

# FUTURE & FORWARD

A PATH TO PURCHASE  
INSTITUTE EXPERIENCE

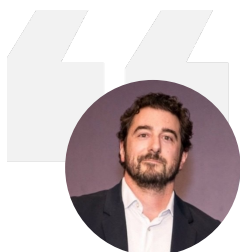


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## Trends Report

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## Charting a Course for a More Human, Collaborative Future in Immersive Retail Experiences




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This year's Future Forward event kicked off with a focus on human touchpoints throughout the retail journey, both physical and digital. This encompassed not only the shopping experience for customers but also the organizational structures of marketing and sales teams. This theme was supported by two tentpoles across much of the sessions – an emphasis on the pragmatic use of established, safe products and tools, and staying afloat the tempest winds of data use transformations.

### More Human Touch Points

- This event was as much about the “how we” as it was about “to whom.” An early session highlighted the importance of integrating data scientists into business contexts (echoing the industry mantra: *break down silos*) to ensure teams work together effectively rather than in isolation. Collecting vast amounts of data is futile if it's handed over to an analytics team without the context needed for proper interpretation.
- Spark Foundry's April Carlisle navigated these human touch points well with her panel alongside Campbell's Marci Raible and Michelle Morale, which surfaced terrific insights into stronger organizational culture to focus on the full spectrum of work from media-to-shelf and the tremendous benefits of an integrated planning process across an organization to make the work actually work (by linking the sales division with the marketing division to support each other's objectives). ▶ 





# Charting a Course for a More Human, Collaborative Future in Immersive Retail Experiences

## Better Use of Tools

- There was also a prevailing spirit of moving away from all the shiny toys in this space (there are many), focusing instead on practical and trackable tools, and avoiding over-reliance on artificial intelligence. Many are guilty of this latter tendency. Research presented at the event reinforced the effectiveness of conversion actions, comparing AI, human, and AI + human approaches. The results showed that human and AI + human approaches were the most successful with consumers.
- We also saw a return to in-store innovations with pragmatic yet impactful data collection systems. These systems can enhance customer engagement, optimize store real estate, and integrate CRM for behavioral data matching and loyalty optimization, further bridging the gap between physical and digital.

## More Impactful Use of Data

- We didn't quite escape the discussion about the original sin of using ROAS as a barometer of success. This is important because everyone, including brands, needs to continue hearing it: return on ad spend can be misleading and provide the wrong signals, confusing causation with coincidence in sales, disconnecting from P&L, and most importantly, obscuring the aspirational target of incremental ROAS (iROAS). There were several discussions about the need to have the right infrastructure and systems in place for accurate measurement and optimization.
- Building on this line of thought, an emphasis was placed on using data to drive smarter media spend tied more to actual human behaviors. Tactics like 'digital end cap' strategies, including sponsored brand conquering (despite potentially higher initial costs), often prove to be more effective in driving actions and sales compared to merely engaging in a low-cost ROAS game. Moreover, both branded search and branded conquering, the cornerstone of digital retail media, can deliver additional benefits when tailored to respond to genuine human intent, effectively positioning products within relevant keyword contexts. ♦



# Unlocking the Future of Commerce Starts with People



**Sade Nawrot**  
Assoc. Strategy Director  
**Arc Worldwide**

Path to Purchase Institute's Future Forward event brought together brilliant industry-leading experts, strategists, and marketing gurus from diverse backgrounds to discuss the future of commerce and how to design successful omnichannel campaigns in today's always-on world.

Knowing the experience was going to be about the future of our industry, I was expecting the focus to be on cutting edge technology or the magic of AI. And while the conference did touch on those crucial facets, I was pleased to see that all discussions were grounded in human insight and authentically connecting with shoppers through invaluable data.

This people-centric focus really crystalized the importance of whole-heartedly understanding our shopper as they evolve, along with the world of retail around them.

## ACTIONABLE TAKEAWAYS

### Understanding shopper thoughts and feelings needs to be at the core:

Having timely, relevant, and expansive shopper data is crucial for creating successful omnichannel campaigns and retailer programs. Great ideas start from listening to your audience, understanding them, and identifying where opportunities lie. Great ideas also don't end at creation, to truly make something that is impactful and beneficial for shoppers, retailers and brands need to be willing to continue to tap into their data set and listen to shopper feedback so that their ideas can adapt and evolve with the pulse of people.

### There is no longer a linear journey to your product:

61% of consumers start their search for products on Amazon and 11% start their initial search on TikTok. This highlights how people are no longer only becoming aware of products through traditional awareness media channels but through reviews and advocacy. People first look at what is being shared about your brand and what other people are saying to become knowledgeable shoppers.

### It's clear what Millennials wanted, Gen Z isn't after:

Everyone is vying for a piece of Gen Z's growing purchasing power, but there are three key things to keep in mind when going after this audience:

1. Unlike Millennials, they aren't saving for a rainy day, 75% of Gen Z would rather feel fulfilled now vs. save for the future.
2. What's cool to everyone isn't cool to them, 91% feel that mainstream pop culture is a thing of the past.
3. Most of them are shopping in-store, they want to experience the products they plan to purchase first-hand, not days after they've made the decision. ♦



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