

 Briefing

Making the case for AI in online merchandising

Why AI must cross the chasm from digital marketing to trading teams.

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Part of the E-commerce/Retail Toolkit

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FOREWORD

FROM YOUR SPONSOR: APPTUS

Innovative Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies are emerging across many industry sectors and e-commerce trading is no exception.

There are a variety of technologies that are described as AI solutions and many views on what 'true AI' is. Our intent in commissioning this report is to explain how disruptive applications that use the power of AI can deliver solutions to the business challenges and opportunities in online trading.

The business challenge that is addressed in this report is online merchandising. This is a complex optimization problem to decide which products (often out of many thousands) to display to which visitors (often many millions), taking into account many variables (often dozens) on the ever-reducing real estate of desktop, tablets, and smartphones.

Selecting and sequencing products for a given space on a web shop is a complex optimization problem to which mathematicians and computer scientists around the world are constantly seeking solutions. The advancement of AI technologies and the speed and affordability of computing power is an ideal combination that can take much of the human decision-making away and augment it with insights derived from the processing of millions of data points in real time.

Deciding which products are trending, waning or just consistent sellers and how they should be ranked can now be done accurately based on behavioural data delivered by AI, and in real time, ensuring that every variable is considered, 24/7/365, even when the merchandising team is tucked up in bed or at the gym! No more missed opportunities when a popular soap star wears an amazing garment or a TV chef uses a new gadget!

The question I had and the reason we commissioned this report was, 'if this is all possible, why haven't more e-commerce teams adopted this technology more readily?'

At Apptus, we have been helping some of the largest brands in the world, including the two largest retailers in Sweden, to implement this approach for the past few years with phenomenal results. We felt it was time to examine 'the case for AI in merchandising' within the UK market.

I hope that you find this article challenging, objective and ultimately helpful to your business.

Andrew Fowler



Country Manager UK and Ireland

Apptus

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Dave Chaffey is co-founder and Content Director of digital marketing management advice site Smart Insights. He is author of five best-selling books on e-commerce including *Digital Marketing: Strategy, Implementation and Practice* and was recognized by the Chartered Institute of Marketing in 2004 as one of 50 marketing 'gurus' worldwide who have helped shape the future of marketing.



Andrew Fowler is Country Manager for Apptus UK. Since starting the role in 2012, he has become well-known amongst UK e-commerce professionals as an evangelist for Machine Learning and AI dramatically improving the way online merchandising is done.



Andrew has helped major fashion and multi-category retailers in the UK improve sales, conversion, and profitability across their online properties.

Prior to joining Apptus, Andrew spent a decade in various roles involving e-commerce solutions and consultancy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most established e-commerce businesses have a system in place for search and merchandising, yet the maturity and capabilities of these systems differ dramatically between businesses.

Some early adopters are already exploiting the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning to automate e-commerce merchandising. Other trading teams are still using sub-optimal, manually-intensive online merchandising techniques.

The limitations of traditional online merchandising

There are three main issues with a traditional approach to online search and merchandising:

1. **Coverage:** Online merchandisers can only work across some product categories.
2. **Sub-optimal recommendations:** Rules-based merchandising will always be limited.
3. **Frustrating brand experience for the customer:** Irrelevant products or limited choices.

How AI improves online merchandising

Applying AI to online merchandising focuses on a narrow, but crucial, merchandising function. It's what consumes 99% of an online merchandiser's time and most affects conversion rate – that is the sorting and prioritising of products and categories to maximize relevance.

There are two key differences between how an AI system automates online merchandising compared to a traditional approach:

1. AI systems use a behavioural feedback loop
2. AI systems are not rule-based

Business changes required for AI-based merchandising

There may be some stakeholders who fear that using AI-based systems means there is a loss of control over the customer experience. In fact, using an AI-based merchandising solution can give better control because, by treating merchandising as an optimization problem, businesses can:

- ✔ Optimize across the full product portfolio to help meet business sales and profitability targets.
- ✔ Use a real-time, rather than static, approach to merchandising which takes hourly, daily, weekly, and monthly product trends into account.
- ✔ Test different merchandising strategies to review the impact on key performance indicators (KPIs).

Online merchandisers are then able to refocus their efforts on other aspects of their role. They now have more time to think creatively about how the brand and new campaigns can better engage their shoppers.

Selecting an AI-based online merchandising system

As a summary of key issues to consider when talking to vendors of AI-based online merchandising systems, we present a checklist of key requirements.

INTRODUCTION

Has your business crossed the online merchandising chasm?

Most established e-commerce businesses have a system in place for search and merchandising, yet the maturity and capabilities of these systems differs dramatically between businesses.

Some early adopters are already exploiting the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning to automate online merchandising, significantly increase revenue per visit, and free-up online merchandisers to work on value-adding activities.

Other trading teams with less-mature online merchandising approaches have failed to make the case so have yet to 'cross the chasm' to the new world offered by AI. They are still using sub-optimal, manually-intensive online merchandising techniques which were possible over ten years ago.

In this report, to help make the case for advancing your online merchandising using AI, we explain the differences between traditional and AI-based merchandising, explore the benefits of machine learning, and review the organizational changes that are needed.

How will this briefing help me and my business?

This report will help you:

- ✔ Understand the limitations of traditional online merchandising
- ✔ Explain the business benefits of AI-powered search and merchandising optimization
- ✔ Manage the change required within merchandising teams and how they work with other business stakeholders
- ✔ Approach AI search and merchandising vendors with the knowledge to make informed decisions about how their services can help your company

Who is this briefing for?

This guide is for managers responsible for maximizing online or digital revenue in businesses with complex websites and a range of products with many SKUs, potentially offered across different markets and via offline channels. It will also be useful if you manage trading and user experience teams working on search and merchandising improvements across the website customer journey. Typical roles who will find it useful include:

- ✓ Head of E-commerce and Digital Sales Director
- ✓ E-commerce managers
- ✓ Online merchandising managers
- ✓ Digital marketing managers
- ✓ User experience managers

How is this briefing structured?

This briefing will provide steps to review your approach to online merchandising and how AI can be best deployed to improve sales. We cover:

- ✓ What is online merchandising?
- ✓ The limitations of traditional online merchandising
- ✓ Artificial Intelligence in online merchandising
- ✓ How AI systems work
- ✓ The benefits of AI merchandising
- ✓ Requirements for deploying AI-based merchandising
- ✓ Business changes required by AI-based merchandising
- ✓ Checklist for selecting an AI-based online merchandising system

1 LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL ONLINE MERCHANDISING

What exactly is online merchandising?

Simply put, online merchandising is ‘the selection and presentation of products and content to make best use of screen real estate’. It’s similar to in-store visual merchandising and product and category management combined. In both cases, the goal is to maximize sales based on consumer preferences and current products and promotions.

Since online merchandising is a relatively new approach, its maturity varies considerably. It hasn’t always been seen as a proper function requiring dedicated people using dedicated tools. That is now changing.

The most common tasks of an online merchandiser include:

- ✓ Defining, naming, and prioritizing categories
- ✓ Managing and optimizing search results
- ✓ Optimizing product data, descriptions, and photography
- ✓ Managing and optimizing cross-sells and up-sells
- ✓ Managing and optimizing key landing pages
- ✓ Promoting offers throughout the site
- ✓ Supporting external marketing campaigns
- ✓ Responding to top-down, ever-changing business pressures

Online merchandisers make sure that, regardless of the customer’s entry into and route through the site, they see the most relevant products, in the most appropriate order, presented in the most compelling way.

Online merchandising also benefits the customer because they will have a more positive brand experience through more relevant offers and choice. As this online merchandiser we spoke to put it:

“Customer choice is central to online merchandising, giving the customer the opportunity to follow trends, narrow down their product selection, review similar products or choose their own add-on products”.

Traditionally, relevance is achieved by sequencing product lists using a range of techniques. A benchmark¹ of the top 50 global e-commerce brands showed that the most popular online merchandising techniques to offer customer choice include:

- ✓ What's new (86%)
- ✓ Themed seasonal areas or collections (54%)
- ✓ Top sellers (40%)
- ✓ Trending now (18%)
- ✓ Top-rated products (13%)

The challenges of traditional online merchandising

Screen real estate is a finite resource, so it is the online merchandiser's job to make sure it's being utilized most effectively. To date, the larger part of the job has focused on managing product lists within categories or search results. Customers often view only a few pages in any one visit so it is imperative that they see those products that they're most likely to buy.

If site visitors have a prior purchase intent, it means ensuring the customer has the means to find the product or products they're looking for via sensible and meaningful category hierarchies or a search function that returns the correct products. If there is no prior purchase intent, then it's about trying to determine which products or categories might most interest them and then show them those.

A typical day's work for an online merchandiser will include:

- ✓ Reviewing analytics data relating to customers' browsing or searching of the site
- ✓ Identifying those categories or search terms that have lower than expected conversion rates and revenue per visit
- ✓ Manual optimization to mitigate or fix the issue

This optimization might mean ensuring products are in their correct category, that the product data is correct or complete, adding to or amending the synonym database used by search, or writing business rules that alter the default behaviour of the e-commerce platform for specific scenarios. For example: promoting or demoting products within search results for a given search query or presenting promotional banners to particular customer segments.

¹ [Smart Insights article: Which are the most popular merchandising techniques with online retailers?](#)

Current limitations of the technology and process

Most of what a customer sees when they visit a site is determined automatically by the e-commerce platform, which, for many retailers, consists of disparate systems, each designed to perform a very specific task which often don't harmoniously work with others.

What does this mean for the merchandiser? It means that a lot of time is spent manually intervening when these automated systems fail to do or show the right thing. This work is reactive in nature, laborious, time consuming, and it leaves little time for other, value-adding activities.

It is not uncommon for today's online merchandiser to wrestle with at least a dozen separate systems to complete their job, including a search engine, recommendations engine, product information manager, content delivery network, site analytics, email service provider, retargeting tools, and the e-commerce platform itself. These are all systems that online merchandisers regularly have to use in order to optimize screen real estate.

There are three main issues with this traditional approach:

- 1. Coverage:** The proportion of work that online merchandisers manage to complete compared to what needs to be done across product categories is miniscule.
- 2. Sub-optimal recommendations:** The effectiveness of many of an online merchandiser's interventions is sometimes questionable but, more importantly, is nearly always impossible to quantify.
- 3. Frustrating brand experience for the customer:** Irrelevant products or limited choices will frustrate the customer and they are more likely to give up and buy from a brand that does meet their expectations.

Put bluntly, online merchandisers have an unenviable task as they simply aren't able to do enough and what they are able to do never seems good enough!

There are simply too many ways for customers to conceive of products, too many ways for customers to navigate the site, too many ways in which products might be ordered, and too many competing and contradictory customer preferences for online merchandisers to properly and effectively optimize screen real estate. It's as if they've been tasked with draining the ocean and they've been given a spoon.

2 HOW AI IMPROVES ONLINE MERCHANDISING

What is AI and Machine Learning?

Much of the media hype around AI technology tends to focus on futuristic visions of driverless cars and fears of job losses. However, look beyond the hype and you'll see that the ideal application is optimization using Machine Learning and predictive analytics techniques. We recommend you understand Machine Learning and predictive analytics techniques and ask vendors about the way in which Machine Learning algorithms use historical data and respond to real-time trends.

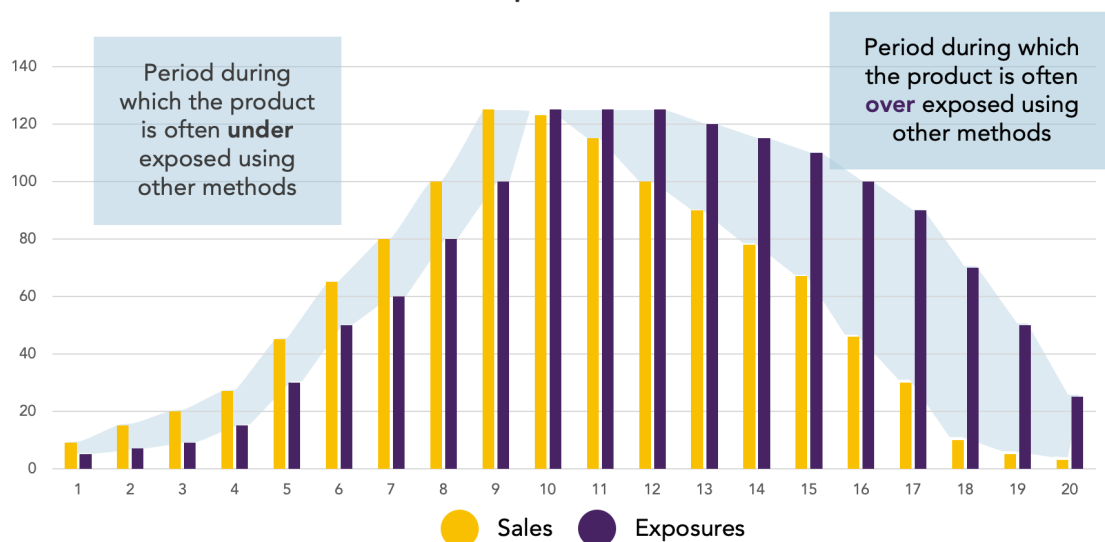
What is Machine Learning for predictive analytics?

Simply put, it's creating and applying predictive models and algorithms with the ability to learn without being explicitly programmed. Computer models then make predictions of success based on patterns extracted from historical data. These are used to automate tasks such as targeting product offers, media or emails to the most valuable segments with the most relevant creative, offer, and timing to maximize response and value.

How does AI improve online merchandising?

Applying AI to online merchandising is focused on a narrow, but crucial, merchandising function. It's what consumes 99% of an online merchandiser's time and most affects conversion rate – that is the sorting and prioritizing of products and categories to maximize relevance.

Using AI to predict trends



AI helps solve the product catalogue optimization challenge: if the customer can't see a product, they can't buy it. The scale of the product portfolio naturally means that the vast majority of products a retailer stocks will never be seen by any individual customer online. Page views per session will typically be less than 20 for many retailers, and products shown per page will often never exceed 100. For a retailer that stocks 4,000 products that's just half – for a retailer that stocks 20,000 products that's just 10% – of total products shown.

For paginated results, such as categories or search results, typical customer behaviour sees page views drop by at least 50% per page. So 100 customers see page one, 50 page two, 25 page three etc. A product that languishes on page four will rarely be seen, be it within search results or category pages.

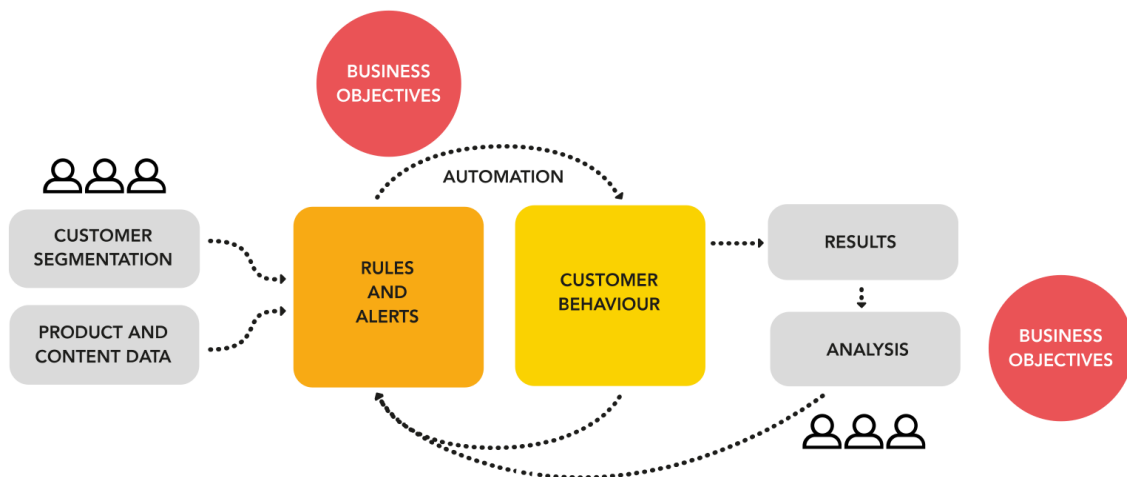
The reality is that most customers won't see most products. Given this, the secret to good online merchandising is making sure the products customers do see are those they are most likely to buy. For customers with a prior purchase intent it means helping them find the product they're looking for, and for those without a specific intent it means highlighting those products they're most likely to buy.

Differences to traditional online merchandising approaches

To understand the power of AI-based merchandising approaches, it is helpful to compare them to a traditional rules-based approach. Traditionally, online merchandisers have used merchandising technology to address the optimization of products by sorting categories by best seller, by prioritising search results by 'relevancy', and by showing personalized cross-sells via a recommendation engine.

This traditional, rules-based approach involves the activities shown in this flowchart.

Rules-based approach



Rules-based automation is based on data about customer segments and their interaction with products and content. Rules and alerts are then manually adjusted based on customer responses. A separate manual review process, involving analysis of results over a period of time, determines how well the rules and alerts meet the business objectives.

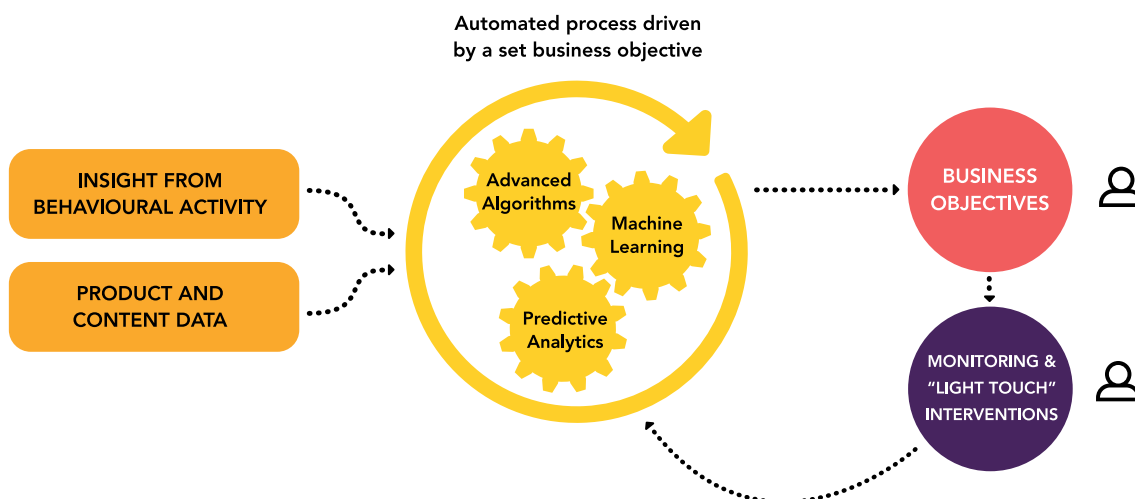
This approach is extremely limited in its effectiveness. Consider these cases:

- ❑ **Category recommendations:** Best seller ranks are a crude average. They don't take into consideration the preferences of customer sub-groups, and they are slow to react to change, for example 'trending products'.
- ❑ **Search listing:** What determines relevancy? For most retailers, search relevancy is still determined by crude query-product data matching. However, relevancy scores for particular product groups, such as those returned by the query 'red dress', are near identical. Some products get shown on page one but others get buried on page two onwards and remain there. The system is also entirely predicated on the hope that your customers use the same terminology to describe a product as your Buying and Merchandising team used when first entering its information into the product information manager (PIM).
- ❑ **Recommendations:** Yes, recommendation engines use algorithms to select cross-sells and up-sells for individual customers, but the data available for them to determine an individual's preference is limited and the scope for them to display options is restricted. In reality, many recommendation engines, despite their intelligence, return product lists no different to the best seller ranks used by categories.

How do AI systems work?

AI merchandising solutions seek to find statistically significant correlations between sets of customer behaviours and product groups. They dynamically select and order products for different customer groups or, in some instances, for individual customers. Their goal is to optimize screen real estate to best meet their set objectives – usually improving conversion rate or profit contribution, but sometimes to increase sales or margin, or to clear stock.

The visual shows how the AI-based merchandising approach differs from the traditional approach. The AI creates an automated 'exposure strategy' aligning with business objectives, based on a feedback loop informed by insight from consumer interactions with product and content, depending on different merchandising hypotheses.



Less human analysis is required in the AI-based approach, but it's important that the AI system delivers insight to the merchandising team so that they can see how well the automation process is performing against business objectives and previous approaches. It's also necessary to be able to override the AI-based automation to make 'light-touch' interventions.

There are two key difference between how an AI system automates the process of selecting and ordering products and how traditional systems handle the task:

1. AI systems use a behavioural feedback loop: They present product sets to customers and monitor, using Machine Learning, how they interact with them over time. The feedback loop for traditional systems is a manual process involving the merchandiser periodically reviewing performance using multiple analytics and reporting tools and tweaking the system's configuration accordingly, leaving it for a period (usually weeks at a time) and repeating the process.

2. AI systems are not rule-based: Traditional systems tend to be statically configured, with either pre-set rules for determining relevancy (keyword matching) or with rules defined by the online merchandiser that affect the customer experience in some way under very specific conditions. The rules governing traditional systems tend to be reviewed periodically and not particularly granular. AI systems begin with an initial state or configuration but this is not fixed and the system adapts over time.

Requirements for deploying AI-based merchandising

For AI to work well, the Machine Learning needs lots of data. The more data available, the more correlations they can find and the greater the statistical significance. For this reason, AI merchandising solutions are best suited to retailers with large product sets and large visitor numbers, but they can still have value to smaller retailers.

AI solutions also tend to work best when they control the majority of screen real estate and product sorting and recommendation functions. Not only does this allow them to harvest more behaviour data (data relating to how customers interact with products and how they discover products) it also allows them to test merchandising hypotheses.

Given a large enough data set, an AI system will uncover many correlations between customers and products. Some of these will have very strong correlations (e.g. men buying mens shoes) but many, if not most, will have relatively weak correlations. Some of these will be valid and could be used advantageously to select and prioritize products, but others could be the result of statistical noise and worthless. To know one way or the other requires testing.

Testing merchandising hypotheses requires the system to intervene in the customer experience and exposes a set of customers to a different set of products. This testing can only be conducted on parts of the screen real estate that the AI system controls. This is the Achilles heel of systems that lack screen space control, such as recommendation engines that control only cross-sells. The vast majority of product views in any one customer session are within categories or search results. Cross-sell areas account for very little screen space and offer only a small opportunity for hypothesis testing. This is why many of their recommendations mirror the best-seller lists – these are the products for which the behavioural correlations are very strong and require the least testing.

The benefits of AI-based merchandising

The power of AI is to analyze customer preferences and then automatically learn from this to deliver optimal recommendations. The AI adapts as it learns. It harvests behavioural data, looks for correlations with products, and tests new approaches. Those correlations that are statistically significant are used to improve relevancy (and therefore the customer experience) and those that aren't are replaced with new hypotheses. The most advanced systems do this in real time.

This happens at such speed, and on such a scale, that human merchandisers cannot compete. The AI system has only to make the slightest improvement in conversion rate per product set shown that, through scale and repetition, they make a significant difference to conversion overall.

This last point is worth emphasizing because it is the main benefit of AI systems but one that is easy to underestimate. They are not perfect, but they don't need to be. They only need to make small, incremental improvements to the relevancy of product selections that, through scale and repetition, then add up to significant uplifts in conversion.

3 BUSINESS CHANGES REQUIRED BY AI-BASED MERCHANDISING

Setting stakeholder expectations

The biggest 'change management issue' that businesses may initially have with AI systems is a fear within the merchandising team of losing control over the customer experience and the reduction in opportunities for online merchandisers to intervene. By design, AI systems need to control those parts of the screen real estate that they are attempting to optimize. The optimization process requires that they look for and test correlations between customer behaviour and products. Intervention in the selection of products by an online merchandiser would play havoc with this process and negate all the tests.

Merchandisers cannot both intervene in the selection of products *and* have a system attempt to optimize the same set of products. There is no way round this unless the merchandiser uses the AI system itself as the tool to make the manual intervention. If the AI system is aware of a manual intervention it can compensate for the action in its analysis of the test results. If another system other than the AI system is used to alter product sets then it is effectively blind to the intervention. It will see a downstream effect in customer behaviour but will think that the change is due to its actions rather than the merchandiser's, therefore providing a false picture of performance and creating false correlations.



STRATEGY RECOMMENDATION

Ensure 'light-touch' overrides available within AI system

Some AI solutions still offer the opportunity to intervene in the customer experience. Intervention isn't essential, but if you do intervene, it is very light touch i.e. minor tweaks, or temporary promotional boosts of products where a merchandiser has specific knowledge that the AI system has yet to 'learn'.

The wider business will also have to adjust. Stakeholders across the business will all have to be brought onboard both before the process of selecting an AI merchandising system has begun and after it has been implemented. They will need to understand both the benefits and the restrictions of adopting such a system, as explained in this report. Crucially, they will need to understand the new process governing the selection and promotion of products to customers and appreciate that the old methods of manually promoting products and 'he who shouts loudest' no longer apply.

Introducing new ways of working

We have seen that current AI merchandising is focused on the management and optimization of product lists and the means by which customers browse or search through the catalogue. This includes category listing pages, recommendations, and search results, but also things such as category navigation, product filters, and sort orders. This is the ‘selection’ aspect of our definition of online merchandising:

“The selection and presentation of products and content to make best use of screen real-estate.”

What these systems do not yet address is the ‘presentation’ aspect of the process. As the saying goes, ‘you can take a horse to water but you can’t make it drink’. It isn’t enough to show a customer a product, you have to persuade them to buy it.

Once a customer has found a product other factors begin to determine whether they will buy or not. The product’s title, description, feature list, photography, review rating, and price all affect the customer’s purchase decision. These factors are largely overlooked by online merchandisers, mostly because they simply don’t have the time. But with product discovery and exposure now predominantly handled by the AI merchandising system, merchandisers can, at last, focus on this important aspect of their role.

It should be apparent that adopting AI in your merchandising workflows will be disruptive. New ways of working that deliver big benefits rarely do so quietly. People will notice.

The immediate impact will be upon the online merchandising team. After the initial system implementation and integration period, online merchandisers will find they can put their time into more ‘value-adding’ activities than previously. The previous tasks of manually reviewing relevancy and performance, tweaking system configurations, and writing business rules should, all being well, become a thing of the past. The process of selecting and promoting products, optimizing category lists, filters, and sort orders should now be automated. They should also notice a significant drop in interventions from colleagues across the business enquiring as to why a product is, or is not, in a specific location.

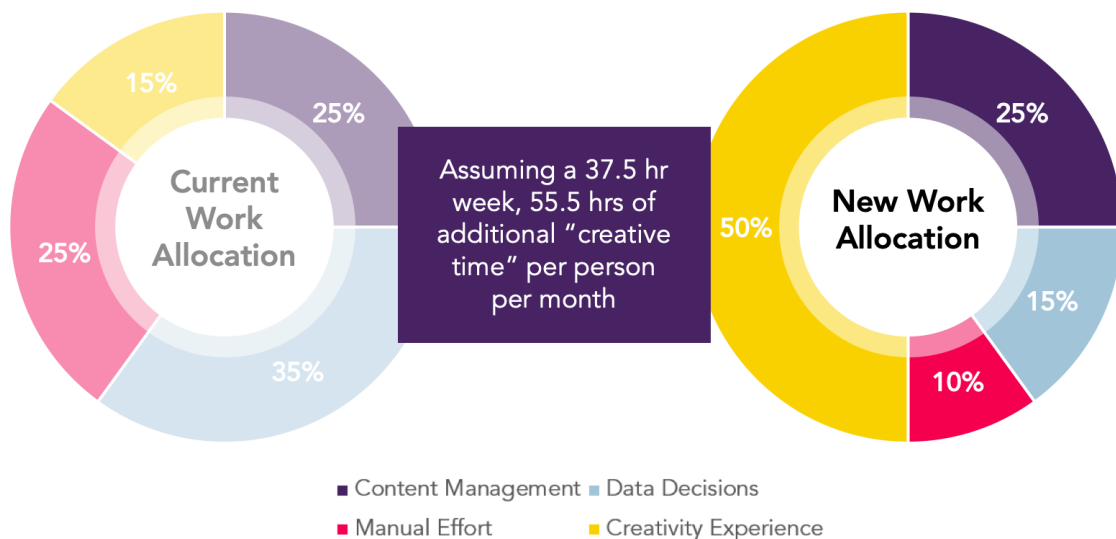
The new approach, using the AI-based merchandising system will involve:

- ✓ Optimizing across the full product portfolio to help meet business sales and profitability targets by treating merchandising as an optimization problem.
- ✓ A real-time, rather than static, approach to merchandising which takes hourly, daily, weekly and monthly trends in product into account.
- ✓ Testing different merchandising strategies to review the impact on KPIs.
- ✓ Monthly and weekly trading meetings are now centred more on planning and reviewing the results of structured optimization tests.
- ✓ Merchandisers are less involved in manual adjustments, instead reviewing the results of optimization to test different merchandising strategies. They now have more time to think creatively about how the brand and new campaigns can better engage their shoppers.

Online merchandisers will have to refocus their efforts on other aspects of their role that may have so far been neglected. Two new opportunities are:

- ✓ **Testing different online merchandising strategies:** More time can be put into testing different merchandising strategies and capable AI-based systems have strong analysis features to present 'before' and 'after' differences.
- ✓ **Improving persuasion:** The art of persuasion, finessing the presentation of products and the brand to improve the customer experience and further improve conversion.

AI to change the way you work



4

CHECKLIST FOR SELECTING AN AI-BASED ONLINE MERCHANDISING SYSTEM

We've created this checklist as a summary of the key issues to highlight in your business case or key questions to ask when talking to systems vendors about the features of their solutions.

Business functionality

- Unified system:** Does a unified system manage all the areas where products are exposed? i.e. search results, lists, category pages, and recommendations?
- Response to real-time consumer trends:** Can the system respond in real-time to changes in consumer buying patterns? (e.g. micro-trends such as a run on a specific range due to a TV programme or magazine advert.)
- Cross border sales:** Can the system manage a different business outcome and use local behaviour for geographical markets?
- Customizing UX interactions:** How many site elements can be optimized? i.e. home page, category and product pages, search, cross and up-sell, and navigation.
- Testing and impact analysis reporting on effectiveness of algorithms:** How transparent is the system in reporting on changes in key performance indicators? e.g. can AB tests be run to show results of new merchandising strategies?
- Relevance vs personalization for prospects and customers:** Does the system deliver equally relevant experiences for new visitors, returning visitors, and customers?
- User interface:** Is the user interface intuitive, non-technical, and does it support light touch interventions?
- Measuring intervention:** Does the system measure and report on the results of interventions being made by the user?
- Manual vs automatic:** Is the system capable of fully automating the merchandising of the site? How much 'manual tweaking' of the 'AI' is needed, e.g. to modify search listings, tune recommendations or manage ranking.

Managing change

- Making a business case:** Will the supplier work with you to establish a business case and commit to a trial or a proof of concept to form part of your ultimate decision making?
- How will the merchandisers role change after deployment?** How will team dynamics change, i.e. working with product and brand managers?
- Time to value:** What is the learning time and process for system to use Machine Learning for predictive analytics based on previous data?
- Implementation support:** What consulting guidance and training are required and what are the fees?
- Privacy and data protection:** You should ask for guidance on disclosure needed for GDPR and check the vendor makes it possible to act on subject access requests, e.g. to provide data and delete if requested.