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RETAIL

Virtual Reality, Digitization and Social Media Shake Up Retail

By **Andrew Asch** | Thursday, May 16, 2019

The future of retail is looking like a chapter out of a science-fiction novel.

Not too long down the road, shoppers will be able to try on highly accurate three-dimensional representations of clothes in virtual dressing rooms. And consumers might have as much control over the look and style of their garments and shoes as a designer.

Those were some of the predictions at the Marcum Retail Symposium, held May 9 at the JW Marriott hotel at L.A. Live in downtown Los Angeles.

The annual symposium has consistently focused on changes in retail and fashion—topics that should be on the radar of every retailer and fashion manufacturer, said Ron Friedman, a partner in Marcum LLP, an accounting and advisory firm.

The event's panels covered a number of topics on the apparel-manufacturing and retail horizon.

The science-fiction future of fashion seems to be wrapped up in technology, such as manufacturing items from 3-D printers. Safir Bellali, VF Corp.'s senior director of advanced digital creation, noted that digital technology allows designers to build virtual samples of their designs.

Working with a virtual sample, or a garment's "digital twin," is a lot more efficient than waiting for a factory to manufacture samples because designers can make changes to digital twins faster than with traditional clothing samples.

As consumers will be able to try on 3-D representations of clothes online, this could lead to increased demand for personal customization of clothing, with brands giving consumers opportunities to design clothes and shoes with their own prints and graphics.

Vans, a VF Corp.-owned footwear brand, currently offers a customization service where consumers can print their own graphics on the bodies of a pair of Vans shoes.

Bellali said that his colleagues have discussed how the popularity of customization might affect designers, but he believes they will still continue to be important. "Designers will help create the

options. Not everyone is creative to a point where they'll upload their own content," Bellali said. "For the most part, [consumers] will select from a multiplicity of options—material options and color options—curated by designers."

Is Big Brother watching?

As big data grows more important to retailers, governments are writing laws to protect citizens from data breaches. The European Union started enforcing its General Data Protection Regulation guidelines in 2018. That same year, former California Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law the California Consumer Privacy Act, which many believe to be as strong as the European laws.

Any company doing digital business in California or Europe will have to follow data-privacy laws and respect consumers' requests to view data and not sell it to third parties.

Attorney Gina Bibby, a partner who specializes in fashion technology at Brutzkus Gubner Rozansky Seror Weber, noted that companies found to be breaking data-privacy laws will be subject to heavy penalties. "If you don't need the data, don't keep it because it is a liability. Don't collect it in the first place," Bibby advised.

Todd Harple, Intel Corp.'s director of experience innovation and path finding, noted that data will become a bargaining chip with big business. "In the future, we're going to see a pivot toward people wanting to know what you'll give them in exchange for their information. People have become a lot more savvy. We've been studying this at Intel for more than a decade now," Harple said.

Courtney Halverson, of the blog and social-media site PrettyLittleFawn, talked about how influencers with followings of more than 10,000 people can use a "swipe up" icon on their Instagram sites, which makes it easier to shop on that site. "I think the swipe-up link is a great way to drive sales," Halverson said. "It is an immediate way to take people from your [Instagram] stories to websites."

But she recommended that influencers not post discount codes daily, which comes off as a hard sales pitch and breaks etiquette in the social-media world.

Despite all the futuristic talk, some things remain the same, said Dan Jablons, the owner of the Southern California-based Retail Smart Guys. Having the right merchandise at the right time, selling puffer jackets when weather is cold and bathing suits when it is hot, continues to be crucial to retail success.