered items. Clients can then text product requests, questions and photos describing what they’re looking for and receive AI-curated product recommendations and refill reminders from their personal shopper.

Through its focus on customer service, Jetblack has found a competitive advantage over convenience-focused e-commerce retailers. “Many of the things that were innovative five years ago haven’t changed that much, like two-day shopping and one-click shopping,” Fleiss added. “The real opportunity for us is making shopping delightful again,” she told Inc. “Can you feel like you walk away with a better product, and having saved time?”
Other retailers are also using virtual assistants to provide on-the-go customer support. Target has created a **beauty concierge service** that provides in-store, online, and text guidance to help consumers choose products and get tips and recommendations. Launched in May 2018, the service was released to support Target’s **Beauty Studio**, which uses facial mapping technology to allow customers to virtually try on makeup before making a purchase.
Brands are also continuing the tradition of using personal shoppers in stores. In the UK, John Lewis hopes to “reinvent the department store” with its new Experience Desk, where customers can plan their day and sign up for in-store services and experiences from travel advice and eye tests to a pop-up barber shop and technology training workshops. The desk was trialed in October 2017 at the John Lewis Oxford store and has been expanded for the home floor of the new John Lewis retail space at White City Westfield to include a “bespoke personal fashion styling service,” a demo kitchen and a sleep studio.

In-store concierges are also helping to create a relaxing and convenient retail environment. In May 2018, Designer Store Warehouse (DSW) opened Polaris Lab Store, which includes a concierge area called the Sole Lounge where guests can create custom insoles, get their shoes and handbags repaired—and get their nails done while they wait.

As consumers show greater interest in conversational commerce, personal shoppers are making it easier and more natural to interact with brands. Although technology is increasingly replacing retail workers, consumers still show a preference for human customer service; 73% of US consumers prefer interacting with a person over a digital capability when seeking advice or resolving a service issue, according to a 2016 report from Accenture. It seems that robots may not be taking over retail anytime soon.

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