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Harrison Leaves CVS After 19 Years

WOONSOCKET, R.I. — CVS vice president of merchandising for beauty and personal care Andrea Harrison has left the company for "a new opportunity," she wrote on LinkedIn.

After 19 years with CVS, "it was a bittersweet departure, with so many memories and so hard leaving an amazing team," she wrote. "There are more people to thank for the experience and opportunities I had than I could possibly capture here, and I am sure I didn't get to everyone in my final weeks.

"While I will now watch from the sidelines, I can't wait to see what the incredibly talented team there continues to do to help beauty lovers of all generations find a healthier relationship with beauty."

Harrison was responsible for the cosmetics, skin, fragrance, hair and personal care categories, as well as the beauty service program within the company's retail business.

She said this year that today's beauty shopper expects not only tried-and-true products but also the accessible health and wellness offerings and convenience that CVS offers them.

"That health and wellness focus has driven many of the moves my team and I have led over the years, not least of which is the continued evolution of the Beauty Mark initiative, one of the achievements I am most proud of," said Harrison.

Walmart Adding 22 Health Clinics

BENTONVILLE, Ark. — Walmart said it will open 22 Walmart Health clinics this year, including 18 in Texas. With the additions, Walmart will operate more than 70 physician-staffed health clinics in five states by year's end. The company plans to introduce the clinics to a sixth market, Arizona, in 2025.

The facilities are staffed by locally focused board-certified providers.

"Walmart Health remains focused on delivering health care that is convenient, personalized to each patient, inclusive of multiple service lines, all delivered by a community-focused team of board-certified providers," said David Carmouche, Walmart's senior vice president of health care delivery. "As we have from the beginning, we are taking a measured approach to growing our footprint, taking into account the unique needs of each community. We're thrilled to be expanding into Missouri and deepening our presence in Texas this year."

Walmart has emphasized that it introduced Walmart Health centers in 2019 to fill a gap in patient care by providing services beyond the diagnostic tests and immunizations that characterize much of the work performed at retail clinics. Each of the new Walmart Health centers will be about 5,400 square feet in size, located inside Walmart Supercenters, and feature Walmart Health's suite of health services, which encompass primary and urgent care, labs, X-ray and diagnostics, telehealth, behavioral health, dental health, optometry and hearing services.

Walmart also said the new centers in Texas will offer value-based care for certain senior populations, where its board-certified providers make it easy for seniors to get annual checkups and dental cleanings and support managing chronic conditions all in one location. The company added that the centers will meet the needs of busy families, seniors and their caregivers by offering care seven days a week, with convenient weekend and evening hours as well as telehealth options on Sundays.

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Moderate Growth Seen For Retail Sales This Year

WASHINGTON — Retail sales this year will increase between 2.5% and 3.5% from 2023 levels, according to the latest forecast from the National Retail Federation (NRF), which foresees sales rising to between $5.23 trillion and $5.28 trillion.

"The resiliency of consumers continues to power the American economy, and we are confident there will be moderate but steady growth through the end of the year," Matthew Shay, president and chief executive officer of NRF, said in releasing the forecast. "Successful retailers offer consumers products and services when, where and how they want to shop, with prices they want to pay."

NRF's 2024 sales forecast compares with 3.6% annual sales growth and a total of $5.1 trillion in sales in 2023. The estimate for this year is in line with the 10-year pre-pandemic average annual sales growth of 3.6%. NRF forecasts that non-store and online sales, which are included in the total figure, will increase between 7% and 9% year over year to a range of $1.47 trillion to $1.50 trillion. That compares with non-store and online sales of $1.38 trillion in 2023.

NRF expects gross domestic product (GDP) growth of about 2.3% this year, down from last year's 2.5% but sufficiently robust to sustain job growth.

The federation said it expects the rise in consumer prices to

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Rite Aid Is Closing Another 53 Stores

PHILADELPHIA — Rite Aid this month announced plans to close 53 more stores, adding to the roughly 200 it has shuttered since filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection late last year.

Officials with the retail pharmacy chain said decisions about which stores to close are based on factors including business strategy, lease and rent considerations, local business conditions and viability, and store performance. Prescriptions are automatically transferred to a nearby Rite Aid store unless a customer requests otherwise, the company said.

Rite Aid operates 1,690 stores, according to its website. That's down from about 2,000 locations in October, when the company filed for federal Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

The chain has been reporting annual losses for several years and, like its rivals, faces huge financial risks from lawsuits over opioid prescriptions. Rite Aid already has reached several settlements, including one announced last year with the state of West Virginia for up to $30 million.

Rite Aid filed for bankruptcy seeking to reduce its debt, close underperforming stores and divest non-core business units. Rite Aid in January received bankruptcy court approval to sell its pharmacy benefits company, Elixir.

And last month, the company said it had entered into an asset-purchase agreement for the partial sale of its Health Dialog business to Carenet Health.

Meijer Plans to Open Two Supercenters in Ohio, One in Michigan

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — Meijer will open two new 159,000-square-foot supercenters, in Alliance and North Canton, Ohio, on May 14, increasing the retailer's store count to 55 in the state.

Meijer previously announced plans to open a 159,000-square-foot supercenter in Hillsdale, Mich. That store is also scheduled to open on May 14.

The Ohio supercenters will feature all the products Meijer customers have come to expect, the company said, including grocery staples, fresh produce, bakery, meat and deli, as well as floral items, a garden center and home goods. The store will also include a pharmacy, health and beauty care, an expansive pet department, electronics, toys, sports and apparel. A Meijer Express gas station will open on April 18 adjacent to the North Canton location.

"Ohio has always been significant to us, as it was the first state we expanded to outside of Michigan," said Todd Anderson, vice president of the Ohio Region for Meijer. "The feedback we've received from customers here in northeast Ohio about our value and convenience has been overwhelmingly positive, and we look forward to building upon that momentum specifically here in Alliance and North Canton."

Meijer opened its first store in Ohio in 1981 and has invested heavily in the state ever since. The retailer employs more than 11,000 team members statewide at stores and its distribution and manufacturing facilities in Tipp City, and it plans to continue investing in the state through new store openings, remodeling current stores, creating jobs, and continuing to invest in team members and local nonprofits.

The new supercenter in Michigan also promises to deliver value and convenience in a one-stop shop. The Hillsdale supercenter will feature Meijer's typical products: grocery staples, fresh produce, bakery items, meat, and deli foods, as well as a floral area, garden center and home goods section. The store will include a pharmacy, health and beauty care, and an expansive pet department along with electronics, toys, sports and apparel. A Meijer Express gas station is also opening in April adjacent to the store.

Meijer was founded in Michigan, opening its first store in Greenville in 1934, and has invested heavily in its home state ever since. The retailer employs approximately 40,000 team

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Digital Shelf Tags Can Revolutionize Category Management

By Adrien Boudier

In retail's fast-paced landscape, it is imperative for grocers to automate traditional operations. Retailers leveraging technology to transform their category strategies are positioned to stay ahead of the curve, meet evolving consumer demands — and drive long-term loyalty.

One innovation poised to revolutionize category management strategies is digital shelf tags. Replacing traditional paper tags, electronic shelf labels (ESLs) offer myriad benefits for both retailers and consumers — and adoption is on the upswing.

Driven by the opportunity to improve pricing strategies and deliver more customer-centric store-level experiences, the global ESL market is expected to grow at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16.84% from 2022 to 2028, according to market research firm reportlinker.com.

Among the many opportunities presented by ESLs, the most appealing is their ability to provide real-time data insights — making digital shelf tags a mission-critical solution helping grocers to automate traditional category management processes.

Traditional category management often relied on periodic manual audits and data collection, which was time-consuming and prone to errors. However, digital shelf tags equipped with sensors and connectivity are changing the game. With access to instantaneous updates on product availability, pricing and consumer preferences, retailers are positioned to make informed decisions promptly. This enables them to optimize inventory levels, pricing strategies and product placements — and more accurately meet consumer demand.

Digital shelf tags are also designed to enhance operational efficiency and cost effectiveness. This will become increasingly important as retailers expect to wholly or partially automate up to 70% of routine tasks by 2025, according to the "2023 Connected Retail Experience Study," a report by Incisiv and Verizon Business.

Included among the tasks ESLs automate are labor-intensive manual price changes and updates. Digital tags enable retailers to remotely update prices, promotions and product information across multiple locations simultaneously, eliminating the need for manual intervention. By freeing up significant time and labor resources, retailers are primed to streamline operations, reduce labor costs and minimize errors.

Not only can retailers redeploy associates to customer-facing high-value tasks (18% of retailers) and support business operations (26% of retailers), but these factors also contribute to improved profitability and competitiveness, the "2023 Connected Retail Experience Study" explained.

Digital shelf tags also pave the way for dynamic pricing strategies and personalized marketing initiatives. At the heart of these initiatives are data analytics that provide real-time insights — the foundation needed to elevate ESL functionality.

Leveraging insights from data reporting algorithms, retailers can make informed pricing decisions based on real-time factors including customer demand, seasonality and competitor pricing.

> *ESLs provide data insights in real time.*

By applying specific consumer preferences and purchasing behavior to the mix for example, digital tags can be programmed to deliver targeted marketing campaigns and personalized promotions to shoppers right at the store shelf.

These personalized experiences can spur customer loyalty and a company's gross sales, respectively. Specifically, customized efforts lift revenues between 5% and 15%, and marketing ROI can increase between 10% and 30%, according to "What is Personalization?" from McKinsey & Co.

Consumers also benefit from the technology. Offering enhanced transparency and convenience — especially when supported by interactive displays and digital signage — digital tags provide real-time access to product recommendations, recipe ideas or educational content related to specific categories. This combination offers accurate, relevant product information, enabling consumers to make more-informed purchasing decisions.

Finally, ESLs facilitate seamless omnichannel integration. In an increasingly interconnected retail landscape, consumers expect a consistent experience across online and off-line channels. Digital tags synchronize store-level pricing, promotions and product assortments across various touchpoints, ensuring a cohesive and unified brand experience. This omnichannel approach not only enhances customer satisfaction but also drives cross-channel sales and engagement.

The rapid expansion of digital shelf tag use represents a significant paradigm shift in retail category management. By harnessing

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the power of real-time data, operational efficiency, dynamic pricing and personalized marketing, retailers can optimize their category strategies to meet evolving consumer demands effectively. Moreover, providing greater store-level transparency, convenience and omnichannel integration, these tags clearly enrich the overall shopping experience.

As technology continues to advance, the adoption of digital shelf tags is poised to become a cornerstone of modern retailing, driving innovation and reshaping the future of category management.

Adrien Boudier is vice president of VusionGroup.

How Retailers Can Stay Away From Pitfalls in the AI Gold Rush

By Prashant Agrawal

Artificial Intelligence, you may have heard, is kind of a big deal, as much in retail as elsewhere. In fact, AI was a big deal in retail before the current gold rush kicked off by the splash success of ChatGPT and other generative AI technologies, though you wouldn't know it from the media coverage. Because the distinction between genuine AI innovators and Johnny-come-latelies can be difficult to perceive, not to mention a serious danger to any retailer's bottom line, this article will point out several pitfalls inherent in this particular gold rush as well as how to avoid them.

Let's start off with answering the question why AI newbies offer subpar retail analytics solutions. The response starts with a lack of industry-specific customization. Retail analytics solutions that have been recently upgraded with AI are often built on generic models that aren't tailored to unique retail challenges and nuances — so they don't accurately predict trends, demand or customer behaviors, leading to poor decision making, lower-user adoption rates and overall customer dissatisfaction.

Next, AI newbies tend to have inadequate data integration

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capabilities. Non-native AI platforms struggle to integrate, process and analyze data from diverse sources such as point-of-sale systems, online sales data, inventory management systems and customer feedback channels — the result is incomplete insights and flawed decision making. To get a comprehensive operational view, retailers may resort to using multiple systems, which increases complexity and the potential for errors.

AI newbies also have limited scalability and flexibility. AI capabilities layered on existing systems simply can't easily grow with your business or adapt to its evolving needs, especially during peak times like holiday seasons. As data volume increases, these systems are likely to slow down and become less responsive, leading you to invest in new software sooner than you'd expected.

Finally, solutions from AI newbies are likely to be overly complex and have a poor user experience. Due to their immaturity, companies new to AI may develop, or invest in, non-intuitive AI solutions that are challenging to use, require significant training — time spent learning such software detracts from core business activities — and lead to poor user adoption, negating any potential benefits.

So, what should retailers look for in a retail AI platform and vendor?

Retailers should begin their solution search by requiring deep, native AI integration. Analytics companies are scrambling to add AI capabilities to existing platforms, but it's much better to select a partner with products that are built from the ground up with AI at their core, not as an afterthought. This deep integration ensures seamless operation and advanced functionalities that are intricately woven into every aspect of the platform.

Retail is all about continuous learning and adaptation, so retail tech must be too. Managers need software that's rich in machine learning models, because it continually learns and adapts, enabling retail operations to navigate ever-changing market dynamics.

All companies need comprehensive and customizable solutions, and retail needs them even more because of the dynamic nature of the industry. Choose a platform with a holistic suite of analytics products that span workforce management, predictive modeling, demand forecasting, inventory optimization, procurement, loyalty, pricing strategies, the works. Each tool

> *Select solutions built with AI from the get-go.*

should be deeply integrated with AI for unparalleled accuracy and data-driven insights. Avoid fragmented solutions with limited scope.

It's an understatement to say business decisions in retail are time sensitive so real-time analytics are required. Native AI platforms provide the ability to make real-time decisions and respond swiftly to market changes, crucial in the fast-paced retail sector. Bolt-on AI solutions simply can't match it.

Another set of capabilities required for the 21st century retailer is flexibility and scalability. Native AI architecture supports extensive customization to meet the industry's unique needs and ensures the platform scales as business grows. Lesser AI platforms provide rigid, one-size-fits-all solutions that will disappoint in the long run.

Last but not least, retailers should find a vendor with a commitment to technological advancement. Only a partner that continually brings in new technologies and refines existing ones is going to help meet company goals. An ongoing commitment to innovation is a clear differentiator from companies whose AI efforts are primarily about marketing.

By selecting a partner with solutions built with AI from the get-go, retailers can best take advantage of the benefits the technology promises, from vastly improved operational performance and enhanced workforce productivity to stronger engagement with customers.

Prashant Agrawal is founder and chief executive officer of Impact Analytics.