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NRF 2026:

WHAT RETAIL LEADERS ARE PAYING ATTENTION TO NOW

NRF '26 RETAIL'S BIG SHOW

AI Agents Are Becoming the New Operating Layer

Agentic commerce is scaling—and it needs a common language.

At NRF 2026, AI in retail clearly moved beyond assistance toward agent-led decision-making across discovery, checkout, service, and fulfillment. As agents begin to act independently, interoperability is becoming the defining requirement.
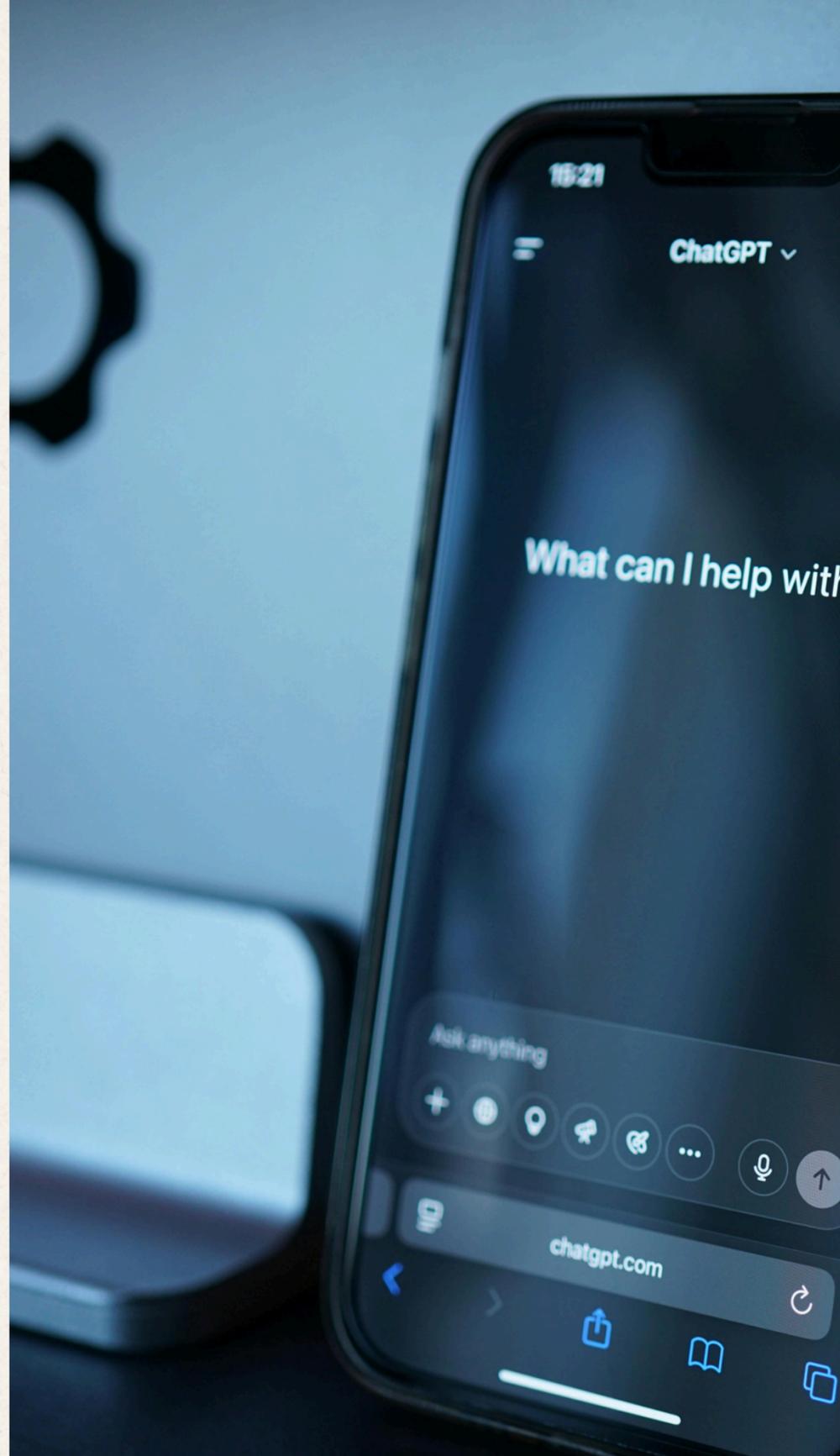
The spotlight

- Assistants answered; agents now execute
- The emergence of the Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP) as an open standard, to give shopping agents a common language to work together seamlessly across the entire journey

Implications for retail leaders

For CIOs / CTOs:

- Open standards like UCP are critical to avoid agent silos.

For COOs:

- Autonomous decisions introduce new operational risk that must be actively managed.

For CEOs:

- Competitive advantage shifts from AI access to decision accountability at scale.

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Everything is Experience-driven

Leaders are investing in integrated experiences that deepen customer intimacy.

At NRF 2026, the emphasis shifted from experimenting with isolated AI use cases to building connected, end-to-end experiences that reliably serve customers and strengthen long-term relationships.

The spotlight

- Less focus on novelty, more focus on integration and orchestration
- AI applied where it improves consistency, relevance, and trust
- Experience investments moving into data, systems, and coordination

Implications for retail leaders

For CX & Digital leaders:
- Differentiation comes from how well experiences connect across touchpoints.

For Technology leaders:
- Orchestration matters more than adding new tools.

For Executive teams:
- Customer intimacy becomes a result of aligned systems, not isolated personalization.

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Trust Has Replaced Efficiency as the Real AI Battleground

AI's next test is customer confidence, not cost reduction.

Retail leaders and public thought leadership are aligned on one point: efficiency proved AI's value; trust will determine its future.

2027

- Personalization must feel intentional, not intrusive
- Automation must remove friction without removing empathy
- Customer-facing AI failures are more damaging than internal ones

Implications for retail leaders

For CMOs & CX leaders:
- AI experience quality becomes a trust issue, not just a performance metric.

For Risk & Compliance teams:
- Trust must be designed into experiences–not addressed after deployment.

For Executive leadership:
- Customer confidence becomes a strategic KPI alongside revenue and margin.

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Speed Has Again Become the New Competitive Moat

Execution velocity now matters more than scale.

The NRF 2026 theme "The Next Now" reflected a clear industry reality: advantage now belongs to retailers who can move from insight to impact quickly, not those with the largest transformation programs.

- Long, multi-year roadmaps are losing relevance
- Modular, staged execution is outperforming big-bang initiatives
- Organizational friction–not technology–is the real bottleneck

Implications for retail leaders

For CIOs / Transformation leaders:
- Architecture must support rapid iteration and deployment.

For COOs:
- Decision latency directly affects customer experience and competitiveness.

For CEOs:
- Speed of execution is becoming a board-level performance indicator.

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Data Is Retail's Strategic Control Plane

High-quality, connected data is the foundation for every AI-driven experience.

One of the most pragmatic signals from NRF 2026 was a renewed focus on data fundamentals. As AI and agentic systems scale, retailers are realizing that data quality, consistency, and connectivity now determine what is possible—and what is risky.

The spotlight

- AI outcomes are capped by the quality of underlying data
- Disconnected data = fragmented experiences and broken promises
- Retailers are investing in data as shared infrastructure, not isolated projects

Implications for retail leaders

For Data & Technology leaders:
- Clean, connected, real-time data becomes a prerequisite for agentic commerce.

For Operations & CX leaders:
- Reliable data improves promise accuracy, personalization, and service outcomes.

For Executive teams:
- Data maturity becomes a strategic differentiator, not an IT metric.

DO ANY OF THESE RESONATE?

Reach out to us at Sales@NULogic.io