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A LOOK BACK INTO THE MEGAVEVERSE OF THOUGHTS, INSIGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE SHARED BY
MENA'S E-COMMERCE ELITE AT THE INTERNET COMMERCE SUMMIT MENA 2024



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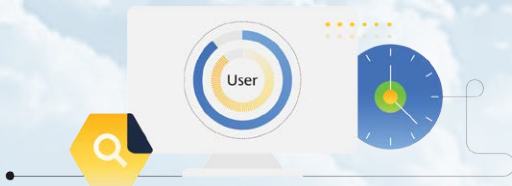
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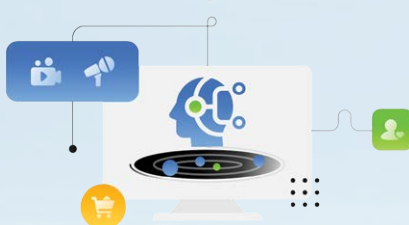
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24/7 support



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Spotlight on Cuisine, Culture, Community

... Rupkatha Bhowmick | Editor

If there's one food show on Netflix that I was eagerly waiting for, it's the seventh season of Somebody Feed Phil that released earlier this month. In case you're wondering why, it's because one of the episodes paid homage to Dubai's foodie landscape. The episode hit the spot just right by showcasing Dubai's extremely diverse culinary tapestry – from the houses of Orfali Bros Bistro and Bait Maryam to places such as Arabian Tea House and Al-Nassma and people like Arva Ahmed who paid a fitting tribute to the city's soul.

No wonder the F&B industry in the UAE alone is estimated to touch \$43.98 billion by 2029 driven by strong tourism, a buoyant economy and a dynamic demographic landscape, indicates a JLL report. If anything, this proves the strong business case of an industry that's extremely challenging yet one that doesn't cease to be exciting. Staying with food, our May edition will spotlight efforts and initiatives from the region's HoReCa landscape. There I said it!

Moving over to the season of giving – well, I'll contradict my own statement here, because the spirit of giving transcends seasons. But yes, the Holy Month of Ramadan is typically a time when heartwarming initiatives and collaborations happen at collective and individual levels. Among several others, here are three initiatives that I personally found heartwarming:

Dubai Holding's 'Gift It Forward' Ramadan initiative that seeks to revitalise thousands of new items and products – including clothing, stationery, books and accessories – into one-of-a-kind gifts to be distributed to over 8,000 blue-collar workers and 500 low-income families supported by the Community Development Authority. While centred around the value of giving and mindful consumption, the repurposing of items into gifts will also help to reduce waste.

The Saudi Food Bank (Et'aam) has partnered with Bel Group's Kiri for its 'Iftar Fast Breaking Programme'. This collaborative effort aims to spread kindness and compassion by distributing 20,000 fresh meals to individuals in need across Jeddah during Ramadan. While the UAE Food Bank has collaborated with Amazon UAE for the 2024 edition of 'Iftar on Wheels', a meal donation programme to support families in need by distributing Iftar meals.

Several food and grocery majors including Carrefour, Lulu Group International, Sharjah Cooperative Society and Union Coop, among others have announced price reduction on many categories during the entire month of Ramadan to ensure stability in pricing of essential items.

Now, over to what we have in this edition, which is dedicated to the MENA region's rapidly evolving digital landscape. In this edition, we bring to you curated content summarising diverse views and insights shared during the recently concluded Internet Commerce Summit (ICS) MENA. That's not all, we have thrown the spotlight on three homegrown online platforms that are witnessing significant growth and two international names that are seeing massive traction in the region.

We hope you will enjoy flipping through the pages and reading our content. Until the next edition, happy reading and stay well.



Rupkatha Bhowmick

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E-COMMERCE MEGAVERSE

A PIVOTAL CONVERGENCE TO ACCELERATE THE FUTURE OF E-COMMERCE IN MENA

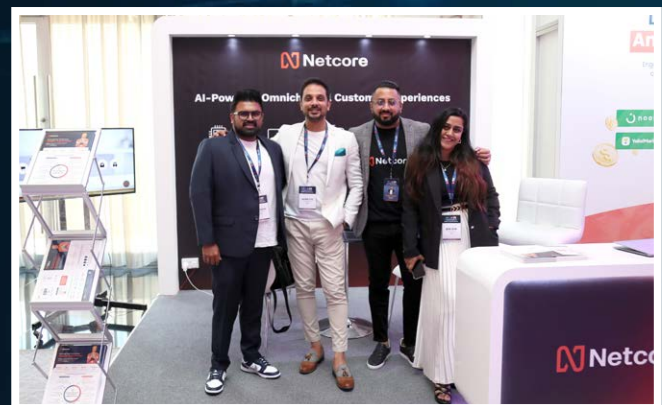
Top Ten #TechAways

Organised by IMAGES Group Middle East the second edition of the Internet Commerce Summit (ICS) MENA brought together prominent voices from retail and e-commerce landscape.

As businesses are navigating a rapidly evolving digital landscape with razor-sharp focus on transformation, innovation and disruption, here are 10 key takeaways from ICS MENA 2024:

- Starting with CX (customer experience). Unification of the back end and the front end is what delivers great CX.
- A single view of inventory is pivotal to create a delightful shopping journey.
- Channels of choice might change, but customer centricity will always be a key differentiator.
- Amid changing customer preferences businesses must keep things relevant and simple for the customer.
- AI is real, and AI is a fad – the debate continues...
- As consumers demand hyper-personalisation, data privacy is adding a new layer of complexity.
- Even in the age of tech, storytelling remains evergreen.
- Marrying tech with human touch is nothing short of an art.
- Social commerce mustn't be undermined.
- In a rapidly evolving digital landscape, 'fix the fundamentals' journey is the only constant.

Note: Do flip through the pages to read highlights from the sessions and check out www.imagesretailme.com to access the comprehensive coverage on ICS MENA 2024.





#KeyNote

Unlocking Innovation and Growth to E-commerce and Retail in the Middle East

Sebastian Shi

Chief Executive Officer
HUAWEI CLOUD UAE





Sebastian Shi, Chief Executive Officer of HUAWEI CLOUD UAE, delivered a keynote speech at the Internet Commerce Summit MENA 2024, focusing on the evolution and expansion of e-commerce and retail within the Middle East. During his speech, Shi highlighted the success stories of various major Chinese e-commerce platforms and discussed the future prospects of e-commerce growth. He further emphasized the importance of prioritising three essential components in online retail: people, goods and marketplace. Specifically, Shi discussed strategies for attracting and retaining users, effectively matching diverse products with a broad customer base, and ensuring a superior consumer experience that seamlessly integrates both online and offline interactions to sustain business growth.

Additionally, Shi detailed how HUAWEI CLOUD contributes to enhancing shopping experiences through advanced user profiling, precise product search and recommendations, agile support for large transactions with high-performance cloud services and real-time interaction facilitated by cutting-edge multimedia services. By leveraging over 30 years of Huawei's B2B experience and globally deployed cloud resources, HUAWEI CLOUD offers top-notch digital capabilities to e-commerce and retail customers.





#CrackingTheClickonomics

Experiences and Advice from Brand Leaders in Managing the E-commerce Business to Exponential Growth



(Front row L-R) Mahmoud Elfeky, Vikram Manjeshwar, Lin Chong Ran, Halima Jumani, Deborah Henning, Mukta Purain, Leena Khalil, Sanele Simmons II, Rajat Asthana (Top row L-R) Saeed Ghanem Al Suwaidi, Karl Nader, Ronny Froehlich and Anuvrat Gaurav



In the ever-evolving realm of digital commerce, the path to success is both intricate and dynamic. To navigate this landscape effectively, one can draw invaluable insights from those who have not only trodden the path but have also excelled in it. In our exclusive session on, "Digital Commerce Megaverse," at Internet Commerce Summit MENA we brought together distinguished brand leaders who have mastered the art of managing e-commerce businesses to achieve exponential growth to discuss the dynamics of doing business in this new era.

The conversation was stirred by **Karl Nader - Partner & Managing Director, AlixPartners** and the session had the presence of

- **Ronny Froehlich, Co-Founder, Golden Scent**
- **Halima Jumani, Chief Executive Officer, Kibsons E-commerce**
- **Saeed Alsuwaidi, Chief Executive Officer, Memoire Jewellery**
- **Mahmoud Elfeky, Associate Vice President Retail - The Middle East, LENSkart**
- **Rajat Asthana, Chief Operating Officer, EROS Group**
- **Mukta Purain, Founder, MissPalettable**
- **Deborah Henning, Founder & Creative Director, Deborah Henning**
- **Anuvrat Gaurav, Regional Country Director, SellAnyCar.com**
- **Lin Chong Ran, Solution Head of E-commerce and Retail, HUAWEI CLOUD**
- **Leena Khalil, Chief Executive Officer, Mumzworld**
- **Vikram Manjeshwar, Chief Executive Officer of E-commerce platforms, Ghassan Aboud Group**
- **Sanele Simmons II, Co-Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Mall For Women**

Here's a brief about the key aspects of discussion.

Leena Khalil, CEO, Mumzworld opened the discussion by talking about the changing customer journeys and how it is impacting business on a daily basis. It is important to track the evolution of the market in terms of customer expectations, also because at present the dynamics of the market is changing alongside the rising competition.

Halima Jumani, CEO, Kibsons E-commerce added that it is a see-saw ride at all times, when on the one side the retail ecosystem has to adjust with inflation, economic conditions and other such macro ideals, on the other hand they have to balance the customer expectations and not allow the cost to add on to their cart value. So, it is a constant trial and error to keep the balance going.

Vikram Manjeshwar, CEO of e-commerce platforms, Ghassan About Group immediately touched upon the factor of reliability and how the company is constantly trying new strategies to make the customer facing approaches more accessible. He assured that breaking their entire customer base into smaller pockets and then serving these smaller zones through separate teams helps create personalised appeal.

Mukta Purain, Founder, MissPalettable touched upon the factor of affordability and highlighted that the brand works on the concept of 'making clean beauty accessible'. In order to do this, they are always working towards curating the right mix of products and that helps build credibility and customer connect.

While the balancing act and building the right forward-looking approach is fine, **Deborah Henning, Founder & Creative Director, Deborah Henning** mentioned that one key aspects for an entrepreneur who is also a creator is a to balance the creation and their passion with the practicalities and commercial viability. It is important to strike a balance and create something that the market will respond to. And here the role of data for customer understanding comes to the forefront.



**LEENA
KHALIL**

Chief Executive Officer

mumzworld.com
#1 mother, baby & child site in the Middle East



**HALIMA
JUMANI**

Chief Executive Officer

KIBSONS
INTERNATIONAL



**VIKRAM
MANJESHWAR**

CEO E-commerce Platforms

GHASSAN ABOUT GROUP
غسان عابود جروب



**MUKTA
PURAIN**

Founder

MISSPALETTABLE

Saeed Alsuwaidi, CEO, Memoire Jewellery pointed out the challenges for the jewellery industry and how it is not an easy task to sell jewellery online and it requires a lot of special techniques to make it viable for the customer. He mentioned how creating a designer-led approach helped them differentiate and create the right product catalogue for the customer over the years.

Coming from the accessories category, **Mahmoud Elfeky, Associate Vice President Retail - The Middle East, LENSkart** too mentioned that technology plays a big role in making processes customer-centric and today Lenskart is employing the most advanced techniques like AR to help customers visualise the styles they are investing in before they actually go and buy.

Personalisation piggybacking on the potential of technology helps brands to create a differentiated approach and a product proposition that sets them apart from their competition.

Ronny Froehlich, Co-Founder, Golden Scent pointed out to a few metrics that they always consider and compare when choosing the right brands for their online platform. Operating with more than 20,000 SKUs requires them to always count in the conversion rates for brands in order to know what sells and what doesn't. While through the right campaigns and processes the brand promises to give prominence and visibility to the entire catalogue, but it is equally important to weigh in customer satisfaction to understand what to put under the spotlight as compared to the rest.

Rajat Asthana, COO, EROS Group highlighted the growing power of e-commerce and mentioned that the online business for the electronics industry stands at 18% of the total retail market share today in the Middle East as compared to 36% globally. Even though the pace of growth for electronics will not skyrocket online, given how strong the region is in terms of its brick-and-mortar retail arena, the idea of digital will always coexist and technology will help connect the dots between the two worlds of online & offline.



**DEBORAH
HENNING**

Founder & Creative Director

DEBORAH HENNING



**MAHMOUD
ELFEKY**

Associate Vice President Retail
The Middle East

 **lenskart**



**SAEED
GHANEM AL SUWAIDI**

Chief Executive Officer



**RONNY
FROEHLICH**

Co-founder

**GOLDEN
SCENT**



**RAJAT
ASTHANA**

Chief Operating Officer



**ANUVRAT
GAURAV**

Regional Country Director



**SANELE
SIMMONS II**

Co-founder & CEO



Anuvrat Gaurav, Regional Country Director, SellAnyCar.com underlined the trust factor in his conversation and mentioned that they simplify the process of selling used cars through the idea of trust and over the years they have been able to hold on to the customer expectations owing to delivering meticulously to keep up with the trust. This is what has today brought down the concept of selling cars into a under 30-minutes proposition as compared to before.

Sanele Simmons II, Co-Founder & CEO, Mall For Women explained that there is no one size fits all strategy when selling online. What starts with the customer understanding diversifies and gets more exhaustive with channel diversification. This is where a good technology framework helps to build the right approach. Moreover, it is also necessary to leverage social media platforms for active customer listening and understanding. This helps to sharpen the marketing tools and make approaches more customer ready.

Lin Chong Ran, Solution Head of E-commerce and Retail, HUAWEI CLOUD summed up the challenges and thoughts of the retail leaders by



**LIN
CHONG RAN**

Solution Head of E-commerce and Retail
HUAWEI CLOUD



highlighting that in order to successfully do business online, one needs the right partners and technology support and with data and privacy factors becoming a challenge everyday it is important



**KARL
NADER**

Partner & Managing Director



to get onboard the right team who understands government regulations and helps build the right approach towards customer understanding riding on data.





#ResearchPresentation

Delving into the Distinctiveness
of our Region's e-commerce
Landscape, while Casting
a Gaze into the Future of Retail

Akshay Jayaprakasan

Associate partner

redseer

In his research presentation at the Internet Commerce Summit highlighted how the MENA e-commerce market is one that showcases resilience and power, standing tall in the face of adversities. Delving into the distinctiveness of our region's e-commerce landscape, Jayaprakasan worked by presenting the right pointers to cast a gaze into the future of retail.

Jayaprakasan highlighted that the market in the UAE is unique and presents a very significant and distinct opportunity as compared to the global space. "Incidentally, when it comes to e-commerce, the global market is ruled by digital natives and they dominate the lion's share of the market, pushing its growth in every way. However, the GCC market is different and so is the UAE. Here the omnichannel businesses and the traditional players dominate the market alongside the digital firsts," he added.

Moreover, Jayaprakasan also mentioned that foodtech and travel e-commerce is facing maximum push from the consumers as compared to the other segments. Here convenience rules as the biggest fuel for growth. Moreover, the dynamics of customer acquisition has also changed and today brands not only acquire customers through their targeted marketing but also through social media. It is the democratisation of the e-commerce landscape that makes this region's e-commerce market unique and meaningful.

Customers today are spoilt for choice when it comes to e-commerce brands they want to shop from. They have multiple options to choose from and Jayaprakasan hinted that the difference between the top brand in any category and the median brand has only reduced over the years capturing that the ecosystem is becoming more a level playing field with each passing day.





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#ConversionChronicles

CMO's Conclave: Unveiling the Magic Behind E-commerce Success



(L-R) Rami Zahran, Miche Whitehouse, Wasim Ben Khadra, Nisham Chhabra and Shahid Ali

Shahid Ali - Principal, Consumer Industries and Retail Practice - Kearney took to the stage to stir a conversation around marketing, customer acquisition tools, data, new-age marketing technology and much more with **Rami Zahran, Group Chief Marketing & Communications Officer, Saudi German Health, Miche Whitehouse, Head of Brand and Digital, LUSH cosmetics, Nisham Chhabra, Vice President - Middle East & Africa, Netcore Cloud** and **Wasim Ben Khadra, Executive Director, Regional Head of Communications, Africa and Middle East, Standard Chartered Bank.**

The main point that Ali highlighted to lead the conversation is the evolving customer mentality and how across channels the idea of customer-centricity

is altering as well. He mentioned whether it is a traditional brand with significant online presence or the one with widespread omnichannel base or a digital-first native, the concept of customer is evolving and marketing for customers across touchpoints is also getting revived with time. So, how does one stay platform-ready with their approach today?

This is when Zahran mentioned that whether e-commerce or not, today all customer journeys begin online. It is a common notion to pick up the phone to check and search something. He elaborated that even though e-commerce isn't a strength for Saudi German, the company takes online very seriously and allows customers to transact and interact with them through their online channels.



**SHAHID
ALI**

Principal, Consumer Industries
& Retail Practice

KEARNEY

Whether a brand or company has a strong e-commerce presence or not, the idea of riding the online wave is prominent and must be worked on from a grassroots level in order to reach the right set of audience. Moreover, the challenge is to constantly stay platform agnostic and build strategies that are right for the platform.

Khadra commented that with a presence globally and with so much competition within the banking ecosystem, the idea of reaching to the customer cannot be uniform across all touchpoints. Rather, they have to streamline and make every market strategy adept to the customer needs of that specific market.

In order to venture into a new market or even relook the market strategies for an existing market, one needs to become more oriented with data, customer understanding and become ready to tread the marketing pathway by choosing to work with tools and techniques that are future ready.

Chhabra pointed out that choosing the right partner is key to growth and helps with building the right marketing approach. The teams of the brands and retailers in this case need to choose right and take a holistic approach from the ground level to the top, rather than doing it the other way round in order to get the best results. It is all about reorienting and calibrating the methods to make way for the right marketing strategies to shine bright.

However, Whitehouse pointed out a very important aspect and highlighted the concept of data to mention that when brands continue to analyse customer behaviour across multiple channels and adapt to multiple digital tools to tap customers online then the potential of data accumulation becomes an excess and too much of data flow needs to be tackled without disrupting the privacy. This is where LUSH stays away from new-age digital platforms and restricts these data movements. The brand plans all its customer interactions through traditional marketing approaches without tapping into massive data pool.



**MICHE
WHITEHOUSE**

Head of Brand and Digital

LUSH FRESH
HANDMADE
COSMETICS



**NISHAM
CHHABRA**

Vice President - MEA

Netcore



**RAMI
ZAHARAN**

Group Chief Marketing &
Communications Officer

السعودي الألماني الصحية
Saudi German Health
Caring like family نرعاكم كالأهلى



**WASIM
BEN KHADRA**

Executive Director, Regional Head of
Communications, Africa & Middle East

**standard
chartered**



#D2CDisruptionDiaries

The Channel of Choice



(L-R) Jonny Nixon, Aya Assaf, Ahmad Yousuf, Hassan Tamimi, Namrata Budhraj and Cynthia Makhoul

The GCC market has undergone significant transformation over the past couple of years and the D2C model has been at the forefront of this change witnessing significant traction.

"This shift has been propelled by several factors including high digital engagement. Coupled with shifts in consumer behaviour and a growing emphasis on personalisation new brands have launched leveraging the D2C model," observed session moderator **Cynthia Makhoul, Director, PwC Middle East.**

Talking about new brands entering the market, one critical element is to take a long-term strategic outlook towards scaling the business.

For instance, Minimalist that sells watches and accessories scaled to more than 50,000 customers across the Gulf region over the past seven years. Product has played a key role in their growth, shared **Chief Executive Officer, Ahmad Yousuf.** "Product is the absolute key when it comes to an online brand, and once you've got the fundamentals right, which is your product and service, I'd say you scale it up as much and as fast as possible."

Ensuring efficiency by having the right inventory levels, keeping a close eye on profit per order, having the cost of customer acquisition under check are also crucial factors for scaling a business.

"When we launched Shift Eco, offering sustainable products, it was

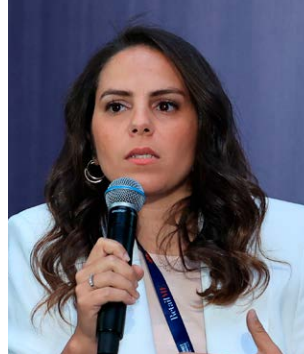
important to understand our target audience. As a startup, we had to keep a close eye on return on investments factoring in elements such as marketing spend, cost of customer acquisition keeping them as low as possible," shared **Co-founder, Namrata Budhraj.** "For instance, we realised quickly that our cost of acquiring new customers was extremely high because we are working in the UAE that already has a small population and our target audience is a niche cohort. So, we started looking at collaborations, and eventually we partnered with Etihad; now we are their green rewards partner. The B2B piece has really helped us to achieve scale. We've started acquiring customers in Saudi Arabia too, which is great."



**JONNY
NIXON**

Commercial Director

DRINK DRY



**AYA
ASSAF**

Co-founder



**AHMAD
YOUSUF**

Chief Executive Officer



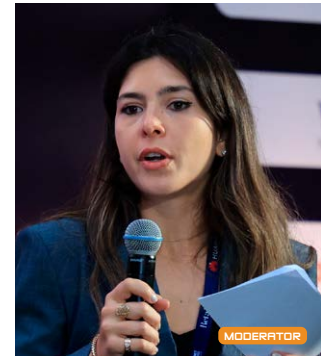
**HASSAN
TAMIMI**

Managing Director



**NAMRATA
BUDHRAJA**

Co-founder



**CYNTHIA
MAKHOUL**

Director



Adding on, **Hassan Tamimi, Managing Director, The Little Things** said, “Data is one of the greatest drivers in scaling up a business. Understanding and using data to our advantage is crucial to establish a good online and offline presence. In addition, loyalty plays a huge factor as well in gaining customer resonance, and across channels customers look for different things.”

At this point, taking a step back **Aya Assaf, Co-founder, Koala Picks** touched upon the various reasons why an entrepreneur chooses a certain

channel to begin with. “Startups often don’t have enough resources in the beginning to reach the masses, so we need to choose the channel where our core customers shop at. The reasons we took a D2C approach through our website, initially as the main selling point, was to stay close to our customers to get almost instant feedback from them on new launches to react quickly and pivot if needed. The second reason was to protect our margins to breakeven as fast as possible. Volume is also important so at a certain point we decided to balance our online presence

alongside being present on aggregator platforms and supermarkets.”

“While deciding on the channel of choice, we were focused on occasions given ours is a marketplace for non-alcoholic drinks,” added **Jonny Nixon, Commercial Director, Drink Dry LLC**. “We wanted to ensure hitting all the touchpoints that people would look for in our category. We almost worked backwards. We saw the demand coming from B2B and HORECA channels and revolutionised that space with retail following suit. The omnichannel approach has worked well for us.”





#FutureThatClicks

The Ever-Evolving Retail Landscape



(L-R) Priyanka Sengar, Neha Samuel, Shamim Kassibawi, Anastasia Kim, Anuvrat Gaurav and Othmane Saifaoui

From innovative platforms to cutting-edge strategies, several trends and advancements are shaping the future of online retail.

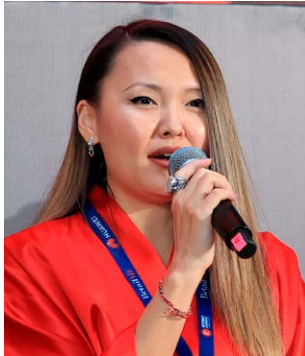
How are customers' e-commerce preferences evolving and how are businesses leveraging technology to address these changes to create a point of differentiation and stay ahead of market trends, asked session moderator **Anuvrat Gaurav, Regional Country Director, SellAnyCar.com.**

"The urge to rent versus own is a big change in customer preference that led to the launch of our furniture rental platform called MAKAN," responded **Co-founder Othmane Saifaoui.** "Technology pieces such as analytics and screening

tools are essential for our business to screen potential clients as well as follow the inventory through the entire lifetime at the client site and our warehouse."

"Technology has not just empowered but changed the landscape of every industry and fitness is no different," added **Neha Samuel, Co-founder and Chief Operating Officer, Fitze.ae,** an app that rewards people for their fitness efforts. "From 2015 when we started offering fitness & wellness services for corporates until Covid we did all activities in-person. Post-Covid 80% of our corporates use our services online, which has also increased our geographical reach. Moreover, 200,000 users have embraced our app."

At this point, Gaurav posed a question to **Priyanka Sengar, Chief Executive Officer, Women First Jobs,** an impact-based women-only talent platform about the importance of inclusivity and diversity in today's business landscape and unique strategies to empower women across industries. "The name itself, Women First Jobs, is great branding. Our idea is to create awareness about DEI among job seekers and recruiters. Our platform is diversified and user friendly to register following which our team facilitates the matchmaking process based on talent, interest and opportunities available," Sengar explained.



**ANASTASIA
KIM**

Chief Executive Officer



**SHAMIM
KASSIBAWI**

Founder



**NEHA
SAMUEL**

Co-founder & Chief Operating Officer



**PRIYANKA
SENGAR**

Chief Executive Officer



**OTHMANE
SAIFAUI**

Co-founder



**ANUVRAT
GAURAV**

Regional Country Director



Another matchmaking platform is Play:Date, an app that helps parents to build their child's social circle based on interests. Highlighting the importance of user feedback **Founder Shamim Kassibawi** said, "When I launched Play:Date, not only was I not a mother, I was single, so I had no idea about parenting or what it's like to run a family. What I knew is that we are the generation of creating relationships online and I wanted to be an early mover. Initially Play:Date was meant to be a child-to-child kind of app run by parents. But we learnt a lot from feedback from parents and switched up

the whole interface, structure of the app, messaging and built it to be a family-to-family app."

So, what kind of innovative strategies are e-commerce platforms implementing to survive in a highly competitive landscape, Gaurav asked.

Anastasia Kim, Chief Executive Officer of B2C platform WEE

Marketplace said, "Our strategy has been a razor-sharp focus on customers, almost 70% being women. We also ramped up supply chain to fulfil 100,000 orders per day, ensuring fast and predictable delivery within one hour by building partnership with logistics providers and

100-plus sellers. Needless to mention that technology will help us to rapidly scale up in markets including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, the Philippines and so on. In addition, we have a great team supporting our growth."

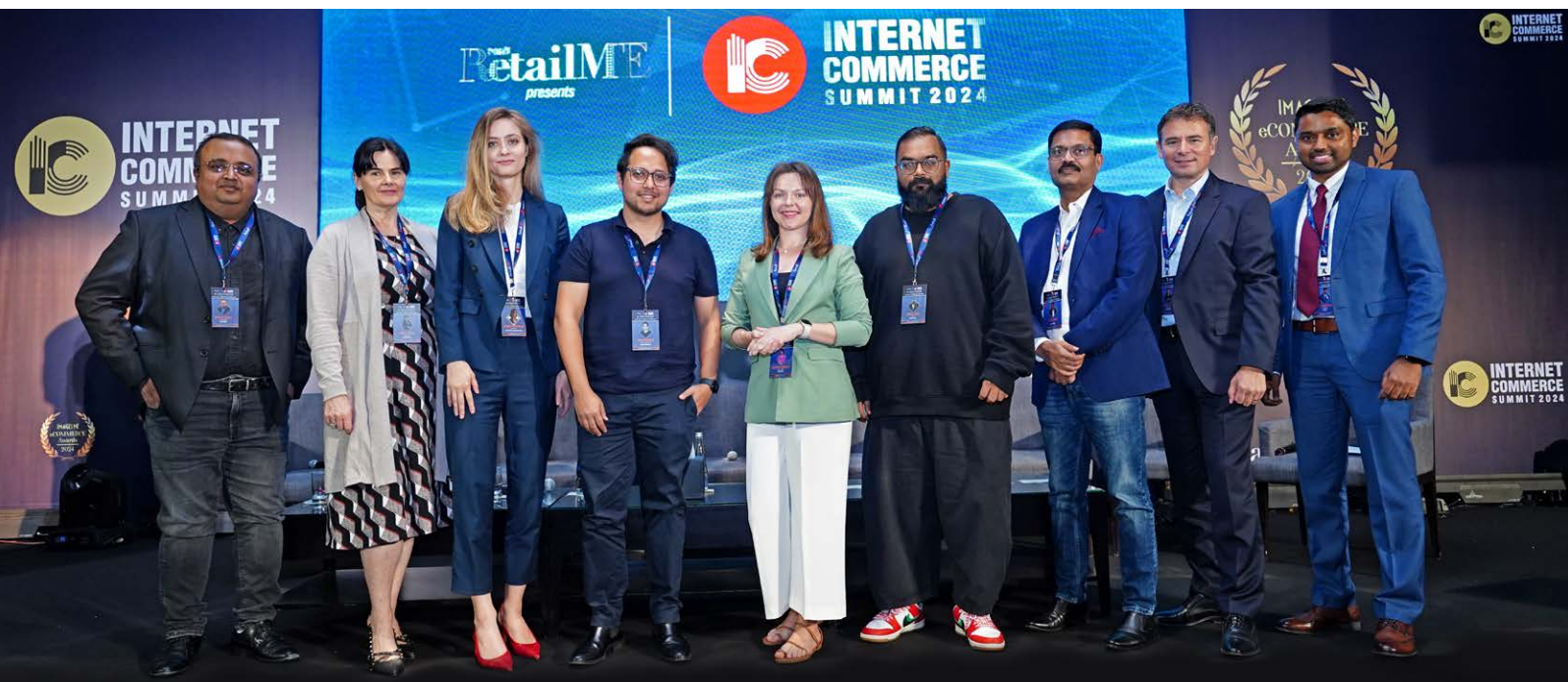
In summation, raising a pertinent question, Gaurav asked, in terms of technology, what will be the opportunities and challenges in the next few years?

In terms of opportunities for, AI will enable brands to keep up with evolving customer demands. While data privacy is adding a layer of complexity, Saifaoui responded.



#TouchScreenToTouchpoint

Bridging the Gap Between Online and Offline



(L-R) Kartik Bhatt, Pamela Opie, Daria Prodaevich, Ajay Prakash, Ekaterina Borodich, Karan Shah, Sunil Nair, Udo Rauch and Akshay Jayaprakasan

From browsing to buying, how are brands creating delightful experiences? How are retailers from diverse categories offering personalised experiences to their consumers – that was the focus of this session moderated by **Akshay Jayaprakasan, Associate Partner, Redseer.**

For Linen Obsession creating a phygital presence was crucial, shared **Chief Executive Officer & Founder Pamela Opie.** “In our business we see customers navigating across channels. Sometimes even if they reach us online, they are keen to know more about the product, preferring to go through an assisted selling process. It could start with receiving a customer query on WhatsApp based on which our staff create personalised recommendations. The customer can then complete the purchase either online through our e-commerce site or offline at our standalone store or with one of our retail partners.”

In the realm of electronics where the customer journey actually begins offline and often culminates into a transaction online, the seamlessness of online-offline

services becomes a key differentiator, stated **Kartik Bhatt, Chief Digital Officer, Sony (MECL).** “For example, PlayStation is one of the most successful products in the Sony Arsenal, for which the average transaction time is 3.5-4-weeks, from experience, price comparison to purchase. What happens afterwards is that the customer realises the need for a controller, mouse card, razor wheel, charger and software around it. Therein the seamlessness is of essence in the electronics universe.”

Moving to F&B, digital-first coffee shop **Drinkit Dubai’s Chief Executive Officer, Ekaterina Borodich** emphasised on the importance of making the digital experience even more convenient versus offline to ensure resonance with consumers.

Sharing an interesting perspective, **Ajay Prakash, Head of Online and Product for Lenskart Middle East** said, “We not only have a virtual try-on feature with multiple functionalities online, since not all customers shop alone, we also have community services where the customer can add their friends and invite them to shop along.”



**AKSHAY
JAYAPRAKASAN**

Associate Partner

redseer



**PAMELA
OPIE**

Chief Executive Officer & Founder



**DARIA
PRODAEVICH**

Managing Director



**AJAY
PRAKASH**

Head of Online and Product



**EKATERINA
BORODICH**

Chief Executive Officer



**KARAN
SHAH**

Co-founder



**SUNIL
NAIR**

Chief Technology & Information Officer



**UDO
RAUCH**

Managing Director



**KARTIK
BHATT**

Chief Digital Officer



Staying with fashion & lifestyle **Karan Shah, Co-founder, Hypeselection** that sells sneakers and streetwear spoke about the importance of leveraging technology to differentiate authentic from fake goods and stressed on the importance of analysing customer data to identify purchase patterns.

At this point, Jayaprakasan opined, "Despite living in the world of data, research indicates that only 10% of the data that's collected is actually used."

"We are capturing a lot of data and not only from the customer but also

from our back end. However, in a market like ours where customer dynamics are changing rapidly, analysing data and taking actions based on that data is a complex process," admitted **Sunil Nair, CTIO, Cenomi Retail**.

From products to experience, having invested in interesting and immersive exhibitions and events, **Daria Prodaevich, Managing Director, Dubai's Theater of Digital Art** shared how their content is resonating with visitors. "As the first digital art space in the UAE we showcase immersive and

technologically enhanced art. We also organise immersive concerts, wellness and dining experiences, blending them with digital art creating something for every visitor based on their interests and mood. In addition, we've a great lineup of classical contemporary music and soon we will launch an immersive Suhoor experience during Ramadan complemented by Arabic music and art."

"At the end of the day, it's all about knowing and investing in the right technology to deliver on customer expectations," **Udo Rauch, Managing Director, fulfillmenttools** concluded.





#FutureFinanceFrontiers

Digital Transactions of Tomorrow



(L-R) Javed Akberali, Rahul Matiwadekar, Lito German, Ian Hooper, Luis Jardim and Brad Whittfield

Moderators **Ian Hooper**, **Partner Payments Leader, Global Banking Expert, PwC & Luis Jardim**, **Senior Manager, Payments, PwC Middle East** opened the conversation on 'Digital Transactions of Tomorrow' by highlighting how the power of e-commerce and digital channels are opening up avenues of growth for financial and insurance companies.

Moreover, **Javed Akberali**, **Co-founder & Managing Director, WELLX** pointed out that it is no more about reinventing e-commerce keeping in line with the rising and evolving customer expectations but all about

creating something new, inventing a new paradigm.

Rahul Matiwadekar, **Chief Product Officer, Insurancemarket.ae** added that adapting to the right payment channels and methods helped them grow their reach and make the platform available to a wider audience.

The future is all about digital transactions and **Brad Whittfield**, **Co-Founder and Chairman of Cashee** mentioned that to keep it GenZ and youth-centric they had to plan on a strong banking model that is accessible in a click and now they are looking at extending this model to traditional banking and that's where the success will lie.

Lito German, **Chief Executive Officer, BayaDIRECT Payments**

presented a different side of reality here and highlighted that he and his team is working with the 'left-behinds'. While one side of economy is highly tech savvy and always ready to click their way through every transaction, there is also a large population of immigrants who do not even happen to have a proper bank account. This is where BayaDIRECT comes into the picture to make it seamless for them and takes their cash to pay their dues and bills digitally. German's team is the touchpoint that is helping this population gain more digital foothold.



LITO GERMAN

Chief Executive Officer



BRAD WHITFIELD

Co-founder & Chairman



RAHUL MATIWADKAR

Chief Product Officer



JAVED AKBERALI

Co-founder & Managing Director



IAN HOOPER

Partner, Payments Leader, Global Banking Expert



LUIS JARDIM

Senior Manager, Payments



Both Akberali and Matiwadekar agree that insurance is more a grudge purchase, and consumers end up buying insurance because it is mandatory. So, it is important to make the buying and claim experience more frugal, easy and fun as possible. It is all about listening to the consumer about their needs and then allowing for the best experiences to take the centrestage. Be it helping them split their payments through an EMI plan or allowing them to claim a

discount by making them play a small game, it is all about making the customer happy with their purchase journey in a seamless way.

Incentivising the process of acquiring an insurance and gamifying the process helps the experts attract the right customers and it builds long term connect as well with the customers. It is all about making the customer responsible for their actions without having to give them lectures

or scary anecdotes. The new wave of e-commerce is all about making the process more attractive and consumer-friendly instead of being daunting.

This session thus highlighted how the Fintech & BFSI leaders are rewriting the playbook for modern digital insurance, banking and financial innovations and at the same time inventing new ways of new customer acquisition, retention and engagement.





#FiresideChat

Delivering the Perfect Omnichannel Recipe for QSR Brands



(L-R) Syed Zeeshan Ali, Vivek Gupta and Kunal Badiani

During a Fireside Chat by Moengage **Kunal Badiani**, **Regional VP - Growth & Strategy, MoEngage** in conversation with **Syed Zeeshan Ali**, **Regional Technology Lead - Middle East, Pakistan, Turkey, Africa and Germany. (MEP and TAG), Yum! Brands** and **Vivek Gupta**, **Director of Digital, MENA, Pak, CIS, Turk, Yum! Brands** discussed all about 'Delivering the perfect omnichannel recipe for QSR brands.'

The question that Badiani posed to Ali and Gupta is how they keep abreast with their omnichannel strategies in the face of rising customer expectations. That's when both agreed that whether it is KFC or Pizza Hut, the idea of QSR is all about visibility, putting forward the right offer and practices across channels and then ensuring a seamless customer experience whether offline or online.

They all agreed that channel strategies may change, but the approach

to customer-centricity will not change and it is all about understanding the business necessity and customer's point of view to ensure that the right technology implementation is made possible to back the channel strategies.

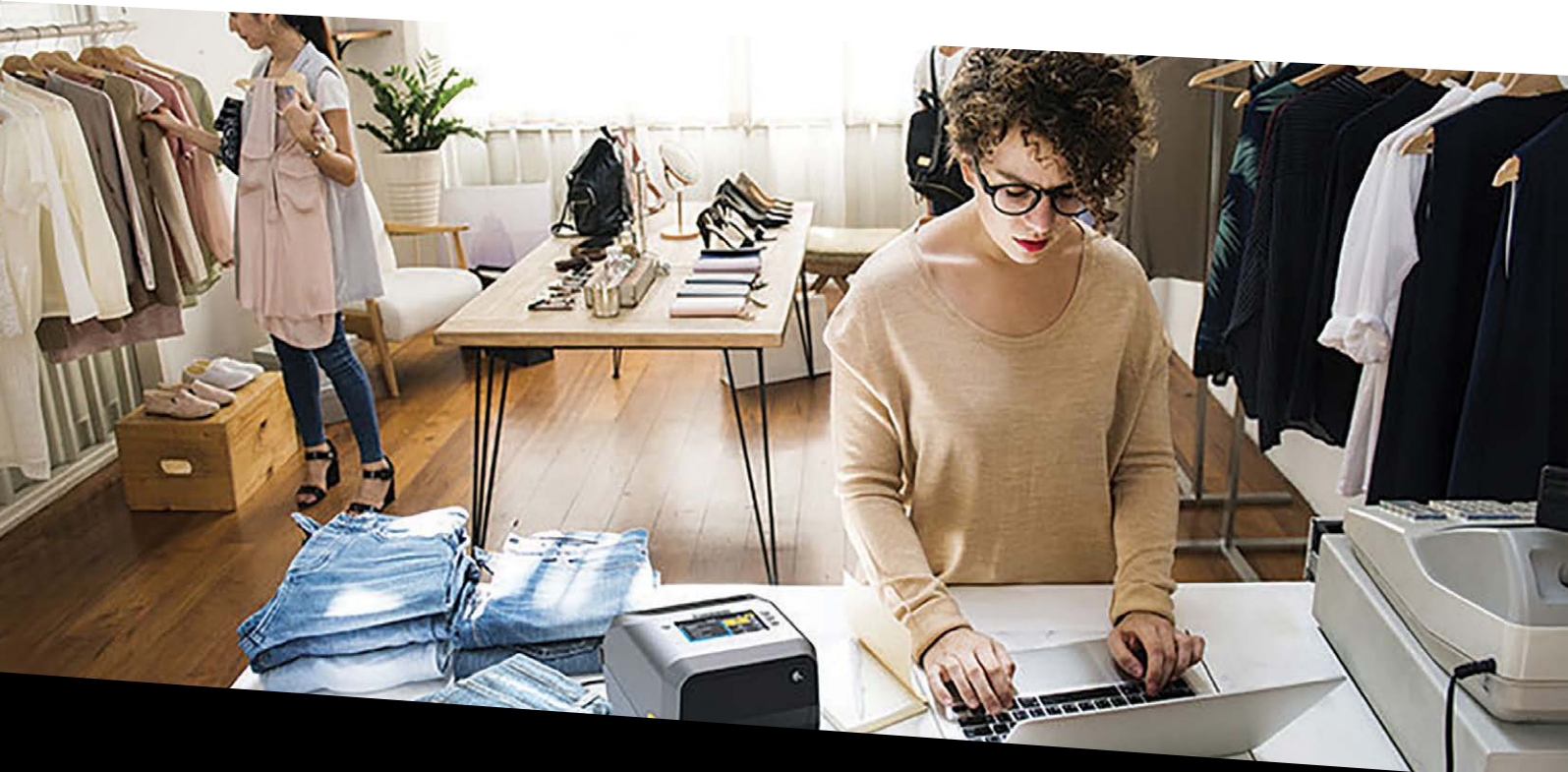
In the context of AI, data protection emerged as a significant concern. To maintain brand trust and safeguard data, brands need to transparently operate with technology and use the data for insights and to personalise for the customers.





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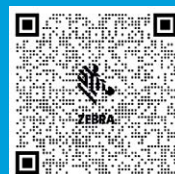


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#FromAislesToApps

Journey Beyond the Shelf



(L-R) Justine Dampt, Baris Akdeveliglu, Sahar Karoubi, Bashar Al Mousa and Nader Amiri

With the ongoing tech heaviness across industries, including FMCG, and significant tech-oriented investments being made, it's an exciting juncture to discuss how brands are navigating through their journey beyond the brick-and-mortar retail shelves.

Over the past few years, especially since the pandemic, the role of e-commerce for FMCG brands has changed a lot, observed session moderator **Nader Amiri, Partner, Homegrown**. So, what role does e-commerce play for businesses of different sizes, he asked.

"Our brand has been built on the D2C model; I like to call it Direct-to-Community as opposed to Customer," stated **Justine Dampt, Co-founder & Chief Executive Officer, Shake Your Plants**. "We're in the business of acquiring and retaining customers online. Almost 70% of our sales in the

UAE and the UK come from the website. So, building and engaging with our community online is of essence, while expanding our presence offline by participating in events."

"I think without e-commerce, especially for D2C brands, it becomes hard to penetrate the retail market," Amiri opined. "Often, the challenge is not to be on a shelf but to move products from the shelves. For that, a strong resonance among the community is crucial," Dampt added.

As a bootstrapped startup Bambuyu.com also launched as a D2C brand initially. "It allowed us to launch with a single product – for the first nine months we only sold toilet paper – and that's difficult to do in an offline retail environment," shared **Founder Sahar Karoubi**. "The D2C model allowed us to engage with our customers, understand potential SKUs to be launched and how we can build it up. After the first six months of operating through our D2C platform we started developing our presence on marketplaces such as Amazon and Kibsons."



**NADER
AMIRI**

Partner



While building a community is crucial for startups where D2C plays a big role, what's the role of e-commerce for large players, Amiri asked.

"It's a growth driver for us too," responded **Baris Akdevelioglu**, **E-commerce Manager ME, Pepsico**.

"E-commerce generates awareness and double-digit revenue for us. It's a channel that drives repeat purchases and at the same time helps us to run trials and innovate."

The role of e-commerce has evolved significantly in the past few years at Fine Hygienic Holding too, shared **Bashar Al Mousa**, **Global Director of E-commerce**. "It's no longer a channel for online sales only. It's one of the channels that helps us to enable a holistic, omnichannel experience and indirectly improve offline sales. Moreover, the e-commerce channel has more capabilities when it comes to understanding the consumer journey and influence decision making for the overall strategy of the company, especially when we're launching new products. E-commerce was a small channel for us that now accounts for double-digit percentage of our total sales."

At this point Amiri asked the best way to build an e-commerce presence.

"Whatever acquisition cost you've planned for, triple it, and don't give up on offline activation which has the potential to drive organic growth online," Dampt recommended.

"The brand story is important," Karoubi added. "Customers are not just buying a product; they're also buying into our mission to improve the environment with our tissues made from bamboo."

PepsiCo has very strong muscles in terms of go-to-market offline. How challenging is that to translate it online, Amiri asked.

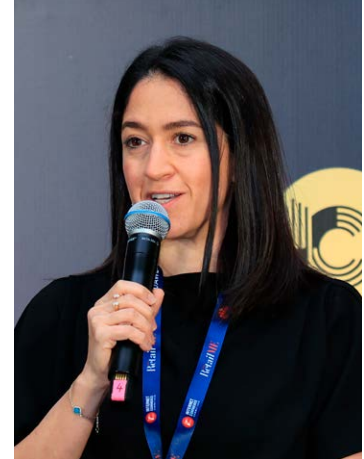
"It's quite challenging," Akdevelioglu admitted. "Offline, we've a huge aisle which we share mainly with another company. Online, we don't own an entire aisle, we are competing on to be on the top."

Summarising how e-commerce has evolved, Al Mousa said, "There was no playbook for us when we started our e-commerce business. Everything was a learning curve, and since then we've been on a 'fix the fundamentals' journey."



**BARIS
AKDEVELIOGLU**

E-commerce Manager ME



**SAHAR
KAROUBI**

Founder

BAMBUYU



**JUSTINE
DAMPT**

Co-founder & Chief Executive Officer

SYP



**BASHAR
AL MOUSA**

Global Director of E-Commerce





#PaceMeetsGrace

Integrating Human Touch with Technology



(L-R) Mazen Kanaan, Vidisha Badwal, Tushar Fotedar, Marcus Sutton and Ketaki Shah

The art of integrating technology with human touch in the hospitality and food & beverage (F&B) industry was the central focus of discussion, steered by session moderator **Ketaki Shah, Head of Marketing, Citymax Hotels & Foodmark.**

In her opening comments Shah observed, as the industry continues to evolve rapidly, customers now have access to both traditional services and tech-enabled experiences, so how can both be integrated in a manner that's relevant for the business and the customer.

There was a time when traditional service meant picking up the phone and talking to the guest to understand their requirements. Now, automated messages are played. Orders are taken on a device versus paper. Tech-enabled aggregators such as Deliveroo and Talabat are taking the market by storm. Technology is all pervading.

It's all automated even in the F&B and hospitality industries, which is only going to get more advanced with time, opined **Vidisha Badwal, Owner, Paprika Gourmet.** "Therein, maintaining a balance between technology with human touch is crucial."

As a predominately brick-and-mortar business, technology has been a "gamechanger" for Mister Baker, a three-decade old UAE-based cake shop. Around eight-nine years ago the company's first e-commerce platform accounted for 2-3% of the topline, which is "significantly" higher now. "But technology has its caveats," pointed out **Tushar Fotedar, Director, Mister Baker.** "As a business that's into customised products like cakes for celebrations which require a certain degree of emotional intelligence, relationship building is at the core of what we do. So, I think for a holistic experience, businesses must leverage relevant tech tools while excelling at offering the human touch."



**MAZEN
KANAN**

Co-founder and CEO



"We're at an interesting stage, specifically within the hospitality sector – which includes hotel rooms, restaurants, cafés, spa and other elements – wherein technology can never replace the personal touch. It enables us to do our jobs better by becoming more efficient at managing costs, curating a better and personalised guest experience and engaging with them meaningfully," said **Marcus Sutton**, **General Manager, Zabeel House by Jumeirah, The Greens**.

"While technology has enabled speed and convenience, where we want to draw the line is based on our business. For example, human interaction plays a key role in our business, since our brand DNA is built around the values of consuming natural and healthy products. I can't imagine having a robot serving our ice-creams. That's why it's important to understand one's brand positioning, consumer expectations and wisely leverage technology to fix the gaps to ensure efficiency while not taking away from our unique selling proposition," shared **Mazen Kanaan**, **CEO & Co-founder, House of Pops**.

"Technology keeps evolving, the way we use it also evolves, especially within the hospitality industry where human touch is so key. It's all about finding a balance between utilisation of technology and keeping that personal touch intact," he added.

While in hospitality and F&B sectors service is an emotion, as Shah agreed, anyone who thinks that data and technology will not impact their business will likely be left behind, Sutton observed.

Overall, the F&B and hospitality industries have embraced technology in several ways from enhancements in the point-of-sale systems to curating highly personalised experiences. Now with middleware coming into the picture, the delivery process has become more seamless too. Even though the customers don't see it, it impacts the customer journey, owing to less human errors and faster delivery, Shah concluded.



**VIDISHA
BATHWAL**

Founder



**MARCUS
SUTTON**

General Manager

ZABEEL HOUSE
THE GREENS | DUBAI
by Jumeirah™



**TUSHAR
FOTEDAR**

Director



**KETAKI
SHAH**

Head of Marketing





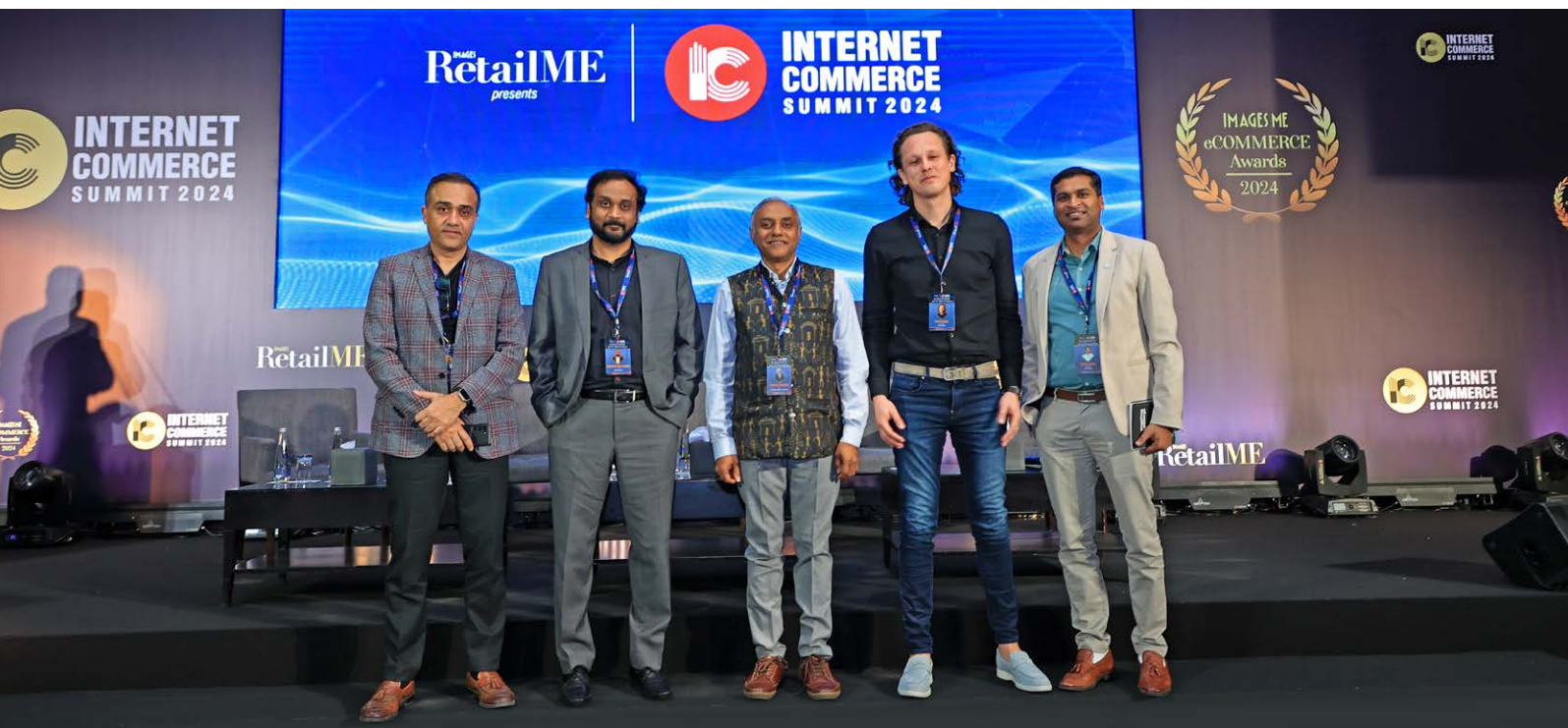
#MakingCXSeamless

Is Tech an Enabler or a Limitation?

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GreenHonchos



(L-R) Gaurav Mahajan, Santhosh John Thomas, Piyush Chowhan, Niels Floors and Navin Joshua

In today's interconnected retail landscape, providing a seamless and personalised customer experience (CX) across multiple channels is paramount for brand success – a topic that the CX Conclave (powered by GreenHonchos) tackled.

In his opening comments, session moderator **Navin Joshua, Founder/Director, GreenHonchos** stated, "Many a times when we think about CX, we tend to focus on the front end. However, unification of the back end and the front end is what delivers great CX."

Starting with a back-end perspective, **Niels Floors, Vice President, Channel Engine** said, "We look at external, third-party sales channels such as marketplaces, social commerce and more, which are part of the CX journey as brands are expected to be on all these channels. With automation we support businesses to manage these channels without much modification of their existing systems."

The idea is to help businesses adapt to evolving channels as quickly as possible and without hefty investments.

Today brands face a dilemma that's rooted in the key question around how to operate in a world where digital, social and brick-and-mortar channels must work seamlessly, added **Gaurav Mahajan, Chief Executive Officer – Lifestyle, Landmark Group**. "In a world where consumers are seamless, the dilemma is to maintain a single brand identity and integrity across channels even though the playbook on how commerce happens on online channels is a bit different from brick-and-mortar. For instance, while going on to a marketplace, a brand must account for dynamic discounting and range width that's slightly different for brick-and-mortar. Having said that, many brands are bridging that chasm successfully."



**NAVIN
JOSHUA**

Founder/Director

GreenHonchos

Certain categories versus others are more adept at creating an omnichannel experience driven by multiple factors, Joshua observed bringing in interesting perspectives from the beverage industry.

"Although I'm a big proponent of omnichannel, it's a long way off in our case due to regulations in this part of the world," agreed **Santhosh John Thomas, CIO, African+Eastern**. "We're seeing exponential growth in brick-and-mortar unlike e-commerce. The reason being when a customer buys alcoholic beverages, they are keen to understand tasting notes and so on wherein face-to-face conversations is key. But once that choice is made, it's all about convenience of getting the items delivered and therein online plays a crucial role."

At this point, **Piyush Chowhan, CIO, Panda Retail Company – Savola Group** shared his thoughts from the food & grocery category. "Brands from specialty retail, wellness, lifestyle and other categories tend to have a focused view based on customer needs.

Experimenting within that focused parameter is easier compared to food & grocery, a category where online penetration is lowest versus several other categories. In food & grocery we have to handle 10 transactions with 10 items that are 10 times more complex to serve the basic needs of the customer. The challenge is to offer the same level of CX to our customers as they are used to across other categories. Our space is evolving, convergence of channels is happening and eventually we will reach a sweet spot when it comes to delivery timelines as well."

But doing things at scale requires a very different perspective from a CX design perspective, Chowhan continued. "Brands have to start with omnichannel as the core principle. Marrying the online and offline channels with integrations trying to mix and match doesn't really work and that's where the whole CX piece might fall flat. The right approach is to work ground up to create delightful CX following an omnichannel path."



PIYUSH CHOWHAN

Chief Information Officer



GAURAV MAHAJAN

Chief Executive Officer Lifestyle



NIELS FLOORS

Vice President



SANTHOSH JOHN THOMAS

Chief Information Officer





#ClickToChic

Decoding Lifestyle E-commerce



(L-R) K Ram Sudhirr, Deepika Tilak, Aditi Gautam, Abdullah Tariq, Vladimir Radojevic, Deepthi Chandran Joyau and Anurima Das

At a time when the digital economy is witnessing consistent growth and online shopping is getting more sophisticated, what will shape the future of lifestyle e-commerce – that's what this session focused on.

Kickstarting the conversation, **Anurima Das, Executive Editor, IMAGES RetailME** asked about the unique selling proposition that makes the panellists stand out.

"We bring unique products into the Gulf region, and we take local brands from the region to rest of the world, aiming to eventually become a global platform of choice for sustainable fashion and lifestyle products," responded **Deepthi Chandran Joyau, Founder, Only Ethikal**.

Staying with sustainability, for UAE-based homegrown omnichannel brand JumeirahRoad.com curating handmade,

upcycled and sustainable products and designs is their USP, said **Founder Deepika Tilak**.

Taking into account customer preferences in terms of style and budget to deliver personalised outfits for men and women is the USP of DRESOS.

"Currently, we're focused on leveraging AI for the platform to scale our business and eventually offer an outfit almost instantly based on customer preferences accessed through data they share with us," shared **Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer Vladimir Radojevic**.

"Our USP is centred around minimalism and simplicity of our product. It's a universal product that aligns with any personality, home and any kind of aesthetics," added **Abdullah Tariq, Founder & Chief Executive Officer** of affordable luxury fragrance brand **Colish**.

Another brand that excels in innovative use of tech within the athleisure category is Zaecy. "We use smart textiles to manage moisture and UPF materials to enhance performance," explained **Head of E-commerce, Aditi Gautam**.

"Our USP lies in our first mover advantage as our company was established in India 12 years ago when e-commerce in its current form didn't even exist," stated **K Ram Sudhirr, Director – Acquisitions & Growth (GCC Countries) India Enterprises, GreenHonchos**. "Over the years as the e-commerce wave happened, we grew exponentially in India offering brands one-stop solution for all their tech-based requirements."

At this point, Das steered the discussion towards building a brand for tomorrow focused on personalisation with a customer centric approach.



K RAM SUDHIRR

Director - Acquisitions & Growth
(GCC Countries) India Enterprises



ADITI GAUTAM

Head of E-Commerce



VLADIMIR RADOJEVIC

Co-Founder & CEO



DEEPIKA TILAK

Founder



ABDULLAH TARIQ

Founder & CEO

COLISH



DEEPTHI CHANDRAN JOYAU

Founder



ANURIMA DAS

Executive Editor

RetailME

A McKinsey study indicates that 71% of consumers expect personalisation when they shop online and 67% of consumers expect to see relevant products. Yet, e-commerce players often fail to offer that level of personalisation.

Explaining DRESSOS approach to personalisation, Radojevic said, "To enable a really personalised approach we gather two types of data – zero party data from our customers in the form of quiz to understand their preferences. Then we pair that with product data on size, colour, price, brand to deliver a personalised outfit experience which increases the average order value and basket size of each order and improves retention."

Talking about customer retention Joyau said, "When we started the business in 2019, we had to spend a lot on customer acquisition to build awareness, explaining and educating them about our products, processes and pricing. This exercise improved our customer experience having a direct correlation with customer retention."

Moving over to how technology helps to build the right product fit, Gautam said, "Prioritising customer focused products, having a highly efficient supply chain along with innovation and agility help us to keep up with trends and minimise our inventory risk. While technology plays a significant role in our product development from smart textiles."

On the other hand, for a slow fashion brand like JumeirahRoad.com, curation and storytelling are crucial, Tilak pointed out.

Sharing a challenge, Tariq said, "The biggest challenge for any fragrance brand is to sell without smelling. So, we focus on making the buying process as simple as possible offering depth of information about the fragrance, coupled with customer interaction touchpoints while also leveraging the power of influencers to build resonance with the community."

In a constantly evolving retail landscape with rapidly changing customer preferences its crucial to keep it relevant and simple for the customer, Sudhirr concluded.



#UnifiedUniverseUnraveled

The Art of Seamless Retail



(L-R) Sundeep Khanna, Marc Jeffrey, Jonathan Flender, Bappaditya Banerjee, Eshan Walia, Tayfun Topkoç, Sédat Firat and Aurelien Cuellar

With the blurring of the lines between online and offline, consumers expect a unified and immersive experience across channels. What are brands doing to meet these changing customer expectations?

Over 55% of customers in the Middle East understand omnichannel and prefer to shop from retailers who offer an omnichannel experience, shared **Sundeep Khanna, Partner, Deloitte** setting the stage for the panel discussion that he steered.

“For many years channels worked in silo and then came omnichannel, wherein we must ensure having full visibility of (mainly) inventory at the warehouse, distribution centre or the store. Whatever the channel, its crucial for brands to be unified offering customers the same experience across channels, while also accessing and leveraging customer data judiciously to take strategic decisions driven by that data,” opined **Aurelien Cuellar, Director Technology & Omnichannel, Chalhoub Group**.

Enabling organisations to create omnichannel experiences, **Tayfun Topkoç, EVP, Global Growth, Akinon** agreed that it’s not so much about the channel but more about unifying these channels to create a seamless experience for the customer. “As a unified commerce provider our job is to integrate front end channels with the back-end systems seamlessly creating a single platform for our customer and a seamless experience for the end user – from browsing to buying to fulfilment.”

A recent study from Tabby indicates that 55% of the purchase decisions are based on the product, shared **Jonathan Flender, Vice President – Digital & Omni, GMG**. “The rest is the experience. So, considering reduced attention span, seamless is the absence of friction and frustration and the ability to offer the fastest path to purchase. With the retail universe flooded with products, services and ads, starting with the ‘why’ is pivotal while creating a seamless experience, which should come from a deep place of trying to solve a problem for the customer.”

Switching fashion collections every 45 days, supply chain and planning are critical components for Sharaf Retail, shared **Head of Digital Transformation, Eshan Walia**. “Doing the planning at the right time and getting the right kind of data is important. At the same time, processing that data and converting it into right information is also important.” Using Generative AI and new assistive technologies, Sharaf Retail is upgrading its applications at the back end to offer customers a seamless experience across channels.

Staying with supply chain, **Sédat Firat, Chief Digital Officer, Flormar** said, “We have e-commerce presence in 40 countries, physical stores in 70-plus countries with wholesale presence across 100,000 points. Supply chain, thus, plays an enormous role. If I had to highlight a tech piece that enhances the omnichannel shopping journey its digital shelf availability online, on marketplaces and across wholesale touchpoints, and interestingly, the journey starts at brick-and-mortar.”



AURELIEN CUELLAR

Director Technology & Omnichannel



JONATHAN FLENDER

Vice President - Digital & Omni



ESHAN WALIA

Head of Digital Transformation



BAPPADITYA BANERJEE

Director of Technology



MARC JEFFREY

Chief Technology Officer



TAYFUN TOPKOÇ

EVP - Global Growth



SÉDAT FIRAT

Chief Digital Officer



SUNDEEP KHANNA

Partner



Highlighting the importance of inventory visibility and accuracy to enable shopping journeys, **Bappaditya Banerjee, Director of Technology, Brands For Less** added, "Being an off-price retailer, we focus on width over depth. Our customers purchase in bulk based on deals. Hence, inventory is crucial for us, and we are moving towards a single view of inventory to create a common pool for the offline and online space. We are in the process of

implementing a more robust order management system and a more modern warehouse management system to enable a single view of inventory. We've also implemented an RFID enabled checkout process for 90% of products in stores."

From data, inventory and supply chain to social commerce, a market that's estimated to touch \$2.9 trillion globally. A good example is a UAE-based

homegrown brand which has built a strong brand resonance. The Giving Movement has successfully created "a desire" among consumers to buy from the brand. "We've done a really good job online by creating discovery touchpoints across social platforms," stated **Marc Jeffrey, CTO, The Giving Movement**. "Last year, we realised that online can't be our only channel and we opened a physical touchpoint offering a unified shopping experience."





#ClockworkConvenience

From Order to Delivery



(L-R) Rehana Raj, Max Avtukhov, Malini Ohri, Minal Siyal, Vishal Kapil, Alfred James, Mayank Srivastava and Darine El Sabbagh

Timely delivery plays a pivotal role in enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. How can brands optimise the ordering process, manage inventory effectively, leverage technology for real-time tracking and transparently communicate delivery timelines with customers?

"I think we're talking about the most forgotten, yet crucial, aspect of e-commerce, and the hardest part too – which is delivery," stated session moderator **Darine El Sabbagh, Managing Director, Golden Scent** setting the context for the panel discussion.

"Ordering is easy. Fulfilling the order is difficult and a large part of what constitutes good customer experience and net promoter scores are hidden there," stated **Vishal Kapil, Group CIO, GMG**.

To kickstart the conversation, El Sabbagh asked for a fad going around in the industry.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is real, and AI is a fad, Kapil said. "We need to know what problem we're trying to solve to stay focused."

"A lot of debate is happening around AI, and I think wider adoption will take time," opined **Alfred James, Deputy General Manager – Group E-commerce, Lulu Group International**.

On the other hand, **Mayank Srivastava, Head of Business Development – MEA, Kaleyra** feels AI is changing lives. "We're seeing good results by leveraging AI in our business."

"Machine learning and deep algorithms of operating with huge quantities of data are eased with the use of AI. In our business it accounts for 20-30% of top line. However, Generative AI is yet to prove its application in terms of unit economics," shared **Max Avtukhov, Chief Executive Officer, Yango Tech**.

"AI is evolving and we've to wait and see what's in store. But staying on the topic of delivery, quick commerce could be a short-term fad. We must understand that order fulfilment isn't a race against time. It's about offering a great experience," said **Rehana Raj, Operations Head – Retail, Choithrams**.

"While experience plays an important role, inventory is an asset, and how we manage that asset is crucial," Kapil stated. "We live in a world where latency is the new outage. So, we need to take a look at our technology, capability, operational and people choices to take a judicious call."

Moving away from the world of grocery, lifestyle and technology **Malini Ohri, Founder, Saante Selfcare** and **Minal Siyal, Conscious Executive Officer, Beauty Binge** emphasised on the importance of making mindful



**REHANA
RAJ**

Operations Head – Retail



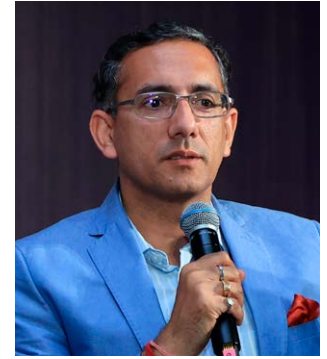
**MAX
AVTUKHOV**

Chief Executive Officer



**MALINI
OHRI**

Founder



**VISHAL
KAPIL**

Group CIO



**ALFRED
JAMES**

Deputy General Manager
Group E-Commerce



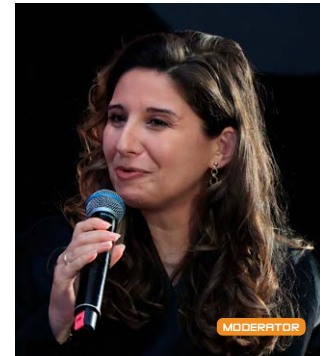
**MAYANK
SRIVASTAVA**

Head of Business
Development - MEA



**MINAL
SIYAL**

Conscious Executive Officer



**DARINE EL
SABBAGH**

Managing Director



choices when it comes to beauty, health & wellness steering away from the on-going fads.

At this point, El Sabbagh asked, “Do you feel the pressure to keep up with the customers’ growing expectations on delivery which has reduced from one hour to 15 minutes now?”

“It’s important for us to define what is on-time delivery for a customer. At Choithrams, we’ve broken down the customer shopping mission into three parts – planned and bigger baskets fulfilled through our brick-and-mortar stores and chatrooms; weekly top-ups serviced through the marketplaces and

aggregator platforms within 60-90 minutes; and finally quick delivery serviced through dark stores of Deliveroo Hop and our home delivery channel. Accordingly, we get our processes in place to meet these expectations efficiently wherein data plays a crucial role. We work with clear goals around how inventory should be managed through our auto replenishment system, so that goods are available to be delivered in an efficient manner. The entire delivery experience is comprised of processes put together with products and people.”

“Within the grocery space the biggest challenge for us is to deliver

faster to customers,” James agreed. “Having a centralised inventory management system has helped in making offline inventory levels visible to online customers. Combining demand planning, understanding offline-online customer demand and planning supply chain have helped us immensely. From a customer perspective, transparent communication around delivery has reduced the volume of inquiries.”

“Delivery tracking mechanisms positively impact the overall customer experience by providing real-time tracking updates offering the flexibility around delivery preferences,” Srivastava agreed. ●





RECOGNISING EXCELLENCE IN E-COMMERCE INNOVATION



The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the most advanced e-commerce market in the region, closely followed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The e-commerce penetration rate in the UAE is 4.2%! **IMAGES ME E-commerce Awards 2024** —MENA's most authoritative recognition for excellence in e-commerce celebrated and honoured best practices in e-commerce.

After debuting in 2023, **IMAGES ME E-commerce Awards 2024** was put forward as a platform to celebrate some spectacular brand journeys. With 15+ categories and more than 150 nominations, and a glittering jury, this year's gala ceremony was nothing less than a big celebration.





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Presented by Sundeep Khanna, Partner, Deloitte

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Food & Grocery



Presented by Evgeny Chernikov, COO, YANGOTECH

IMAGES ME

Most admired E-commerce company of the year
Beauty & Wellness



Presented by Sundeep Khanna, Partner, Deloitte

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Customer Experience



Presented by Cagri Orcan, Co-founder & CSO, Akinon

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Presented by Bana Aljbour Almajali, Brand Management - Associate, PwC

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Presented by Nurcan Arcan, CMO, Akinon



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Marketplace



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Children's Wear



Presented by Nisham Chhabra, CLOUD VP, MEA & Africa, Netcore



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IMAGES ME E-commerce Awards 2024 awardee picture

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Anisha Oberoi
Founder
Secret Skin

Secret to Success

Among several others, three key factors have fuelled the growth of homegrown e-commerce platform Secret Skin that's focused on clean beauty. First, rising consumer interest in the clean beauty segment; second, the growth of e-commerce having a direct impact on online beauty sales; and third a strong sense of purpose, writes **Rupkatha Bhowmick**.

For perspective, research indicates that the global clean beauty market is expected to touch \$15.3 billion by 2028. Turning to the Middle East, recent data from Google indicate that YouTube search interest for 'clean makeup' in Saudi Arabia increased by 13X. Interestingly, searches for the term 'skin-scent' which means clean, more minimal smelling scents saw 51% year-on-year growth. While according to data from Admitad, online sales of beauty products in the MENA region grew by over 20% in 2023.

One such impact-driven online beauty tech platform Secret Skin that started with around 1,200 products spanning various categories of beauty has grown significantly year-on-year. What's more, Secret Skin recently established offline presence within Majid Al Futtaim Lifestyle's THAT Concept Store in Mall of the Emirates, with more such openings lined up in 2024.

Secret Skin at a Glance

- **Year of Launch:** 2020
- **Founder:** Anisha Oberoi
- **Growth Stats:**
 - Customers – **66%**
 - Sales – **52%**
 - Product Categories – **130%**
- New vertical launched every year since 2020 – B2C, B2B, B2B2C
- **Funding Status:** Raised over \$1 million with a new round for seed capital now open. **65%** of investors are women.
- **Growth Goals:** Expand into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and India with key retail partners.

The interest in clean beauty products in the Middle East is a rather recent phenomenon which has been on an upward curve since the pandemic. Even five years ago, there was a gap in the regional market for products that were clean and non-toxic. Secret Skin Founder, Oberoi confirmed this.

"I survived breast cancer 14 years ago and at the time I didn't have access to toxin-free beauty and personal care products. When I moved to the region in 2019, I found the same gap here. Beauty buying here was labour-intensive, cost-prohibitive and time-consuming. Finding any 'safe' brand locally was difficult, requiring consumers to ship it in from foreign shores, incurring over 50-80% custom charges. In addition, with no local customer care support it often led to a poor customer experience limiting the possibility of repeat purchase."

This led Oberoi to launch Secret Skin, a platform built on a framework of social and environmental change whose values are rooted in 'People, Planet and Purpose'.

What's also quite interesting is Secret Skin's data-centrism in its everyday operations and long-term strategic outlook. In this context, Oberoi shared, "Personalisation drives engagement and is interwoven with social advocacy reflective of brand values and ethos of our partners. The pay-off can be seen in our repeat customer rate of 54%, compared to the beauty industry average of around 25%. Our return rates are lowest in the region too because delivery-in-full-on-time (DIFOT) is always prioritised as a metric. We track everything from interface dwell time, scroll depth, average order values, basket sizes, spend etc which gives us a better understanding of performance across brands and campaign initiatives. We don't overlook any insights."

In fact, as an ex-Amazon Oberoi brings with her a lot of key learnings. "We built the blueprint of Secret Skin on Amazon tenets and KPIs," she admitted. "From UI/UX, delivery experience, product discovery, navigation standards, pricing architecture etc. we were able to ideate and scale at a faster rate than our competitors because of this learning."

Another pivotal focus area for any brand today is supply chain. Having brands from different parts of the world on its platform it is crucial for



Secret Skin to create an agile supply chain proofing it from disruption as much as possible. Here too Secret Skin is heavily reliant on data and technology. "Instead of the customer waiting for three weeks to receive a product like most cross-border beauty offerings today, we have local robotic fulfilment with a promise of same-day delivery. We index highly on maintaining optimal lead-times as part of our logistics process with partners across geographies so that our customer experience is timely and seamless," Oberoi explained.

Looking ahead, Secret Skin aims to expand presence beyond the UAE by entering markets such as Saudi Arabia and India. "We are looking for the right local talent to fuel this mission," Oberoi stated.

"With Secret Skin we have built an entity that's disrupting the beauty landscape meaningfully. As a result, we have succeeded in getting the right investors, advisors and partners on board who are all helping drive this momentum for a rather new category like sustainable beauty & wellness in the Middle East in a never-seen-before manner," she concluded. ●



Paws Up for PAWDEGA



The global pet food industry was valued at \$140 billion in 2023 and is expected to grow at a CAGR of 5.32% by 2028, estimated Clarkston Consulting. With over one-third of the global revenue coming from the US, it's a no brainer that the American market is on the radar of many brands offering pet products. Moreover, with holistic health & wellbeing and sustainability emerging as some key trends in the human world as much as the pet universe, brands offering natural, non-toxic and holistic products are seeing traction and many businesses are expanding their horizon to cater to new markets, writes **Rupkatha Bhowmick**.

One such UAE-based homegrown online, pet products brand PAWDEGA recently entered the US market. Before getting into the growth story, a few words on how this two-person run entity came into being. Four years ago, **PAWDEGA** was born out of frustration as **Co-founders Charly & Larry Pruden** found it hard to source natural and non-toxic products for their own dog Milka.

"The term 'natural' has become a buzzword in today's pet industry. But most pet stores don't even know the truth about what 'natural' actually means, making the landscape highly unregulated. We started PAWDEGA as a platform with a promise to offer product transparency. Having done in-depth research on what constitutes holistic pet lifestyle and collaborated with globally renowned holistic and integrative veterinarians we are able to offer safe and non-toxic pet products wherein every single ingredient in every single product undergoes an extensive vetting process," Charly elaborated.

PAWDEGA at a Glance

Year of Launch: 2020

Co-founders: Charly & Larry Pruden

Funding Status: Self-funded

Product Portfolio: From stocking 50 safe and natural pet products to over 200 SKUs currently.

Business Milestones Over the Past 12 Months:

- 58% revenue growth in 2023 compared to 2022.
- Started worldwide shipping; international orders now account for around 5% of revenues.
- Expanded and opened a second location in the US towards the beginning of 2024.

Key Growth Goals for 2024:

- Grow PAWDEGA in the US.
- Expand the UAE product range and include freeze-dried dog food.
- Create more free and reliable content for pet parents, while expanding presence on YouTube.



From the UAE to the US: Major Learnings

Over the past decade, the UAE has become home to many more pets offering a fertile ground for the emergence of several pet-related businesses, born in the region and beyond. Consumers in the region are also becoming more and more aware of what truly is 'good for pets' and 'good for the planet'.

Yet, PAWDEGA decided to foray into the US market which is a major milestone but also quite different from the UAE market. Asked about some of their biggest learnings, Charly and Larry said, "Interestingly, the US played a major role in the opening of our UAE operations. Most of our mentors, holistic veterinarians who we work with, and social media followers are from the US. In fact, last year a majority of our international sales came from US, which reaffirmed our decision to launch PAWDEGA there."

A Win-Win Model

Despite operational differences between PAWDEGA's home base the UAE and the US, the co-founders realised that operating their business in the US has worked out cheaper as compared to the UAE.

"In the UAE, customers expect to receive their delivery the same day or the next day, and many customers are not willing to pay AED15-20 for delivery, which is not even the true cost of our deliveries. Meanwhile, in the US, customers are used to waiting many days for their delivery to arrive (3-8 days on average) and are willing to pay the full price for delivery, which is usually



around \$10 (AED36.70). Further, our annual business license and related fees in the UAE are around \$10,000, while it is a one-time fee of only \$200 in the US. Another difference we noticed is that customers in the UAE ask a lot more questions and are used to receiving customer service through instant messaging versus American customers who use e-mail to contact us for mostly delivery-related questions," the co-founders explained.

Navigating Roadblocks

Yet, their journey hasn't been a cakewalk. PAWDEGA has had to navigate unique challenges and fulfilment tops the list.

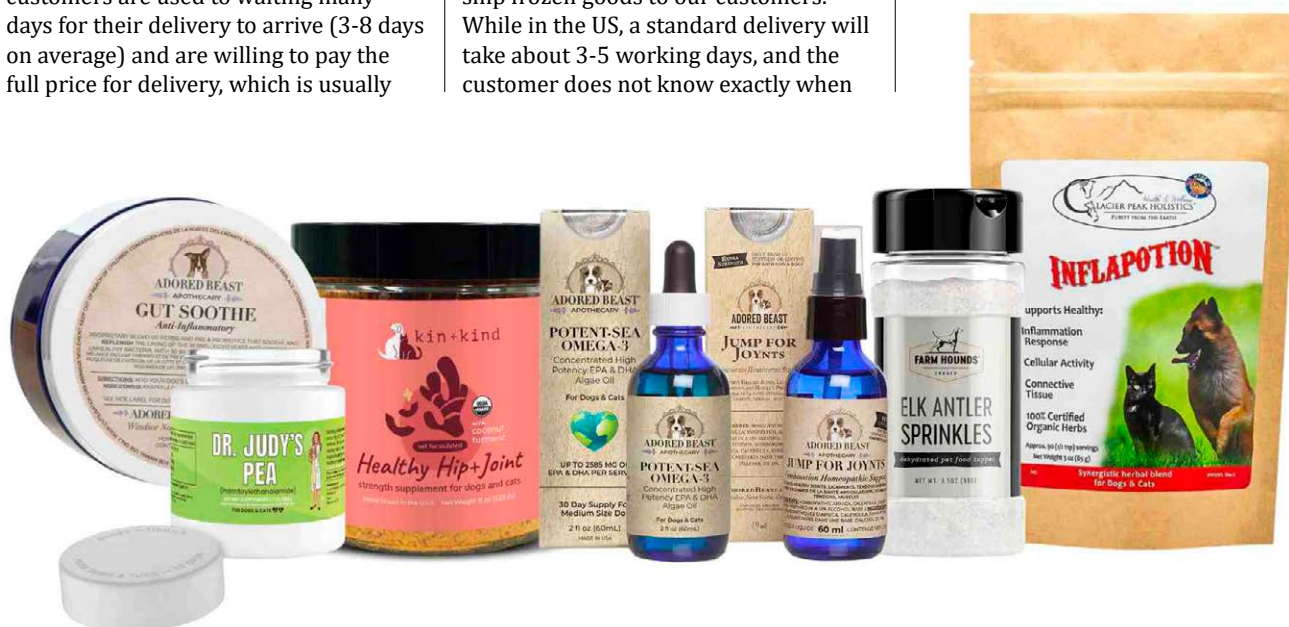
"Shipping is probably the biggest unique difference between our two markets of operation. The UAE is a much smaller country compared to the US that works in our favour because we offer customers next working day delivery within their preferred time slot. Moreover, our UAE deliveries are made in cooling trucks allowing us to ship frozen goods to our customers. While in the US, a standard delivery will take about 3-5 working days, and the customer does not know exactly when

the delivery will be made. There are no cooling truck deliveries, so we're unable to ship frozen items to our customers in the US."

Further, in a world where supply chain is prone to disruption as has become amply clear over the past few years, what steps does PAWDEGA undertake to create an agile supply chain?

"This is an area we're always working on to ensure we always have stock for our customers, which is a challenge for any small business. We usually look at our sales history to plan inventory. Then we rely on data on the average amount of time it takes for the manufacturer to fulfil our order and how long it takes to deliver the order to our UAE warehouse. In the UAE, from the date that we place our order to the date when we receive it can be anywhere between two weeks and four months depending on the manufacturer. It becomes more challenging if we don't have enough data for new products, and the growth of our business can also be unpredictable."

"Having said that, we try to automate our processes as much as possible. Our store runs on Shopify, so we utilise a lot of their integrations to operate more efficiently. The latest exciting addition is using an app called Flow, which automates certain processes for us. For example, we've created workflows to create customer follow-up tasks once an order is placed," Charly and Larry shared. ●





Somia Anwar



Grace Karim

Budget-friendly Books

Rupkatha Bhowmick

Ask any booklover and they will tell you the joy of spending time in a bookstore. They will also confirm that its expensive to frequently buy full-priced books in the UAE. Two friends **Grace Karim** and **Somia Anwar** spotted this problem and decided to find a solution. As a first step, they decided to collect pre-loved books from friends and family to resale them. Priced as low as AED5-10, the pre-loved books sold quickly often making Dh1,000 within a couple of hours from each tabletop sale at festivals, schools and nurseries.

Having spotted a gap in the market Anwar and Karim were keen to launch an online platform for pre-loved books to offer a sustainable solution to encourage people of all ages to read more by giving them access to a wide range of books at an affordable cost. However, as with every startup funding was the first obstacle that they needed to overcome.

Bookends at a Glance

- **Year of Launch:** 2020
- **Retail Footprint:** An online marketplace along with a brick-and-mortar store in Dubai Silicon Oasis.
- **Over 1,300 sellers, 10,000-plus buyers and more than 3,000 books sold each month.**
- **Funding Status:** Won two startup competitions organised by Sheraa and Bank of Sharjah raising AED50K followed by an additional grant of AED36K from Sheraa and the rest is self-funded.

FROM 250 TO 20,000 PRE-LOVED BOOKS

In 2019 Anwar and Karim participated in a Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center (Sheraa) led competition, inviting innovative ideas around books and publishing, winning the third position and AED25,000 of seed funding. They decided to use the prize money and personal investment of AED25,000 each from their savings to start Bookends in March 2020.

Bookends launched with an initial repository of 250 books. Cut to the present, it operates as a marketplace facilitating the purchase and sale of pre-loved books, spanning 13 different languages with an online inventory of 20,000 books and over 5,000 titles available in its physical store.

"Having children of our own who like to read, we saw how swiftly they outgrow books and new books often come with a hefty price tag. In addition, maintaining a diverse collection demands considerable space. Many of us have books that we no longer need but these could be treasures for others. We launched Bookends with the simple idea to make books more affordable, encouraging children to read more while minimising their screen time. In essence, Bookends is the go-to destination for booklovers to get a budget-friendly refresh of their bookshelf," the co-founders observed.

Explaining the business model, they added, "Buyers can effortlessly browse and order through our website, enjoying delivery services across the UAE. While sellers provide us with their books, and we take care of the rest. We post their books on our website, incorporating our service charge on top of their specified price for curation, storage and delivery. Once a sale happens, the sellers accumulate credit with us, which can be redeemed for purchasing other books online."

FOUR YEARS ON...60,000 BOOKS REHOMED

Asked about some technology-centric developments since launch, Anwar and Karim said, "In 2021 we created a proprietary seller and book management system, consolidating all data into a centralised platform. Retrieving any details is just a click



away. For buyers, our website provides a fully searchable interface, allowing them to find any book effortlessly by name, author or keyword. To date, we've successfully placed over 60,000 books in new homes."

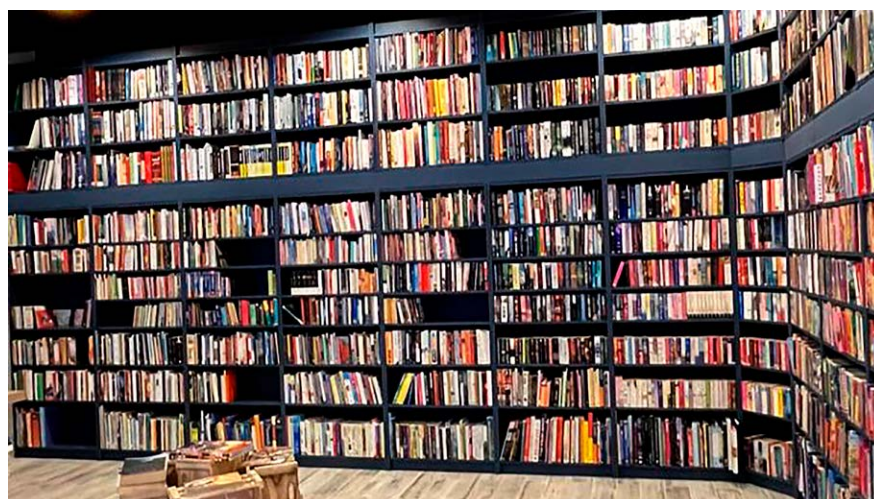
Another significant milestone for Bookends is the opening of its brick-and-mortar space in Dubai Silicon Oasis in 2023. "This bookstore is a reader's haven, where we host various events including book clubs, game nights, Bookish carnivals, storytelling sessions and much more."

This homegrown brand's journey, however, hasn't been free from challenges. A common challenge that Bookends faces just like any other startup is a small marketing budget making advertising an expensive proposition. Additionally, building awareness to choose used books over

new is also difficult as people in this region are used to the traditional way of always buying a new item.

"Having said that, this trend is now changing as more and more people are becoming more environmentally conscious. This change in consumer behaviour aligns well with our goal to encourage reusing pre-loved books as well as help interested people to donate their books to support charities. In fact, we've partnered with Thrift for Good and Sharjah City for Humanitarian Services," the co-founders shared.

Looking ahead, Bookends aims to sell a minimum of 5,000 books monthly, collaborate with more schools to organise book fairs and with more corporate entities to bring reading into their culture. Expansion into other GCC countries is also on the cards following the franchise model. ●



Shapewear in Demand

Established as an e-commerce platform specialising in shapewear Metro Brazil reported 210% increase in sales and 161% rise in the number of orders from the GCC countries in 2023. Acting as a bridge between Brazil and GCC markets offering a compelling range of luxury Brazilian shapewear products, Metro Brazil aims to empower individuals and increase their self-confidence.

Metro Brazil at a Glance

Year of Launch: 2017

Business Milestones over the Past 12 Months:

- 210% increase in sales and a 161% rise in the number of orders from the GCC in 2023.
- Formed strategic alliances with foreign suppliers and logistics partners to deliver exceptional Brazilian shapewear products, streamline operations and enhance market positioning.

Funding Status: Currently preparing to secure venture capital investments to accelerate expansion regionally and globally, while allocating resources towards product development, marketing initiatives and infrastructure developments.

Growth Goals:

- 2024: Gain market share in the Middle East, undertake research to improve product offerings and provide customers an exceptional online user experience.
- 2025: Expand in Europe and North America, build physical stores in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to offer customers an exceptional shopping experience and diversify product range.



Alaa Kara Ali
Chief Executive Officer
Metro Brazil



In conversation with Rupkatha Bhowmick, Alaa Kara Ali, Chief Executive Officer of Metro Brazil discussed the demand for shapewear in the Middle East region and its resulting effect on his business.

Let's start with your thoughts on the shapewear market in the Middle East and its impact on retail.

The demand for shapewear in the Middle East offers a profitable opportunity to capitalise on the rising customer demand for body-enhancing products while meeting the region's changing cultural standards and fashion tastes. Our research indicates that the addressable market for shapewear in the GCC region is predicted to grow by 1.83% to reach \$3.5 billion in 2028, versus the global addressable market that's expected to touch \$218.19 billion, representing a 3.98% growth. The growth of shapewear products is majorly driven by factors including enhanced awareness about health and wellness, evolving fashion trends and growing preferences for body-positive products. As the region's fashion preferences evolve aligned with changing global trends, the demand for shapewear will continue to increase.

Further, the emergence of e-commerce platforms – such as Metro Brazil – has also contributed to the growth of the shapewear market in the region.

How is Metro Brazil fuelling demand within this market segment?

We have played a significant role in transforming the Middle Eastern shapewear industry by introducing cutting-edge Brazilian products that are well-suited to the varied cultural tastes and demography of the region. Our commitment to inclusivity has resonated well with customers, as we provide a wide selection of sizes and designs to cater to all body shapes and preferences. As a result, we've been able to record significant growth.

Are there any unique challenges that you've had to navigate in the region?

Even though we have recorded growth, our journey hasn't been free from challenges. These include understanding cultural differences and regulatory intricacies. We have effectively overcome these challenges through the implementation of various proactive communication strategies, in-depth market research and productive collaborations with local partners.

How has the brand leveraged tech-based solutions to offer a seamless and personalised CX while also ensuring accurate inventory management?

Our technological innovations have enabled us to provide a customised, effective and secure e-commerce shopping experience. For example, we leverage customer data and advanced algorithms to recommend shapewear products based on prior purchases and personal preferences. On the other hand, we use cutting-edge security technology to protect customer data by implementing measures, such as multi-factor authentication and encryption methods. In addition, our platform's interactive instructions and educational content enable customers to understand the essential characteristics of our shapewear products facilitating the buying process. To further offer customers a seamless shopping experience across multiple touchpoints, we have adopted an omnichannel strategy, integrating our online and physical sales platforms. As for inventory management, data mining and analytics help us to interpret customer behaviour and preferences to be able to efficiently control inventory levels, predict changes in demand and maximise product availability, all of which contribute to a seamless customer shopping experience and lower inventory-related expenses.

What are some key steps that you are undertaking to create an agile supply chain?

To ensure a dependable and effective supply chain network, we have formed strategic alliances with several manufacturers and suppliers to source high-quality materials and streamline production processes. This provides us with the flexibility to swiftly adapt to changing market demands. Furthermore, we also guarantee on-time order delivery through our collaboration with Aramex and DHL. Additionally, we have made significant investments in cutting-edge supply chain optimisation and inventory management solutions. We can efficiently meet customer needs by forecasting demand, minimising stockouts and optimising inventory levels by utilising data analytics and automation. ●

The Power of Pop

From butter beers to brooms. Dobby themed coffee mugs and keychains to Dumbledore wands. Not to forget Platform 9¾ at King's Cross Station, UK. Ask any Harry Potter fan and you'll know the significance of it all. If that's not all, data from Statista indicates that Hogwarts Legacy, an action role-playing game which released in February 2023, sold 12 million units in its first two weeks of release and a total of 24 million units recording \$1 billion in sales as of December 2023. That's the power of pop culture.

One such player specialising in pop culture and lifestyle products is Monkey Distribution, which holds the exclusive distribution rights for global brands such as Funko and Harry Potter Wizarding World within the MENA region.



Funko at a Glance

Year of Launch: 2016

Brand Founders: Elmoataz Obada, Ayman Alatrash and Motasem Ahmed

Retail Footprint: Operates in 13 markets and manages a network of 10 retail stores, including the first Funko franchise store outside the US and the first Harry Potter Wizarding World store in the MENA region.

Funding Status: Self-funded

Milestones Over the Past 12 Months:

- Expanding Funko's franchise retail footprint by opening two additional franchise stores located in Dubai Mall and Reem Mall.
- Opening the first Harry Potter Wizarding World store in the MENA region.
- Establishing presence in new markets such as Egypt and Tunisia.

Key Goals for 2024:

- Accelerate growth in Saudi Arabia by launching innovative brands and forming strategic alliances with key retailers.
- Leverage diverse brand portfolio and deep insights into pop culture to innovate and introduce new in-store experiences with strategic retail partners.
- Enhance digital platforms to improve customer engagement and sales.



Elmoataz Obada
Co-Founder
Monkey Distribution



*In an interview with **Rupkatha Bhowmick, Elmoataz Obada, Co-Founder of Monkey Distribution** shared the influence of pop culture in retail and the significance of gaining and retaining customer loyalty.*

"After all, everyone is a fan of something and Funko has something for every fan. That's our reason for being. We cultivate customer loyalty by offering exclusive Funko items, unveiling exciting new arrivals through pre-orders, ensuring swift responses to inquiries and actively engaging with our community, fostering a bond with our valued customers and community leaders," he said.

Through its broad assortment of products successfully meeting the eclectic tastes of a region home to over 200 nationalities, Funko stands out ensuring there is something for every fan. A big reason why Funko's appeal continues to grow in the region, mirroring the worldwide surge in pop culture collectibles.

However, having different retail partners in the region, how does Funko manage to offer a seamless customer experience while ensuring a unified brand image?

"We recognise the individuality of each retail partner, acknowledging that they cater to distinct customer bases and offer unique in-store experiences. In 2023, we embarked on a transformative initiative to create sections within our strategic retail partners' stores specifically for our brands, therein ensuring a more tailored shopping experience. While we infused each

retail space with a distinct flavour to resonate with its specific audience, we also carefully preserved our overall brand identity. This balance allowed us to present a unified brand image that is both recognisable and adaptable, catering to the diverse preferences of consumers across different retail environments," Obada explained.

Even as the MENA region serves as a gateway to reach a diverse section of multicultural consumers, it also has its unique challenges. Asked about roadblocks that Funko has had to navigate in the region, Obada said, "One of the challenges we encountered was understanding the different regulatory environments and obtaining the necessary approvals for product supply in each country. Moreover, the diversity within the region required us to be particularly sensitive to cultural nuances, ensuring that our product offerings and marketing strategies not only align with local norms but are also

embraced across various communities. This demanded a tailored approach, where understanding and respecting the cultural intricacies became as crucial as the business strategy itself, ensuring our initiatives were well-received and successful throughout the MENA region."

In the realm of collectibles and pop culture, another crucial focus area is social commerce which continues to become more and more pivotal driven by emerging trends, anticipation of new releases and an active fan participation. Seamlessly blending pop culture elements into social media strategies can elevate a brand's appeal and relevance with iconic moments in pop culture sparking extensive content generation and engagement on social platforms. Engaging with these cultural phenomena can deepen audience connections.

Commenting on the importance of social commerce for Funko, Obada said, "Platforms such as Instagram have become essential for unveiling new brands and products, offering a wealth of benefits including insightful audience data, the power of social proof and the opportunity for direct feedback from customers. These features are invaluable for businesses like us aiming to navigate and thrive within the ever-evolving landscape of pop culture trends."

Looking ahead, Funko's growth in the MENA region will be centred on three key strategies "prioritising core and evergreen product lines that consistently appeal to fans, launching themed Funko Moments collections for special occasions & interests and expanding the Funko Bitty Pops! line, which has surpassed expectations since its debut last quarter," Obada summarised. ●



Zebra Technologies on a ‘Problem Solving Mission’



Zebra Technologies is taking its newly enhanced Modern Store framework on a problem-solving mission.

Zebra's Modern Store framework and supporting solutions have been proven to help retailers reduce product waste shrink by 27% and achieve 98% inventory accuracy. Some retailers have reduced employee turnover by 8% and secured a 95% on-time task completion rate, improving store productivity during these challenging times.

“We know that customers want seamless in-store and online experiences, product availability and quick and easy ways to pay and collect orders. The Modern Store framework has been shown to increase transaction value by 25% and cut customer wait times by 23%,” shared **Mark Thomson, Retail Strategy Director, Zebra Technologies.**

Responding to the needs of retailers and shoppers, Zebra's newly developed Modern Store framework features a range of hardware and software innovations for the front, middle and back of store, combined with the expertise of an experienced retail team of problem-solvers and an extensive network of specialist partners:



Mark Thomson

- Zebra Workcloud™ suite of software applications enable front-line workers to better optimise labour decisions, streamline communication and improve inventory management. Zebra Workforce Optimisation suite is designed to digitise and streamline task management, scheduling and timekeeping. While Zebra Workcloud Inventory Optimization suite enables

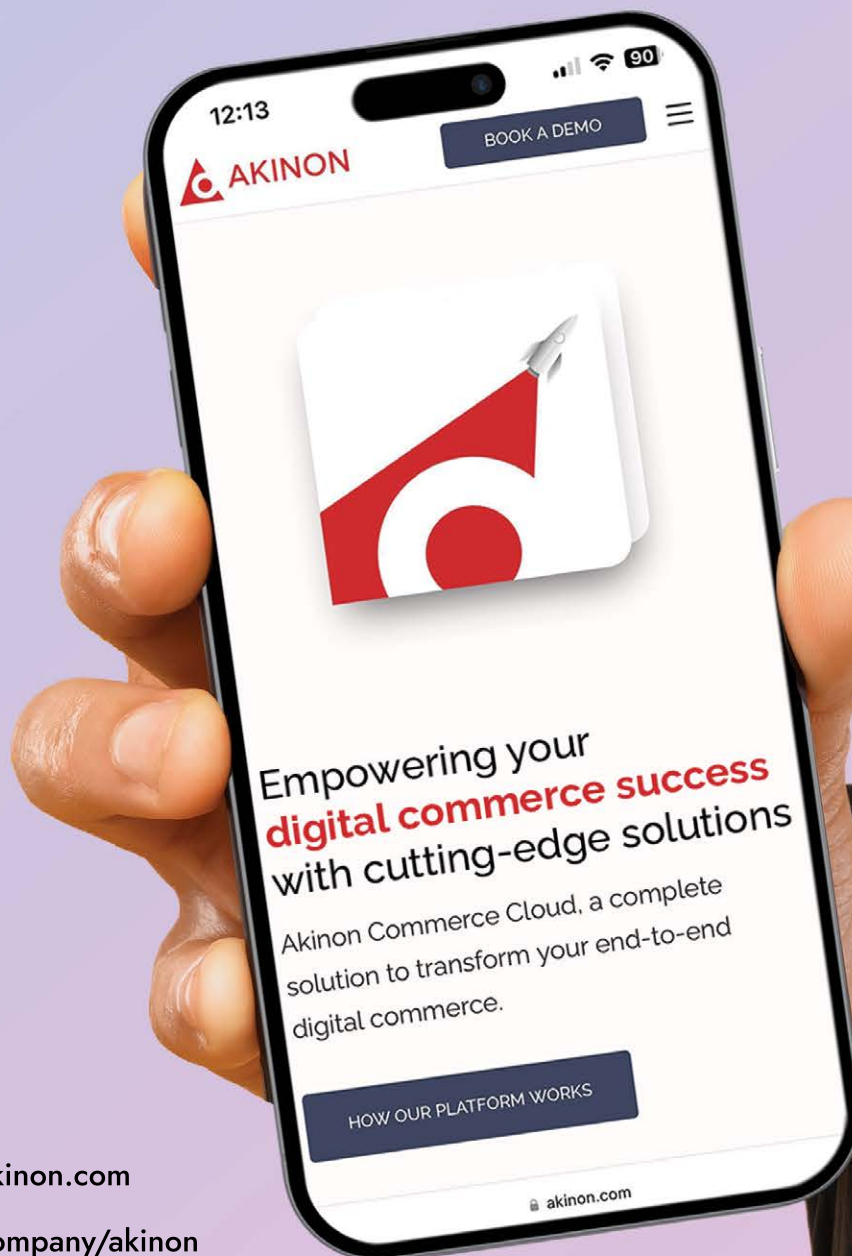
retailers to conduct accurate, quality inventory counts, detect sales and inventory anomalies with prescriptive analytics using AI. Retailers including BP Aral, MPREIS, Bonita, Office Depot and Bimbo Bakeries are leveraging Zebra Workcloud software to optimise workflows and transform their businesses.

- The new WS50 Powered by Workcloud, the industry's first wrist and clip wearable enterprise-class Android touch computer, features Voice AI Assistant, Workcloud Communication and Workcloud Task Manager to better connect retail workers. Zebra Device Tracker is now offered for the WS50, ensuring a device can be located whether it is on or off, minimising the time and cost of lost devices and driving productivity for retailers.
- The next generation PS30 Personal Shopper enables retailers to provide a transformative, low-friction and personalised in-store shopping experience. Its enhanced location sensor data enables retailers to send consumers personalised offers and provide retailers with shopper insights which can be leveraged to improve store operations. The PS30 supports tap-to-pay, allowing shoppers to complete a purchase right from the cart, alongside Zebra devices compatible with Apple VAS and Google Smart Tap.
- The MP72 Series multi-plane scanner has vision-based software and an enhanced colour camera that recognises produce as it's scanned. The new MP72 saves consumers' time from guessing items or requiring help, simultaneously minimising fraud and shrink risks for retailers.
- A number of solutions for back-of-store operations, including intelligent cabinets, liner-less printers for more sustainable label printing and advanced packing bench solutions, are available with Zebra's fixed industrial scanning systems. ●

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