How Top Brands Are Driving Growth With Unified Commerce

This post was created in partnership with Shopify

Key takeaways:

- First-party data is the best way to map out the modern shopper’s winding path to purchase.
- Thanks to AI, a future of fewer dials and levers doesn’t mean marketers will have less control.
- Despite the fear of being left behind, marketers must resist the urge to adopt new technology for its own sake.

As ecommerce and physical retail converge, the path a customer takes from discovery to purchase has become a complex web of interactions. To help make sense of it all and break through, brands must move beyond siloed channels and build a single, unified view of their customer.

During an ADWEEK House Advertising HQ Group Chat, co-hosted with Shopify, ecommerce leaders explored how to drive growth and efficiency in a landscape that now bridges the offline and online worlds.

(L-R) Vera Bradley’s Alison Hiatt, Shopify’s Andrius Baranauskas

Commerce has become three-dimensional chess

Today’s shoppers don’t live in a single channel. They move seamlessly between social feeds, streaming TV, third-party marketplaces, and physical stores. Such fragmentation creates data conflicts for brands trying to manage the customer journey.

“You went from playing checkers to chess to 3D chess,” said Scott Kramer, VP of growth at AS Beauty.

The complexity is felt across the industry, as brands manage countless new ways to reach consumers.

Alison Hiatt, CMO at Vera Bradley, described the feeling of managing a control room where the number of inputs is constantly multiplying. “I think about these dashboards with all these dials, and it’s just filling up with all these different channels and social commerce and this and this and this,” she said.

The current environment forces brands to rethink old models, like one described by Evan Moore, SVP of commerce partnerships at NBCUniversal, in which television content generates a massive shopping opportunity, but essentially tells viewers to, “Find it yourself, dude.”

(L-R) AS Beauty’s Scott Kramer, Kismet’s Benjamin Tilton

Unifying the journey with first-party data

The panel members agreed that managing the modern shopper journey requires a unified view of the customer. A strategic focus on acquiring and unifying first-party data from every possible source—from a QR code on a physical product to a purchase on a retail partner's website—is now fundamental.

"The way I like to think about a seamless customer journey is really from the consumer's perspective, and thinking about a strategy where you are acquiring first-party data across all channels," said Kait Stephens, CEO and co-founder of Brij. "You're unifying that data so it's consistent."

Such a strategy is crucial for new and growing brands like Kismet, a modern dog food company. Benjamin Tilton, head of digital at Kismet, explained that whether a customer discovers them through a veterinarian, during one of their community "pack walks," or via a purchase on Chewy, the brand's data must inform a message that "feels consistent for every touch point that customer is hitting."

(L-R) Brij's Kait Stephens, Merkle's Steve Duran

From complex dials to a simple lever

With a unified data foundation in place, brands can leverage AI not as another complicated dial to turn, but as a key to simplification. Andrius Baranauskas, director of product for merchant marketing at Shopify, explained that the future of commerce platforms is about reducing complexity, not adding to it.

"There's so many dials, right?" said Baranauskas. "That's probably not how the future is going to look. It's maybe two or three dials, then the rest is automated."

However, leaders cautioned against adopting technology for its

own sake. Steve Duran, VP and global commerce lead at Merkle, stressed the importance of grounding AI strategy in human behavior. “Just because this is the thing, the soup du jour, doesn’t mean we run to that channel,” he said. “It means we understand our people at a deep level, then we serve value to them. We understand where they search, how they live their lives, how they prefer to interact with us, then we aggressively invest in those use cases..”

(L-R) ADWEEK’s Lauren Johnson, NBCUniversal’s Evan Moore

When influencers and marketplaces own the relationship

That deep customer understanding is essential as new centers of influence reshape retail. Vera Bradley’s Hiatt noted that

as consumers become more loyal to creators than to brands, a new paradigm of collaboration becomes key.

Baranauskas added that Shopify is actively enabling the trend. “Brands working together is an interesting thing that I see growing,” he explained. “From Shopify’s perspective, we have been doing that through products like Shopify Collective, where brands can merchandise each other’s products.”

A glimpse into the agentic future of shopping

Looking ahead, the panel agreed AI technology would continue to create a more seamless and personalized shopping experience. NBCUniversal’s Moore pointed to the rise of “agentic commerce” within television, while Merkle’s Duran highlighted the growth of “first-party marketplaces” as a major trend.

Baranauskas concluded that a key role for platforms like Shopify is to put merchants in control of every part of the customer journey, making powerful new tools accessible and allowing them to both collaborate and compete. “I think Shopify has visibility right now into 12% of U.S. commerce,” he said. “This is an interesting position to be in, in terms of empowering our merchants to work together to form that buyer picture, as an example, or work together to enter OpenAI.”

Featured Conversation Leaders

- Andrius Baranauskas, Director of Product, Merchant Marketing, Shopify
- Steve Duran, VP, Global Commerce Lead, Merkle
- Alison Hiatt, CMO, Vera Bradley
- Scott Kramer, VP, Growth, AS Beauty
- Evan Moore, SVP, Commerce Partnerships, NBCUniversal
- Kait Stephens, CEO and Co-founder, Brij
- Benjamin Tilton, Head of Digital, Kismet
- Lauren Johnson, Deputy Editor, Commerce, ADWEEK

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