From hype to how: The new reality of AI at scale

Less wow, more how. That was the sentiment of retailers at NRF 2026. And that should become your brand's guiding strategy to find success in the evolving retail space.

Capgemini

After years of focusing on the potential of advancing technologies like AI, retail leaders are no longer leaning into the hype. Instead, they're leading with a more practical set of hows:

How to execute.

How to scale.

How to measure success.

We've reached a point in the growth curve of AI and innovation, that it is now only impressive when it delivers value. And delivering value means moving beyond novelty to usefulness, helping a service team clear a surge in calls, enabling a supply chain leader to get a step ahead of a literal storm, or supporting store managers to adjust prices based on local events.

But what truly differentiates AI, is not any single use case but its ability to connect the business through them. When applied across functions, AI can surface patterns no individual function could see on its own, thereby revealing how the same weather event might trigger a spike in service inquiries, disrupt inbound logistics, and require rapid price adjustments.

When AI becomes both ubiquitous throughout the business and unified across it—when it acts as the connective tissue for key functions, regions, and business units—it doesn't just deliver isolated impact, it becomes a source of enterprise advantage.

This shift is already materializing in retail. On the NRF show floor, it was unmistakable: fewer one-off point solutions and more coordination across the enterprise; less pilots and more scalable programs; solutions that were truly interoperable, connecting systems, data, and teams and breaking the silos created over years and decades.

> AI is not the headline, but the wiring. We're seeing the shift from AI as 'a feature' into AI as an operating layer inside the business.

Alexander Fleischer
Executive Director
Innovation Ecosystem,
Capgemini AIE

Despite the strong digital overtones throughout the conference, retailers also remained cognizant of their roots. The store is no longer just a point of sale—it's a place of trust, where the brand promise is reinforced and high-touch, human experiences are delivered in ways digital channels can't easily replicate.

Taken together, 2026 will mark the transition from experimentation to industrialization. Retail leaders aren't asking what the technology is capable of, they're considering how to apply it at scale to solve challenges and deepen the connection with shoppers.

Less wow, more how.

Attendees and exhibitors alike focused less on technology's potential and more on its practical use in the real world.

Rewiring with AI.

AI is being used as the connective tissue within the business to unite data, decisions, and workflows end to end.

From transaction to trust.

The physical store is the place to verify and reinforce brand identity and values.

Key takeaways from NRF 2026

Agentic commerce is the reality.

AI can act on behalf of customers—now retailers need to create a seamless, secure experience to match.

Physical stores run on digital tech.

The store may be physical, but the experience is digital—driven by dynamic content, automation, robotics, and smart-store platforms.

Collaboration is king.

Retail leaders know better than to go it alone. Partnerships with big tech and enterprise platforms are the key to innovating faster and achieving scale.

Execution is a differentiator.

Advantage comes from connecting, governing, and using AI tools effectively—not adding more to an endless stack.

Trend 1: Agents get practical: Rewiring day-to-day retail execution with AI

Agentic AI continued to dominate the headlines at NRF. But unlike last year when AI agents were impressing attendees with possibility and potential, this year's conversations focused on the real value they can deliver today.

Agentic AI was everywhere across commerce, service, and marketing conversations.

Demos shifted from flashy assistants to operational AI, focused on store and e-commerce execution.

Our observations

AI showed up as an embedded platform capability, not a standalone point solution.

Usability mattered more than intelligence, with AI designed to solve issues in the moment.

Many retail leaders have been convinced that "AI can do everything." Now they want to know what it can do in the moment to make everyday work easier, faster, and more effective.

Exhibitors that received the most traction at NRF were those that led not with pitches around raw intelligence, but real-world applicability, showing how AI agents can deflect customer service volume during peak seasons, enable faster merchant and operations changes without long IT backlogs, and improve store execution through smarter task management, staffing, and issue resolution.

For instance, **7Learnings** is a dynamic pricing software that uses AI to optimize pricing, performance marketing, and product ordering—and also synchronize actions across the business. Similarly, **Profitmind** leverages AI agents to identify specific growth opportunities across pricing, inventory, and assortment and offer retailers a clear path to execution.

On the customer side, the bar for AI is even higher. Unlike employees who may invest time learning a new tool or be required to use it, shoppers are purely value-driven. They'll engage if the experience delivers immediately, and they'll move on just as quickly if it doesn't.

One strong example we saw of an effective customer-facing AI tool at NRF was **Ask Ralph,** a conversational styling companion from **Ralph Lauren** and **Microsoft.** This app-based chatbot delivers an experience that mirrors that of the flagship store, offering styling advice, outfit suggestions, and inspiration while preserving Ralph Lauren's tone, attitude, and aesthetic.

> The most effective AI isn't just fast or smart—it's brand-right, trust-building, and genuinely enhances the customer experience.

Kacey Burden
Innovation Strategist and Operations Lead, AIE, Capgemini

To draw out the full value from AI, retailers need to be more intentional about its use, not as a standalone solution but as the connective tissue across the business. NRF marked a clear shift from AI as a feature to AI as an operating layer embedded across the business. Rather than sitting on the surface, AI is being used to rewire retail organizations to move faster, operate more efficiently, and respond in real time.

At the same time, AI cannot connect what the organization has neglected. Scalability depends on having the right foundations in place—clean, trusted data, clear permissions and governance, and workflows that align with how teams already operate. Without those elements, even the most capable agents and advanced solutions will struggle to deliver real impact.

The key to AI adoption at scale: Trust

The latest consumer research from the Capgemini Research Institute, What matters to today's consumer 2026, reveals a critical issue: While AI use has grown, trust in the technology has declined steadily over the past two years across all age groups. To close that gap, retailers and brands must prioritize strong guardrails, transparency, and explainability to ensure AI earns and maintains customer confidence.

71%

Of shoppers are concerned by how Gen AI collects and uses personal data

76%

Of shoppers want to be able to set strict boundaries for a digital assistant

66%

Of shoppers trust a digital assistant more when it provides clear explanations

Source: What matters to today's consumer 2026
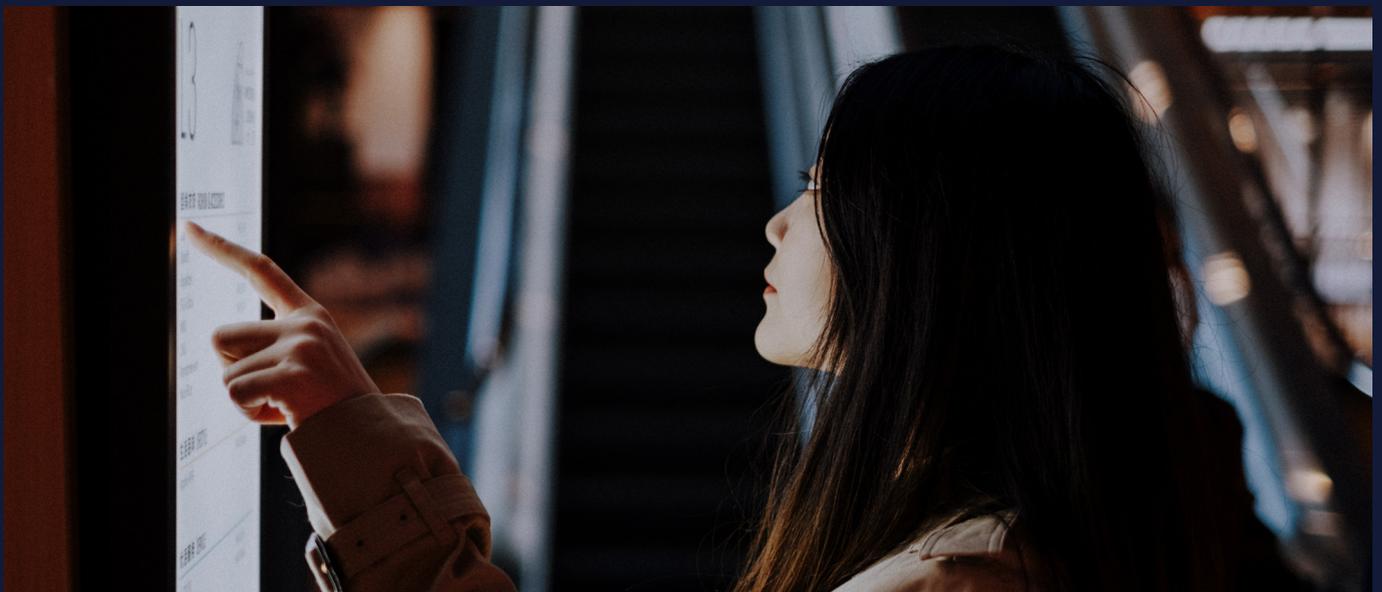
Trend 2: Simplify to scale: Connected platforms power agentic commerce

One of the most important infrastructure moments at NRF was the announcement of the U**niversal Commerce Protocol (UCP)** by **Google** and **Shopify**—a shared standard designed to make agentic commerce interoperable at scale. Rather than forcing AI-driven experiences to hand off to fragmented, retailer-specific flows, UCP creates a common way for AI agents to discover products, access inventory, apply pricing and promotions, and complete checkout across platforms.

Our observations

Interoperability is the standard—and standalone or bolt-on tools don't measure up

Unified commerce is the new omnichannel, defined by orchestration of data, inventory, pricing, and fulfillment.

Customers don't care about infrastructure— but they notice when it falls short.

Discovery is shifting from traditional search to conversational engagement.

Anticipatory commerce is coming. The new unit of commerce will be defined by the moment, not the category.

This announcement signifies a shift of agentic commerce from concept to reality. AI can officially transact on behalf of customers and now it's up to retailers can make those interactions seamless, secure, and measurable across fragmented systems.

The introduction of UCP is an early signal of what's coming next: a broader race to establish shared standards that allow agent-driven commerce to operate at scale across the ecosystem, rather than within isolated platforms.

> " The barriers to agentic commerce are no longer intelligence or technical feasibility, but integration, interoperability, trust, and provable ROI.

Sanjay Nand
Head of Applied Innovation Exchange, Capgemini UK

The UCP announcement also resonated with many retailers because it reflected a broader reality. After years of assembling stacks of one-off tools, organizations are feeling the strain of fragmented systems and limited scalability. UCP reinforced the industry's collective need for simplification and orchestration— connecting systems so teams can move faster, execute more consistently, and build on integrated foundations rather than disconnected solutions.

A connected infrastructure is what makes big ideas executable. And in 2026, few ideas are bigger than **unified commerce.**

The modern successor to omnichannel, unified commerce goes beyond simply connecting channels to orchestrating demand across a broader set of routes to purchase, including agentic commerce, social commerce, marketplaces, and wholesale or alternative channels. The focus is on unifying data, inventory, pricing, and fulfillment across these paths so commerce feels cohesive, no matter where or how the transaction begins.

Unified commerce also supports multi-path discovery. This is especially important as shoppers increasingly engage in natural language search through AI assistants, voice, and visual search, as opposed to traditional tools and terms. This raises the bar for retailers and brands: it's not enough to be findable online, they also have to be discoverable inside the conversation, with product information, availability, and benefits structured in ways AI can understand and act on.

From the customer's perspective, unified commerce is about delivering a consistent, seamless experience across every interaction. Customers don't care which systems are chugging away behind the scenes—it only matters that experiences are accurate, actionable, and effortless, regardless of where or how they engage.

To deliver on this expectation, retailers also need to focus on execution. The priority is speed and consistency across the business, supported by cleaner data flows and fewer handoffs between teams and systems.

> " In anticipatory commerce, decisions are no longer driven by categories— they're shaped by context. The unit of commerce becomes the moment, not the merchandise.

Sebastien Jouvenaar
VP, Strategy & Innovation - frog, Head of the Applied Innovation Exchange Capgemini

This speed and agility will become critical as the industry advances to the next phase: **anticipatory commerce,** where AI agents evolve from answering questions and making recommendations to ultimately taking action on a customer's behalf. In this model, shopping is shaped by real-time context, such as replenishment needs, time constraints, location, preferences, and trust signals.

The goal is not for retailers to automate transactions to make purchases faster, but to make decisions easier for the shopper by helping them widen the world of possibility, while reducing their need to search and compare. Retailers shouldn't aim to persuade, but to reassure, helping customers move forward because the experience feels clear, relevant, and trustworthy.

Trend 3: All-in-one retail: Physical store | Digital tech | Human experience

What does a sneaker smell like? How does coffee sound? What does lightweight down really feel like?

These are the questions that can only be answered in physical retail spaces. And they're the reason why stores are not disappearing.

Technology should amplify the human connection, not stand between shoppers and associates.

The physical store's role is shifting from transaction to trust as AI takes over more digital decision-making.

AI is an augmentation tool, not a replacement strategy

Our observations

Experiential retail still matters.

Physical retail wins in what can't be replicated online.

Coming to a store near you: Retail media. Digital shelf displays and dynamic content are turning the store into a source of discovery.

On the contrary, stores are becoming more important than ever in an AI-enabled world, where recommendations, pricing, and fulfillment increasingly happen through algorithms. In this context, the store becomes the place where customers verify, validate, and feel confident in those decisions.

56% of consumers have used Gen AI shopping tools or plan to do so in the future	**53%** have made a purchase based on AI recommendations
Source: What matters to today's consumer 2026	Source: From hype to habit: How consumers are embracing AI

At NRF we saw how the store's role is shifting from a point of transaction to a source of trust, providing what AI alone cannot:

- **Sensory experiences,** where customers can see, touch, try, and experience products firsthand.

- **Human expertise,** delivered by associates that can explain, advise, and contextualize AI-driven recommendations.

- **Real face-to-face interactions** that build reassurance, accountability, and emotional connection.

The human nature of the store underscores the idea that AI should augment the associate experience, not replace employees. Intelligent solutions should amplify the human connection through consistent personalization and contextualization at scale. By arming associates with better tools, retailers can reduce friction and the resulting administrative tasks, enabling staff to spend more time with customers.

74% shoppers value human interaction during in-store shopping

Source: What matters to today's consumer 2026

At the same time, AI has a critical role to play in streamlining the parts of the experience that don't require human expertise or that are difficult to provide at scale. From frictionless checkout and intuitive navigation to relevant, real-time recommendations, AI can handle the routine moments of the journey, removing friction, saving time, and increasing confidence.

When applied thoughtfully, AI allows the store to feel both more human and more efficient: technology doing the background work, so people can focus on what truly benefits from human judgment, empathy, and connection.

Purpose-driven AI: As seen at NRF	
AI as an augmentation tool for associates	**AI as an experience enhancer for shoppers**
YOOBIC is an AI-powered frontline digital workplace that brings communication, training, and task management into one mobile app—helping frontline teams execute more consistently, work more efficiently, and stay aligned with HQ.	**Temi** gives shoppers instant, personalized assistance—helping them navigate the store, find products, and get answers quickly through a friendly, autonomous AI assistant.
Salesfloor empowers store associates with AI-driven clienteling and virtual storefronts—extending personalized selling beyond the store to deepen customer relationships and drive higher conversion.	**Cust2Mate** transforms the shopping cart into a personalized, interactive experience—enabling in-cart payment, tailored promotions, and real-time guidance that make in-store shopping faster, easier, and more engaging for customers.
Frogmi is an AI-powered store operations platform that connects HQ and store teams across tasking, compliance, communication, and analytics—helping associates execute more consistently and managers improve performance in real time.	**VenHub** delivers always-on, cashierless convenience—giving shoppers instant, frictionless access to food and essentials 24/7 through AI-driven, robotic retail formats in high-traffic and hard-to-serve locations.

Finally, NRF also reinforced how quickly retail media is moving into physical spaces. Digital shelf displays, smart signage, and real-time content triggered by shopper context are turning the store into a dynamic channel for discovery, not just a place to purchase. Done well, this doesn't clutter the experience; it makes it more helpful, surfacing the right product information, value messages, and timely reminders at the exact point of decision.

3 recommendations to embrace the future of purpose-driven retail

Unify the organization through AI.

Retailers should deploy AI as a shared operating layer that connects teams, data, and decisions across the business, rather than as isolated tools for individual functions. In practice, this means embedding AI into core platforms and workflows so pricing, inventory, marketing, store operations, and customer engagement are working from the same signals and priorities in real time.

Anchor all platform decisions in interoperability.

NRF made it clear that interoperability is what enables unified commerce—the ability to orchestrate data, inventory, pricing, and fulfillment across every route to purchase. Retailers should prioritize interoperability as the core design principle for their commerce stack, moving away from standalone or bolt-on tools toward connected, scalable platforms.

Design stores to verify trust and deepen human connection.

As algorithms increasingly influence discovery, pricing, and fulfillment, the store becomes the environment where customers validate those decisions through sensory experience, human expertise, and real interaction. This means using digital technology to remove friction—powering discovery, navigation, checkout, and recommendations in the background—while equipping associates with tools that free them from administrative tasks and enable more meaningful engagement.

From show floor to your store.
Let's make it real.

As always, NRF showcased what's possible in retail—but this year it went a step further, highlighting what's required in practice: AI must be unified across the business, platforms must be interoperable by default, and physical stores must strengthen trust, discovery, and human connection.

The retailers that will take the lead will be those who draw on what they saw on the show floor and put it to work—embedding AI into everyday workflows, connecting systems end to end, and using digital intelligence to amplify what only people can deliver.

This is what purpose-driven retail looks like. Let's make it real.

If you're looking to move from insight to action, Capgemini's Applied Innovation Exchange helps retailers turn ideas into real-world impact. Through joint partnerships with startups, exploratory workshops, strategy engagements, and proven solutions, our team helps organizations experiment, validate, and scale what's next. Let's continue the conversation and make purpose-driven retail real.

 To continue the conversation, reach out to **nyaie@capgemini.com.**

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