

THE LENS · WALKING INTO JAVITS · PART 5 OF 7

In-Store Retail Media: Where Does Advertising End and the Experience Begin?

Retail media creates another revenue stream, and some of that investment could help fund better stores. The question is whether it becomes part of what makes a store worth visiting, or starts getting in the way.

THE SHORT VERSION

Digital shelf displays, connected cooler doors, interactive endcaps, and smart shopping carts create new opportunities to reach customers. Some help shoppers discover products, compare options, or find relevant offers. Others display advertisements from manufacturers paying for that space.

Someone shopping for groceries after work probably has different expectations from someone visiting an arcade. And every retailer has spent years developing an identity customers recognize. As manufacturers introduce more advertising, how does the retailer make sure that identity doesn't get lost?

WHY IT MATTERS

Advertising inside the store isn't new. We've all seen cardboard displays, branded endcaps, and elaborate Coca-Cola or Pepsi displays built around football season. What's changing is how connected those experiences can become. Instead of displaying the same message for weeks, retailers can change content based on location, time of day, inventory, or even the weather.

Retailers have spent years trying to unify commerce. Now they're introducing another ecosystem of advertising platforms, manufacturers, and technology providers. Those connections need to work before retailers start adding more messages to the store.

> **Are retailers building advertising networks inside their stores, or building better stores that advertisers help fund?**

WHAT'S CHANGING

1. **Beyond traditional retail.** RaceTrac launched Trac Media Group across more than 600 RaceTrac-branded locations, with plans to expand to RaceWay, Gulf, and Potbelly. Topgolf launched Topgolf Media Networks in July 2026. Restaurants already have relationships with beverage companies and ingredient suppliers. Could those partnerships help fund experiences, not just promotions?
2. **From advertising to experiences.** During the 2025 IndyCar season finale in Nashville, Sam's Club's Member Access Platform and Andretti Global brought *Race to the Club* to three Sam's Club locations and the Nashville Superspeedway Fan Zone: simulators, driver appearances, product demos, sampling, and a concert.
3. **Local creativity counts too.** Trader Joe's hand-drawn signage and Wawa's associate-designed holiday cup show how local teams give stores personality. Connected content could give employees and communities another way to contribute.



See It → Explore It → Try It → Step Into It: the levels of engagement retail media could support.

WHO RUNS IT?

A campaign can report thousands of successful plays while some screens are dark, others are blocked, and a few are promoting products that aren't on the shelf. And when Instacart announced it was winding down Caper Cart, retailers that invested in the carts were left asking about long-term support. If a provider or a sponsor walks away, who owns the equipment, and who pays to keep it running?

THE LENS · IN-STORE RETAIL MEDIA · AT THE SHOW

WHAT WE'RE WATCHING AT NRF

Four sessions, three days. Two of the Sunday sessions were on our experiential retail list too. This time we're watching them for what they mean for retail media. They still overlap, so you'll have to pick one.

ROAD TO NRF '27 · WALKING INTO JAVITS

Retail media sessions on our list

Saturday, January 9 – Tuesday, January 12 · New York

SAT · 8:30 AM

Commerce Media Saturday

WHERE
Lavan Midtown (offsite)

ADD-ON

SUN · 11:30 AM

The Next Era of Digital Retail: From Connected Stores to Adaptive Experiences

FEATURING
Sephora · Outform

SAME TIME SLOT

SUN · 11:30 AM

What If Retail Becomes Entertainment First, Commerce Second?

FEATURING
VS & Co. · PepsiCo · Gap

SAME TIME SLOT

TUE · 9:15 AM

The Last Digital Frontier: Reinventing the Physical Store

FEATURING
Cust2Mate

Cambridge Retail Advisors · Booth 6703

Check the NRF app for rooms and updates

A FEW COMPANIES WORTH EXPLORING

- **VusionGroup (Booth 4839).** Connected shelf technology, electronic shelf labels, and retail media. How does advertising stay aligned with pricing, promotions, and inventory?
- **Creative Realities (Booth 2201).** Digital signage, content management, and retail media. How are campaigns managed and reliably delivered across locations?
- **Ergonomic Solutions / SpacePole (Booth 3447).** Mounting and installation infrastructure. Accessibility, security, maintenance, and equipment replacement.
- **dunnhumby (Booth 6305).** Customer strategy, loyalty insights, personalization, and measurement. Can those insights show where retail media actually adds value?
- **Cust2Mate (Booth 4846).** Connected shopping, smart-cart advertising, and shopper insights. Does it improve the trip, or add another distraction?

A connected store doesn't have to mean a constantly monitored store. Ask what customer information a platform really needs, and what shoppers get in return.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

58.6%
69.6%

In our CRA/Pollfish Checkout Series survey of 500 U.S. shoppers, 58.6% of those who had encountered sponsored checkout ads rated them annoying or very annoying, and 69.6% wanted a clear "skip" or "no thanks" option for unwanted checkout prompts. That's checkout, not the whole store. But if the first few displays generate revenue, why not add another ten or twenty?

TAKE THESE FIVE QUESTIONS TO EVERY BOOTH

1. Can you prove the advertising works, with incremental sales and return on investment beyond playback counts?
2. How does it fit into the connected store? Does it work with pricing, inventory, loyalty, and POS?
3. Can manufacturers and retailers build experiences together? Who controls content when competing brands participate?
4. How do you protect customer privacy? What information is necessary, who uses it, and what choices do shoppers have?
5. What happens when something goes wrong? Who supports the technology when equipment fails or partnerships end?

THE TEST

Are we designing retail media around the customer journey, or asking customers to navigate around our retail media?

COMING UP IN THE SERIES

Parts 6 and 7 cover inventory and returns, and the systems that have to work together.

Previously: Part 4, AI Agents and Checkout: Can They Help Retailers and Customers Work Together?

SCAN

Read the article

Open the guide

ABOUT CAMBRIDGE RETAIL ADVISORS

We aren't software vendors, and we aren't theoretical consultants. CRA is a specialized retail advisory firm of seasoned industry operators who have lived with the systems, led the implementations, and solved the operational friction. Strategy, system selection, and execution grounded in real retail experience. Read the full article at cambridgeretailadvisors.com. **See us at NRF '27, Booth 6703.**