Article

Is this the beginning of the end for the storefront as we know it?

If the current consumer trends are indicative, asking intelligent AI powered interfaces to find us the perfect product will become the dominant way we shop online. Given that a potential shopper now has the ability to discover, review and purchase all without ever having visited your store. What could this mean for the humble storefront particularly as intelligent interfaces start to compress the funnel into a simple discussion.

Since we delivered the 123rd Shopify store, the platform has moved with breathtaking speed from its humble beginnings, to the modular, component based beast it is today.

In that time it has been surrounded by huge changes in tech. Much of which has had profound implications on shopping habits. Back in 2008 it was only just becoming mainstream to buy online and we still had the Social Media, PPC, SEO and Mobile Commerce booms to come.

Fast forward and these nascent disrupters are now firmly established, yet set to be hugely disrupted by the unstoppable march of AI. In particular the concept of intelligent interfaces.

So what are intelligent interfaces?

Interfaces have long been about working out how to make it as simple as possible for you to achieve a goal through a set of actions.

Buy a shirt, pay for your parking, search for information... you perform a few actions, a series of clicks and voila your shirt arrives, you don't get a parking fine and you get the information you need.

Great but no two interfaces are the same, you often have to both work out what's required, provide context and provide additional information repeatedly, especially online where password and "prove your human" fatigue is a daily occurrence.

Now replace this with the concept of intelligent interfaces, where all UX compresses to either a Chat Box or a voice chat. Where we can think of the things we interface with as "intelligent"

- Paying for parking becomes a verbal conversation and wave of your phone
- Buying a shirt is a discussion about the options with your personal AI and a "yes buy it" statement
- Deep research is delivered to you on a plate from a simple request

While these examples may seem almost sci-fi, they are already possible if not yet widely adopted. The point is, how we interact with information is going to completely change. Especially when you consider that your personal devices are going to have memory. In the world of data & information this is an incredibly powerful concept.

Interfaces with memory…

One of the key aspects about human teams is the ability for each person to pursue strategic goals whilst understanding the context of the current situation. When you imagine a great assistant, you think of a proactive intelligent person who over time would come to know you and your needs. This requires two key things, memory and intelligence.

With these things now embedded in your AI Chat interface of choice, we now all have the opportunity to have the ultimate assistant just like Jarvis from Ironman. Now think forward, presuming your Chat interface has your size, fashion preferences, colours, and to some degree a map of your personality. Then what location is going to get you the best results… searching on Google or asking your AI Chat interface.

The collapse of the eCom funnel…

The ramifications of this are huge and especially so for the eCom industry. Typically it has been almost a natural mainstream reflex (i.e. just Google it) for consumers to go out into the information space online and "search" for items. Spending time on research and comparison until ready to purchase, often directly from the site that is most visible.

That game is changing and fast, consumers are now being entertained by video shorts and "asking" AI Chat for a "product solution". Not only that with the advent of "memory" these AI Chat interfaces increasingly understand the precise context and needs of the user intuitively.

This effectively completely collapses the transactional purchase funnel. Why go anywhere else when we can purchase via our favourite entertainment platform or our AI chat interfaces can

provide the best, most relevant results? In this world the customer no longer comes to your data, your data now goes to the customer.

Entertainment + Authenticity + Contextual Data

In my view any business that wants to thrive in this new information space going forward should understand that…

- **If you want eyeballs and attention** - in the long run, being entertaining *and* providing value will beat paying for search visibility (PPC, SEO etc)
- **Value will come from** - craft & authentic human experiences and story telling in a world of instantly produced & meaningless content (AI as means of telling authentic stories will be great!)
- **If you want to be discovered** - your data needs to be set up for context

If you want evidence of this, just look at influencers. For those who have built a large following through consistent entertainment now have brands tripping over themselves to collaborate. They also have ready made audiences, from which many have bootstrapped highly successful brands & businesses (see Mr Beast)

Interestingly AI is eating content production too, yet I see this as a forcing function for truly authentic human story telling and connection. Because when anyone can make anything, digital content becomes meaningless, without the experiences and human connection to anchor it. I think this is bullish for all forms of human to human connection from in person events, to education to real world experiences.

Lastly AI Chat will eat traditional search for breakfast, so building context into your data is going to be critical. With **context-aware agents** doing the curation, selection, and even purchasing on behalf of their human counterparts, adding context and meaning to your data will be the difference between being part of the selection process or not at all.

The Role of the Storefront

So if less and less "transactional" traffic actually comes to your storefront, then what role does it play as we move into the future. The answer for us lies in authentic, story telling and creating an entertaining brand space that people "want" to spend time in *and* can purchase from.

For brands, emotional connection, storytelling, and immersive experiences will be crucial. We believe storefronts can be the natural and trusted **space** to bring this content and experience together.

- By tying this content into real world experiences it will help build and create authenticity, connection and give the content meaning for its audience
- Creating a vibe through custom animations, layered storytelling, brand rituals, and live events won't translate well to chat interfaces (at least for now)
- Complex options or purchase journeys (not catered for by chat interfaces) will provide unique reasons to go direct to the storefronts - i.e. build your own intelligent interfaces
- Expect to see a trend to buy "direct" to encourage exclusivity for certain product lines or experiences that can only be accessed via the storefront

In short, storefronts will need to evolve into brand worlds, and become less transactional, more experiential. Think PDP pages that build product anticipation like Apple, Live Shopping, exclusive real world tie ups, offers and and events.

These will be store built more along the lines of content-powered microsites and not bloated bland product catalogs - because your structured data will be pulled to where it's in demand.

Final thoughts

So perhaps after all the storefront isn't dying but it is leveling up. If we move increasingly to a world where AI chats handle transactions and search, your brand's *story* and *experience* will become your true differentiators. You can make sure your product data is clean, structured, and ready to travel simply by being on Shopify although best practice and approaches will certainly need to be applied.

I predict you'll need to invest in genuine stories and human connections that AI alone can't replicate so that you can build a storefront people *want* to visit, not just as a transaction — but to belong and be a part of the bigger picture of your brand.