The Future of Omni-Channel Retail

Predictions in the Age of Amazon

Lionel Binnie

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The Future of Omni-Channel Retail:
Predictions in the Age of Amazon

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To my father Michael and mother Carol,
who filled our childhood home
with books and a love of reading.

Introduction

> A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them.
>
> **Marshall McLuhan**

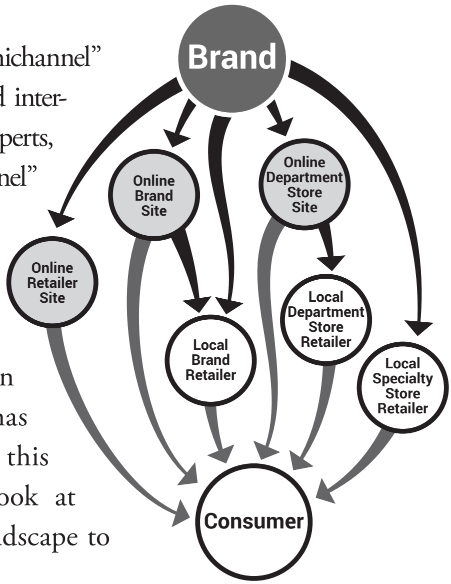
When we can order almost anything online, will we? That's the future that is rapidly becoming our present. In a one-day or even two-hour home-delivery world, what types of experiences will still entice consumers to shop in-store? Will there even be any shops left to browse in if we still wanted to? If so, what types of shops?

Jim Cramer, an analyst on the business channel CNBC, once said, "Younger consumers don't want to go out. They just want to order food on Grubhub so they can stay on their couch and keep playing 'Call of Duty.'" He was saying that the move to online shopping is accelerating. People, especially those under 35, don't want to leave home if they don't have to, and businesses that make this possible are everywhere.

E-commerce has been with us for more than twenty years. Yet we are in an interesting time now because we can see the developing relationship between online shopping and physical, brick-and-mortar stores. The fog is starting to lift. The emerging shapes of online and offline retailing, as well as the ways they're likely to develop and interact, are becoming clearer than ever before. It's an exciting time, with great possibilities coming into view. Perhaps for the first time, greater clarity than ever before is available to us.

The term "omni-channel" has emerged in the retail industry to refer to this new blend of online and offline retail. "Omni" comes from the Latin *omnis* meaning "all," and "channel" comes from the Latin *canalis* meaning "canal." Channel is an often-used business metaphor to explain how products flow down a distribution channel from their source through various stages and businesses to the consumer.

The diagram to the right illustrates how the different pieces work together.



"Omni-channel," "omnichannel" or "omni channel" are used interchangeably by marketing experts, but we'll use "omni-channel" throughout this narrative.

Let's not get sidetracked by terminology, though. Whatever we call it, we are clearly in an era where retailing has forever changed. In this book, I take a close look at this developing retail landscape to examine which paths are most clear, and how far down some of those paths we can see at this time.

As a consumer products and food marketer, I've spent years peering into that fog, observing as these larger shapes emerge from the mist. I've been asking myself:

- Where is all this going?
- What can we say for sure about where internet retail is heading as the mist lifts?
- What can we be certain about?
- What is still unclear?
- What should our responses be as business thinkers and actors in this $5 trillion industry (total annual U.S. retail sales)?
- How are online and offline channels playing off one another?
- What will omni-channel retail look like going forward?
- To what extent will different product categories move further online?
- Which product categories will move the furthest online, and why?
- What product attributes and buying occasions are factors influencing whether products are more likely to be purchased online?
- What types of product categories will continue to rely on an offline brick-and-mortar presence?
- With this in mind, what types of offline shopping environments (malls, stores, shopping centers, downtowns, etc.) will still be viable in the foreseeable future?

- What characteristics will help those offline shopping experiences and environments remain viable?
- What is it about offline, tangible shopping that is least replaceable by online shopping? (Hint—think discovery, social experience, community building, dining, services, entertainment).

In my career, I've spent the last three decades working at the intersection of consumer product and food marketing, distribution, wholesaling and retailing. I have managed and selected malls and spaces within malls for over 200 holiday kiosks selling gift products throughout the U.S. I have observed people's shopping behavior up close.

Later, as a business development strategist at iZone Group, a national distributor of fashion eyewear and accessories, I was responsible for getting our sunglasses and other fashion products in front of as many consumers as possible. In this role, I developed new channels of distribution, first in highway travel plazas and then in airports, nationally.

I realized that it was important to get these products not only in front of crowds, but also crowds that were in the right frame of mind to buy. I thought long and hard about the role of location and timing for the optimal placement of products in the U.S. retail market.

When I became a consultant, I repeated the exercise with Cejon, which was acquired by Steve Madden, helping them enter the Canadian market and highway travel venues. I was also a partner in a business that sold fashion scarves and accessories in college bookstores nationwide, and operated pop-up shops and events to promote those products.

More recently I've worked with consumer and food brands to help them open distribution in other high-traffic venues favorable to consumer sales and branding, such as large colleges, hospitals, corporate workplaces and travel venues.

What these different projects have had in common has been the overarching questions: What works? What is optimal? In getting a product in front of consumers, where are the best locations to place products? What is the right convergence between the product, customer and venue?

You could say I'm a placement expert, a connoisseur of product placement opportunities, a "place whisperer" even—someone who teases out the right questions and answers that lead to optimal product placements.

When those placement opportunities have been identified, I've also developed the business muscles, techniques and connections with the various channel partners who provide access. What types of partnerships need to be developed to obtain this "sweet spot" distribution, where it all comes together?

From my vantage point as an industry participant and an intensely curious person, I've closely observed the development of omni-channel retail. The blending of technology with retail and the evolution of various e-commerce business models that have come and gone (flash sales anyone?) have fascinated me. I am awed by the potential of e-commerce to make the physical placement of products in the real world obsolete.

To revisit my opening question, when we can order virtually anything online and have it delivered to our front door, will we ever still want to shop in an offline world? Ultimately, will viewing a product on a screen and reading other buyers' reviews of the product be enough for us to stay home for many, or even most, shopping occasions?

How will this ubiquity of product information and availability that the internet offers affect how, when and where we still will want to shop in person and experience the entertaining and social aspect of shopping in stores, markets, malls, arcades and on the street? And if we do still want to, why will we want to when we don't have to? The answer might surprise you.

You may be astonished to hear that some of the promises of digital distribution and online retail have begun to fall short and reverse themselves, such as the rise and present decline in use of eReaders (Kindle, Nook and tablets), and the re-emergence of independent bookstores.[1]

It turns out that the structure and charm of physical books are not entirely replaced by words on a screen. The phenomenon of screen fatigue is becoming more readily apparent, causing consumers to return to the simple pleasure of reading books and magazines in print. Add to that the essence of brick-and-mortar bookstores as places of charm, social interaction and discovery, and there is a certain gravitational pull that makes browsing, buying and reading books in a store, a delight.

You also may be surprised to learn that new online brands like Warby Parker (eyewear), Casper (mattresses) and Harry's Razors have all learned that they still need a presence in physical stores to maximize their reach. These businesses have discovered that online-only is a limited and limiting strategy. Stores as a means of consumer discovery and fulfillment, still work, and work well.

This book consists of three parts. The first part, Chapter 1, is a somewhat quick and playful glance back through history to see how we got here. It provides a very brief tour through the history of human exchange and retail, noting the different disruptions along the way. This is to help us to zoom out and gain some helpful perspective on where we currently are.

The next part consists of Chapters 2 through 4, and tackles the present era. Chapter 2 looks at our current period of retail disruption and examines its fundamental nature, while Chapter 3 reviews current marketing models of shopping behavior and brings them together into my own two-axis model. This model can be used to plot any product type and shopping occasion to predict which ones will likely move further toward online shopping. For those that are more resistant to this change, I also delve into the reasons for that resistance. After that, Chapter 4 explores the current state of retail disruption, where we examine retail store and shopping mall closings as well as the re-purposing of real estate that has already occurred. This chapter also analyzes food retailing and the restaurant industry, along with the move toward fresher food and home delivery models.

In the final part, Chapter 5, I look at key aspects of omnichannel retail and make predictions about where these trends are likely to go in the future, based on my two-axis predictive model.

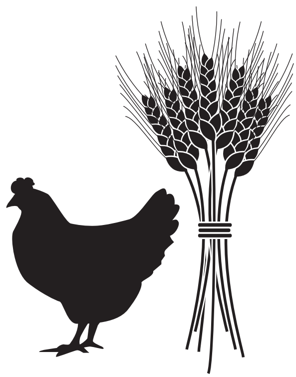
Are you with me? Let's dive in!

Part I. The Past

Chapter 1.

How We Got Here (A Quick Tour of Retail History)

Retail disruption has always been around. What this chapter and the timeline image at the end of it lack in detail, they make up for in perspective. The point of the exercise is to zoom out and view our current situation in the context of the last twenty years or so, and then locate that era within the perspective of history. Change, development and, yes, that over-used word "disruption," are nothing new. What *is* new is the speed and scale of the current disruptions.



Out of the mists of pre-history, our hunter-gatherer ancestors emerged. Before 10,000 BC, the gathering of nuts, fruits and other plants, as well as the hunting of game, were the pre-economic survival activities of our ancestors. It was pre-commerce. You gathered or hunted your food and perhaps shared with your clan, maybe trading apples for nuts or goats for chickens. Pretty straightforward.

Around 10,000 BC, humans developed agriculture. Yuval Harari, in his fascinating book *Sapiens—A Brief History of Humankind*, delves deeply into how farming developed and explores some of its more colorful details. For example, the first crops to be cultivated were wheat, the first animals to be domesticated were probably goats, and agriculture first developed in the Middle East, China and central America. Why? Because that's where easily farmed crops, like rice and wheat, and easily herded animals, like goats and cows, already naturally existed. There are relatively few plant and animal species that were readily domesticated.

Interestingly, Harari makes the strong case that humans were actually better off as hunter-gatherers and that there were real drawbacks to the rise of agriculture. For example, the specialization farming required resulted in a much more restricted range of foods for the farmer, leading to less varied and therefore less healthy diets. Additionally, the surpluses created by agriculture resulted in social classes and the exploitation of laborers by landowners. It also led to an increase in violence, which was required to defend (or capture) precious land, now a source of security, from other tribes.

But there was no going back. The increased populations that agriculture created could never have been sustained in a hunter-gatherer system anyway—too much land was required. But back to our history.

Agriculture allowed people to extract more food from much less land than hunting and gathering. That allowed for population growth. It also resulted in specialization and exchange. For example, I might focus on raising wheat, while you might raise chickens. I'd then have surplus grain and you'd have extra birds. This means we could exchange. So, agriculture directly resulted in exchange and bartering, haggling over how many chickens a bag of wheat is worth.

Simplifying Commerce

After another 9,000 years, at around 1,000 BC, the concept of money evolved.

Money doesn't necessarily mean metal discs or paper notes. It's any accepted medium of exchange that means I don't have to take what you have in surplus and trade it for my surplus. Essentially, an accepted medium allows me to turn an excess of anything valuable into something else.

There are many limitations of barter. I always need to find someone who values what I have in excess—say, apples—and who also has an excess of what I need—say, shoes. So, the development of money dramatically freed up commerce. It allowed for the development of a greater variety of goods and services being produced and exchanged. One person could focus on making great shoes, another on baking the best bread, and another on crafting really cool chairs—more and better stuff.

The types of money varied by culture. Sometimes it was just a predetermined portion of barley, but it could also be shells or beads. Later, imprinted metal coins were developed around 700 BC, which were sanctioned by the political authority that guaranteed the coins' value, which also was an important factor in facilitating commerce.

Another result of agriculture and its capacity for exchange was the development of towns and cities. The greater efficiency of farming meant more food could be extracted from the same land as gathering and hunting, resulting in greater population density. These greater concentrations of people allowed for more efficient exchanges of surplus farming products and other goods.

Now that we've got concentrations of people, more variety of goods, and an efficient and trusted way to buy them, what's missing? The mall! (But more on malls later…)

The Development of Shopping

Archaeological evidence exists of early shops and markets in what is now modern-day Iran and Turkey from 7,000 to 6,000 BC. In ancient Greece, the central communal space of the town, the Agora, was used as a market on particular days. In ancient Rome, the forum was the communal central space of the city. Permanent buildings were created there to house shops. These may have been the earliest permanent shopping centers in history. Trajan's forum, which still exists in Rome, was a four-story building housing permanent shops.

In northern Africa and western Asia, the name still used for a central market is *souk* (in Arabic) or in Persian, *bazaar*. Dating back to 600 BC, these central markets are still to be found, usually in the old central parts of cities in this part of the world. They were located where the caravans came into town, bringing goods for exchange from other regions, and later they became permanent. Besides commerce, they had a social function, where people could interact, and a cultural function, where culture, art, crafts, music and poetry were exchanged. We will come back to these extra-commercial functions of the market later in the book.

Jumping forward, markets proliferated in medieval Europe. Records show that in 1516, England had 2,464 markets. The local lord would grant a charter to a market for a fee, guaranteeing that another competing market could not operate on the same day. Markets operated weekly or bi-weekly and were supplemented by annual fairs that celebrated religious holidays. The fair was an occasion for a temporary market that offered a greatly expanded array of merchandise.

Larger cities had areas where different craftsmen had workshops where they produced goods like metal-work, carpentry, leather, pottery and textiles, as well as foodstuffs and taverns.

These were supplemented by market days in a central market square, where farmers from neighboring areas would bring in their agricultural products.

In the age of discovery and colonization in the Middle Ages, European adventurers brought back goods from Asia and the Americas, opening up new opportunities for trade and many new products that offered retail opportunities and expanded product selections in markets. Tomatoes came from the Andes and potatoes from what is now Peru in South America. Spices came from the tropics. These new foods and products transformed and expanded markets in Europe.

Medieval markets were followed by better markets in spaces specifically designed for the purpose, like the Galeries Du Bois[2] created in the 1770s. Inspired by the forums of ancient Rome and the souks of Arabia, the Galeries Du Bois was a shopping arcade located in Paris in the square around the royal palace. It became more than just a place of commerce. It was the artistic, social and political center of Paris at the time, consisting of a collection of stores, galleries, bookshops, cafés and restaurants. It attracted aristocrats, intellectuals, students and business-people and was an escape from the smells, hubbub and chaos of central Paris.

In the nineteenth century, department stores were developed, first in Europe and then in the U.S. The origin of the department store is in some dispute, as many of the earliest operators were inspired by one another.

One of the earliest true department stores, Le Bon Marche, was developed by the French fabric salesman Aristide Boucicaut around 1850. Inspired by his experience visiting the World's Fair, Boucicaut's intention was to create a sensory overload for the consumer. Boucicaut called his store a "cathedral of commerce" that offered a "spectacle of extraordinary proportions, so that going to the store became an event, an adventure."[3] He employed the engineer Gustave Eiffel (of the Eiffel Tower) and the latest technology in cast iron and glass to create huge skylights, letting natural light into the enormous 3-story, almost 600,000 square foot building.

Other early department stores following the same model were Bainbridge's in London, followed by Harrods.

A.T. Stewart, an Irish immigrant to the U.S., who became one of the twenty wealthiest people in history ($90B in U.S. today's dollars), founded his Marble Palace, an early American department store in New York City in 1848.

Around this time, some of the earliest omni-channel retail experiments also began. Instantaneous communication via the telegraph was invented in 1844 and was in widespread use by the 1860s. In Steven Spielberg's movie "Lincoln," there is a scene in which President Lincoln is communicating practically in real time with his generals on the front line by telegraph. When you combine this with the fast and efficient transportation provided by railroads, also being perfected and expanded in the mid-19th century, and the printing of an enormous catalogue of goods (Sears), the possibility of ordering a product and receiving it in just a couple of days came into being. In reality, consumer orders were likely placed by mail rather than by telegraph, but the potential for e-commerce was foreshadowed in this era. It was the technologies and systems of secure mail combined with railroads that made mail-order retail businesses viable in the mid-19th century.

Leveraging the new rapid and secure transportation provided by railroads, and the reliable mail system of the Penny Post made the first mail-order business possible. It was founded in 1861 in Wales, in the U.K., by Pryce Pryce-Jones. He shipped locally-produced flannel fabrics around the U.K. and later sold an early form of sleeping bag he invented.

In the U.S., Montgomery Ward's catalog began in 1872, followed by Sears and Roebuck in '93. They started with watches and went on to sell virtually everything imaginable in their vast catalogs. But it was 32 years before Sears even opened their first store in 1925. By that time, more catalogs appeared for every type of merchandise, from Hammacher Schlemmer (tools) to L.L. Bean and Land's End (outdoor gear and apparel).

As the television era developed in the second half of the 20th century, this became another shopping avenue. TV home shopping reached its apex in the 1980s with channels like the Home Shopping Network and QVC.

The Origin Story of the Enclosed Shopping Mall

The origin of the U.S. shopping mall is worth looking at in some detail in our history of retail, so we'll now make a small detour to take a closer look at this important business and cultural phenomenon.

If we must trace the origin of the U.S. shopping mall to one person, it would be the Austrian architect Victor Gruen (1903-1980). Gruen was born and raised in Vienna, and studied architecture at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, opening his own firm in 1933. But after the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938, he emigrated first to England and then to the U.S. "with an architect's degree, eight dollars and no English."[4]

His early U.S. projects involved designing innovative storefronts for shops on 5th Avenue in New York City in the 1940s. These pioneering retail designs showed a clever understanding of shopper psychology in that they had open frontages designed to entice pedestrians to walk into the store off the street, without necessarily planning to.

His first enclosed shopping center project was Southdale Mall in Edina, Minnesota, in 1954.

This was hailed as a dramatic and positive modernization that attracted national media attention. *Life* magazine called it "the splashiest center in the U.S." While *Time* magazine called it a "pleasure-dome-with-parking."

What was new about it was that it was an entirely enclosed system of shops with no exterior windows and a climate-controlled interior. This was a particularly good fit for Minnesota with its cold winters. Until then, shops in malls and arcades were connected by outside walkways. This new design was on two levels, had a department store at each end, and escalators to bring shoppers up to the second level and down again when they'd completed walking the mall. And it had a central court with skylights, fountains, plants and seating.

Gruen was inspired by the centrally planned urban re-development of his hometown of Vienna, Austria, that took place because of the democratic uprisings in 1848.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his article "The Terrazzo Jungle" in the *New Yorker* magazine, describes these Viennese developments:

> The Parliament now faced directly onto the street. The walls that separated the élite of Vienna from the unwashed in the suburbs were torn down. And, most important, a ring road, or Ringstrasse—a grand mall—was built around the city, with wide sidewalks and expansive urban views, where Viennese of all backgrounds could mingle freely on their Sunday afternoon stroll. To the Viennese reformers of the time, the quality of civic life was a function of the quality of the built environment, and Gruen thought that principle applied just as clearly to the American suburbs.[5]

Gruen's mall concept was really a synthetic version of the old downtown shopping areas of many American towns. With a couple of department stores and many smaller shops and restaurants in between.

The problem, from a business optimization viewpoint, was these downtown shopping areas were unplanned. Besides the fact that they were outside, making the weather a factor, the layout couldn't be fully controlled since the buildings were owned by different landlords. There was no central control of leasing—you couldn't create adjacencies to maximize sales. For example, having a men's shoe store next to a men's clothing store or a jewelry store next to a dress shop to stimulate additional sales by attracting the same type of customer.

Gruen's centrally planned enclosed shopping mall solved all these issues by having a single landlord who could organize and lease the entire mall to optimize the shopping experience. These malls were intended to positively impact the surrounding community and be integrated into it. That meant they weren't just intended to contain stores, but would also include housing, schools, museums and parks.

What happened instead, to Gruen's later disapproval, was the endless replication of his enclosed mall design. Instead of being parts of larger thoughtful developments, they were simply thrown up into the middle of former farmland on the edges of suburbs where land was the cheapest.

Worse yet, because shoppers had to drive to get there, malls were surrounded by acres of unattractive parking lots instead of being integrated into a larger holistic community. Nothing could have been farther from what Gruen envisioned when he designed that first indoor mall.

A Blow to Main Street

Before suburban shopping malls stole business from the old downtown department stores and main streets, there were multiple family-owned regional department stores throughout the U.S. and each region and major city had their own, including Hecht's in Baltimore, L.S. Ayres in Indianapolis, Donaldson's in Minneapolis, and Macy's in New York.

But the suburban enclosed malls disrupted entire cities. They drew business, vitality and traffic from the old downtowns and Main Streets to the developing suburbs, where the parents of the Baby Boomer generation wanted to live.

In the 1980s and '90s, Walmart and other Big Box stores returned the favor, grabbing traffic from both malls and Main Streets. Consumer traffic moved to the large strip centers anchored by Big Box stores, oftentimes relocating even farther out in the suburbs, where the cheapest land was, especially in the small towns of America. Walmart was the Amazon of its day, decimating the local merchants of Main Street and later the local grocery stores as well.

At the same time, large bookstore chains like Borders and Barnes & Noble, with their buying power and pricing control over publishers, took market share away from small independent bookstores. Big Box retailers returned the favor and used their even greater buying power to discount popular titles still further, impacting Borders and Barnes & Noble.

Later, the internet came into being as a publicly available medium in 1993. With all of its stops and starts, and successes and failures (think of the dot-com boom and bust), the internet has now fully come into force as the primary medium of information exchange, socialization and commerce for the grandchildren of those early mall shoppers from the 1950s.

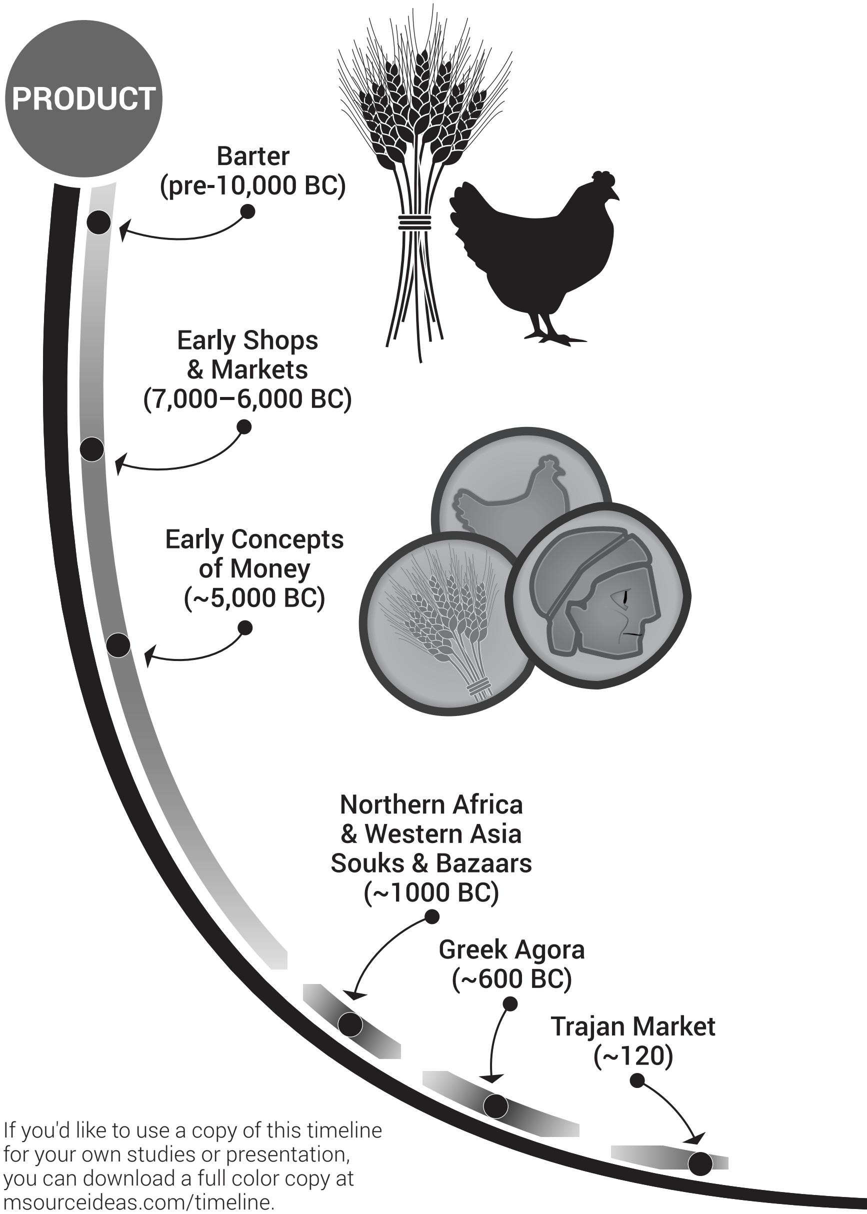
While the internet was growing in popularity, Jeff Bezos, a bright Wall Street banker who had been analyzing the growth potential of e-commerce, was quick to understand the potential of this new channel. In 1994, Jeff and his wife drove across the country in his Dad's car to begin selling books on the internet out of a rented house in Seattle.

The Age of Amazon had begun…

Disruption, reinvention and the overturning of established retail models and businesses are nothing new. It's a story that plays out time and again throughout history. Human invention and the technologies we have developed have constantly demanded re-imagining commerce and retail. This has resulted in a seemingly never-ending stream of changes, from the invention of agriculture and the development of cities, to seafaring ships resulting in trade, to the development of materials and larger buildings to house commerce.

The constantly expanding range of merchandise that trade and then science have made possible made consumer shopping the constantly evolving phenomenon that it is today. But the scale and speed of change we're experiencing now? That really *is* different.

So that's how we got here. But where *are* we?



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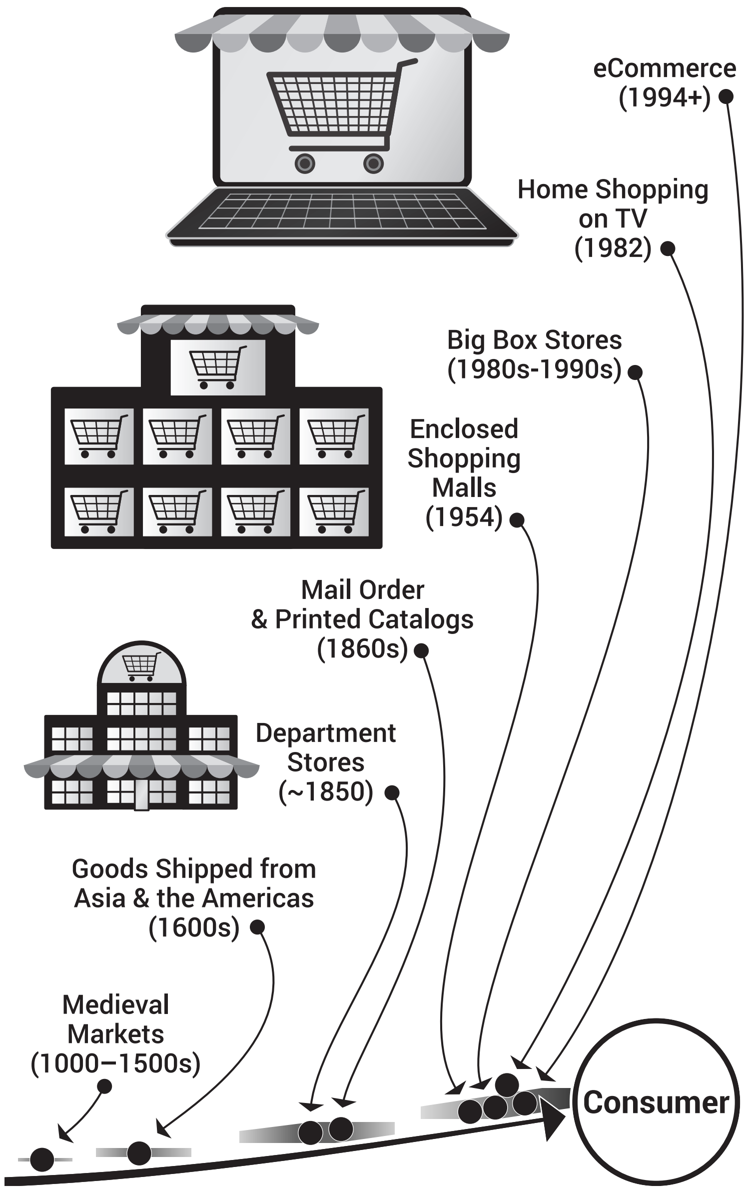
eCommerce
(1994+)
Home Shopping
on TV
(1982)
Big Box Stores
(1980s-1990s)
Enclosed
Shopping
Malls
(1954)
Mail Order
& Printed Catalogs
(1860s)
Department
Stores
(~1850)
Goods Shipped from
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Praise for
The Future of Omni-Channel Retail

A well-distilled volume processing the past, present and future of consumption. Want a good quick read? It's right here.

Paco Underhill
Author of *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*

This concise, readable book describes why a growing portion of e-commerce belongs to traditional retailers who are moving online, and an increasing amount of brick-and-mortar sales belong to online companies moving to Main Street. It provides the statistics on how over-stored America has become, and how certain retailers are successfully competing against Amazon. One fascinating development he details are online services helping traditional stores to compete, by giving them a "long tail on the web." Traditional stores can discover how to best utilize the array of channels to them by asking, "What job is the consumer hiring them to do?" If you are a retailer, a supplier to retailers, an investor, or a real estate professional, there is something here for you.

Kent Trabing
Director of Real Estate, True World Group

Lionel Binnie's, *The Future of Omni-Channel Retail*, is a little book with a BIG idea. In fact, Binnie's principal concept is to offer an insightful, easy to understand, and easy to use framework for navigating through the piles of information and opinions on how to provide products and services to our customers in the future. The book's small size makes it perfectly suitable to serve as a guidebook that retailers and those interested in the sector will want to keep always available and close at hand.

Henry Welt
Co-Founder, Ossining Innovates! Former CEO Van Cleef & Arpels

The act of purchasing fulfills different consumer goals and needs. I think Mr. Binnie does an excellent job in explaining consumer purchase considerations and behavior. Understanding buyer behavior, combined with knowing retail history, helps us predict the future of retailing. I believe his insights provide a view of the future.

Milton J. Sussberg
Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurship, Fordham University
President, Sussberg & Co., Inc.

For the decades I have known and worked with Lionel Binnie, he has always had a strategic perspective on the retail market in all its variations. His innovations and insights have produced great results for his clients. In his book, *The Future of Omni-Channel Retail*, Binnie explains how the Discovery and Fulfillment steps of marketing are pervasive yet unique across the many channels of our retail landscape. Developing an understanding of how to leverage the unique qualities of each channel is crucial for every omni-channel retailer and Binnie's book will help you do just that.

John Hessell
Former CEO, with 40 years in Specialty Retail

I have had the pleasure of knowing Lionel Binnie for two decades in several capacities: client, consultant, business partner and friend. He is a master of channel marketing and retail. I've learned many things from Lionel about brands, merchandising and intercepting the consumer with occasion and impulse buying. I am not only glad he is sharing his thoughts, intellect and insights in his inaugural book *The Future of Omni-Channel Retail*, but I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to read an advance copy. Anyone venturing into retail and e-commerce today would be wise to read what Lionel has written in the pages of this book. You'll be wiser and smarter for it. I know I am.

John J. Eccleston
Sr. Director of Brands Development for a Fortune 150 company, brands maven, business entrepreneur and author

Endnotes

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