



SHOPTALK 2026 · CONFERENCE REPORT

Conference Report

Key Takeaways &

Emerging Themes

 March 2026 Las Vegas, NV 5 Defining Themes

What the industry is talking about — distilled.

Shoptalk 2026 brought together thousands of retail leaders, technologists, and brand builders in Las Vegas to wrestle with the forces reshaping commerce. Across keynotes, panels, and product launches, five defining themes emerged. This report synthesizes what attendees heard, debated, and left believing.

5

defining themes

\$170B

untapped inventory opportunity

30%

better conversion, creator video

180%

New Balance growth in 5 years

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Setting the Scene

Shoptalk has always been a barometer for where retail's center of gravity is moving. In 2026, that movement felt less like a slow drift and more like a decisive shift. The conversations that dominated hallways and mainstage alike shared a common undercurrent: the gap between what technology can do and what retailers are actually doing has narrowed dramatically — and the retailers who haven't closed that gap are beginning to feel it.

If previous years were defined by experimentation and question marks, this year felt like the point at which the industry collectively said: we know what works. The question is no longer "should we?" but "how fast can we?"

What follows are the five themes that defined Shoptalk 2026 — the ideas that cut across every session, every panel, and every product announcement, and that attendees carried home as their organizing framework for the year ahead.

AI Has Moved from Pilot to Production

The most significant shift at Shoptalk 2026 was tonal. For the past several years, AI conversations in retail centered on experiments. This year, nearly every speaker was talking about AI in the past tense — things they had already built, deployed, measured. The experimentation phase is over. Production is here.



"With ~2,500 engineers and a 20-million SKU catalog, Wayfair has deployed AI across three distinct fronts simultaneously: customer-facing tools, internal automation, and supplier enablement. Each delivers measurable ROI."

Wayfair's leadership drew an explicit and sobering parallel: generative AI is a technology shift comparable in magnitude to the Internet, and those who hesitate will find themselves in the same position as retailers who were slow to build e-commerce capabilities in the early 2000s. The message was not hyperbolic — it was delivered with the grounded authority of a team that has been building AI infrastructure for years and can now point to results.

Perhaps the most future-facing conversation centered on "agentic commerce" — AI that acts on behalf of consumers to identify, evaluate, and purchase products with minimal human intervention. This is not science fiction: the infrastructure is being built now, and the retailers who have clean, rich, contextually dense product data will be the ones whose products get surfaced when AI agents go shopping.

Macy's offered a different but equally concrete picture. AI is automating markdowns, streamlining sales-set processes, and consolidating store reporting for leadership — freeing associate time that is immediately redirected toward customers. In a 2,200-store footprint, these are not marginal gains. They compound.

48%

enterprise stakeholders plan \$4M+ AI investment in 2026

3

AI deployment fronts at Wayfair: customer, internal, supplier

30+

years of retail evolution Macy's has navigated — AI is next

AI Has Moved from Pilot to Production

Blanket AI deployment does not guarantee results

Wayfair's experience was explicit — deploying copilots broadly does not immediately move the bottom line. The highest-ROI applications are targeted, measurable, and operationally specific. Identify the two or three problems AI can solve with clear financial impact, and start there.

Agentic commerce requires data readiness now

When AI agents shop on behalf of consumers, they will surface products from catalogs with the richest, most accurate attribute data. Retailers and brands that treat product data as a strategic asset will win the agentic moment. Those who don't will be invisible to it.

Lean in early

The dot-com parallel is apt. Early movers built durable advantages in e-commerce that took competitors a decade to close. The same dynamic is unfolding now with AI — the window for early-mover advantage is open, but not indefinitely.

The Physical Store Is Having a Renaissance

The death of the store has been predicted so many times that its continued vitality has become its own story. But Shoptalk 2026 went further — the conversation was about stores as active investments, capital-intensive, strategically differentiated, and increasingly central to building competitive advantage.



"\$25M+ invested in store refreshes in 15 months. Flagship remodels across SoHo, Harajuku, Oxford Street, and Boston. Store formats tailored by neighborhood purpose, refreshed on five-year cycles."

Wayfair is opening 150,000 sq ft flagships — a deliberate correction after a smaller test format at 5,000 sq ft failed to generate the immersive experience required for a high-consideration home goods purchase. The Chicago store drove more than 15% local market growth in Illinois and comped positively in year two, offering hard evidence that physical scale, done right, translates directly into digital performance in the surrounding market.

Meta's MetaLab reframed the purpose of the store entirely. Rather than a place to transact, the store is "the richest place for data for retailers everywhere" — a living laboratory where behavioral signals from what customers pick up, where they linger, and what closes the sale can be captured and used to inform digital marketing, merchandising strategy, and supply planning. The store that learns is more valuable than the store that simply sells.

New Balance told a brand story that is inseparable from its store strategy. After a difficult period from 2015 to 2019, the brand rebuilt around a singular target consumer — a global, independent 18–29-year-old — and then designed every store to speak directly to that person. The result: 180% growth over five years, outpacing the entire sneaker market. Premium store experiences and strict pricing discipline were not costs; they were the engine.

150K

sq ft: Wayfair's new flagship store format

>15%

local market growth from Wayfair Chicago store

180%

New Balance revenue growth over five years

5

MetaLab locations operating as retail R&D labs

The Physical Store Is Having a Renaissance

Scale matters in physical retail

Wayfair's 5,000 sq ft test failed. At 150,000 sq ft, it worked. The store format must match the category's emotional and experiential requirements. For high-consideration purchases, under-investing in the physical environment is a false economy.

Stores are performance media

The MetaLab insight is transferable. Every physical retail location generates behavioral data that most retailers are currently discarding. Building infrastructure to capture in-store signals is a meaningful competitive advantage.

Premium positioning requires physical commitment

New Balance's results make a clear case: you cannot claim a premium brand position while underinvesting in the physical environments where that brand lives. Store quality signals brand quality.

The Purchase Funnel Is Being Redesigned

The traditional purchase funnel was built for a world where the consumer did the work of moving between stages. That world is ending. At Shoptalk 2026, multiple sessions converged on the same observation: the funnel stages are collapsing, actors are multiplying, and the path from discovery to transaction is becoming shorter and increasingly mediated by non-human agents.



"110M hours of shopping-related content watched annually. Creator-led videos convert ~30% better than traditional ads. 70% of Gen Z prefers creator-led content over brand-produced formats."



"Shoppers who engage with experiential activations spend 4–5× more time on macys.com compared to transactional shoppers. The in-store experience is a digital performance driver."

Creator commerce has matured into a core channel, not a marketing tactic. YouTube now generates more watch time than cable and broadcast television combined. Within that scale, creators function as purchase filters — audiences trust them the way they trust friends, and that trust translates directly into buying behavior. Brands that haven't built creator relationships are absent from some of the highest-conversion discovery environments available today.

Wayfair's Stylus product illustrates the convergence of these forces. The AI chatbot allows customers to visualize furniture in their actual spaces, addressing the specific confidence barrier that has historically slowed home goods conversion online. Discovery, visualization, and purchase are integrated into a single seamless experience — and the result is a measurably higher likelihood to buy.

But creators are only one side of the funnel's redesign. On the other end, AI agents are beginning to collapse the later stages entirely. In the emerging agentic commerce paradigm, a consumer's expressed intent — a voice prompt, a search query, a visual input — can be routed directly to a transaction by an AI that evaluates options, checks availability, and completes the purchase. The consumer never moves through a funnel. The funnel moves around them.

The Purchase Funnel Is Being Redesigned

Be where discovery happens

Creators on YouTube, AI agents, and experiential in-store moments are now the primary discovery environments for large and growing consumer segments. Brands relying on traditional search and display advertising are competing for a shrinking slice of attention.

Creator relationships are a commerce infrastructure investment

Long-term creator partnerships — with flexible briefs, real product experiences, and affiliate structures — generate compounding returns. One-off campaigns are the least efficient use of creator budgets.

The in-store experience is a digital acquisition tool

Macy's data confirms: customers who have a meaningful in-store experience become more engaged digital customers. Physical and digital are not competing for the same consumer — they are sequencing her.

Product data readiness determines agentic commerce eligibility

When AI agents evaluate purchase options, they work from structured product data. Brands with incomplete or contextually thin product attributes will not appear in agent-generated offer cards. This is an existential gap.

Delivery and Operations: The Loyalty That's Being Lost

If the front of the house was dominated by AI and creator content, the back of the house had its own reckoning at Shoptalk 2026. Fulfillment, long treated as a cost center to be minimized, was reframed as a brand promise to be kept — and the data on what happens when that promise breaks is stark.



"Two consecutive delivery failures typically eliminate the customer's third chance. Delivery is not a logistics metric — it is a retention metric."

The numbers framed the problem with uncomfortable clarity. Eight percent of first-attempt deliveries fail — roughly one in twelve customers. Each failed delivery costs between \$17 and \$40. And 50 to 80% of customer service team time is consumed by "where's my order?" inquiries. These are not edge cases. They are structural costs that compound across every high-volume retail operation, and most of them are preventable.

The conversation around autonomous delivery added a different dimension. Wing grew more than five times in the past year, with drone delivery promising sub-five-minute fulfillment for small, immediate baskets. The estimated economic impact — up to \$2.4B in annual cost savings and \$8.3B in additional sales potential — reflects both the scale of the last-mile problem and the magnitude of the opportunity in solving it differently.

SuperCircle brought a perspective that reframed the entire inventory picture. The largest untapped opportunity in retail, by their estimate, is not acquiring new customers or opening new channels — it is optimizing the products that have already been made, that are sitting in warehouses, in stores, and in customer closets. They put the figure at \$170 billion. AI-enabled itemization and digital product records, they argued, are the unlock.

The orchestration layer — the middle tier connecting commerce front ends to logistics systems — emerged as a structural gap that is costing retailers more than they realize. Disconnected inventory pools cause local stockouts even when product exists in other locations. Stale data causes order cancellations at the worst possible moments. One retailer in the session faced \$500,000 to switch logistics providers, a cost that reflected the price of having built without modularity.

8%

first-attempt delivery failure rate

\$170B

untapped value in inventory & returns

5x

Wing autonomous delivery growth in 12 months

\$500K

cost to switch logistics providers (one retailer)

Delivery and Operations: The Loyalty That's Being Lost

Treat delivery as a brand promise, not a logistics function

Shipping is moving a box from A to B. Delivery is the customer experience of receiving what was promised, when it was promised. Failing at delivery fails the brand, not just the operation.

Proactive exception management is a retention investment

AI agents that detect, reroute, and resolve delivery exceptions before the customer notices them are not a luxury — they are a loyalty preservation tool. The math on acquisition vs. retention makes this obvious.

Build the middle tier

A single, real-time inventory view connecting all fulfillment channels — stores, online, social, wholesale — is the foundation of modern operations. Without it, every investment in personalization is undermined by execution failures.

The circular economy is a revenue line

SuperCircle's trade-in program generated \$9M in net revenue last year, with ~30% coming from new or returning customers. Returns and aftermarket inventory are not a cost to manage — they are a business to build.

Human Connection Is Still the Differentiator

Against the backdrop of AI deployments, autonomous delivery, and agentic commerce, Shoptalk 2026 offered a counterweight equally emphatic: the most durable competitive advantages in retail remain deeply human. The brands winning right now are not the ones who replaced people with technology — they used technology to make their people more effective and their experiences more resonant.



"AI provides in-store associates with real-time product knowledge, fit guidance, and styling combinations — increasing sales confidence and measurably improving customer satisfaction scores. Technology in service of the human, not instead of it."

"Technology is most powerful when it makes the human experience richer, not when it removes the human experience entirely. Every speaker who has scaled something at Shoptalk 2026 has done it by combining, not substituting."

Macy's framing was deliberate and consistent: AI is an augmentation of a human-driven business, not a replacement for human experience. The retailer added staffing across 2,200 stores while simultaneously deploying AI to handle operational burden — because the strategic bet is that the associate who is free to engage with a customer is worth more than any amount of back-office automation.

New Balance made the same argument through a different lens. The brand's 180% growth was not built on a technology platform or a media strategy. It was built on a deeply held and precisely defined idea about who their customer is and what she deserves from a brand experience. Every decision — product, price, store design, athlete partner — was filtered through that idea. The result is a brand with genuine emotional resonance in a market full of technically proficient competitors.

The creator commerce conversation reinforced the point from a different angle. Creator-led content converts 30% better than traditional advertising not because it is more targeted or more efficiently delivered — it is because it is trusted. Audiences trust creators the way they trust friends. That trust is a human quality that no algorithm can manufacture. It can only be attracted and retained by brands that are genuinely authentic in what they make and how they communicate.

Even Wayfair, the most technically sophisticated company represented at the show, was emphatic on this point. The home category is emotionally charged — people are making decisions about where they live, how they feel, who they are at home. Technology helps them discover and decide, but the in-store designers and service teams handling kitchen remodels and material selection are the reason customers trust Wayfair with those decisions at all.

Human Connection Is Still the Differentiator

Invest in your people at the same time as your technology

Macy's is both adding staff and deploying AI. Technology that replaces associates reduces experience quality. Technology that enables associates creates the conditions for loyalty.

Authenticity is a commercial strategy

New Balance's results demonstrate that brands with a clear and genuine identity — one driving every product and experience decision consistently — build customer relationships that withstand competitive pressure. Authenticity is not a value statement. It is a growth strategy.

Creator relationships require genuine trust

The most effective creator partnerships give creators latitude to tell stories in their own voice. Restrictive briefs produce content audiences recognize as inauthentic. The brand that trusts its creator partners earns the trust of their audiences.

Curated discovery beats infinite choice

Macy's, Wayfair, and MetaLab all pointed to the same consumer need — not more options, but more confident decisions. The retailer that curates, recommends, and guides is more valuable than the one that simply lists.

What Leaders Are Taking Home

The conversations at Shoptalk 2026 were unusually concrete. Attendees left not with trends to watch but decisions to make. Five priorities emerged as what retail leaders are taking back to act on.

01

Audit your product data.

Agentic commerce, creator discovery, and AI-powered search all depend on data quality. The gap between your current state and what AI systems require is likely larger than you think — and the cost of ignoring it is compounding.

02

Decide what your store is for.

Is it a transaction point, a community hub, a data engine, a brand statement? The most effective retailers at Shoptalk 2026 had a clear answer to this question and had invested accordingly.

03

Get serious about fulfillment as a brand promise.

Delivery failures are retention failures. Build the exception management infrastructure, the inventory visibility, and the escalation protocols that prevent failures before customers experience them.

04

Build creator relationships before you need them.

The brands winning on YouTube and in social commerce started early, gave creators genuine latitude, and built long-term partnerships. The one-off campaign mentality is a structural disadvantage.

05

Combine your technology investment with a people investment.

The retailers growing fastest at Shoptalk 2026 are not choosing between AI and associates — they are doing both. Technology that empowers people generates better outcomes than technology that replaces them.

This report synthesizes session content from Shoptalk 2026, held in Las Vegas, March 2026. Prepared by Incisiv.

Sessions referenced: Agentic Commerce & AI · Creator Commerce Shift · Keeping the Delivery Promise · New Balance Growth Play · Retail Labs & Omnichannel · Stores & AI Blend · Wayfair: AI & Stores



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