In the retail industry, innovations in business models, customer experience and new products happen every day. Each week, our retail team finds a leading example of innovation and discusses the implications in our Retail Shout Out blog.
Trends in 2016

As we reflect upon our blogs from 2016, there have been some clear trends.

Digital Customer Experience
Artificial Intelligence
Increased Use of IoT Technology
Material Innovation
Increased Focus on Sustainability
Wearables
Innovation Themes for 2017

Competing for customer attention and loyalty continues to be a tough battle as we enter 2017. We find leading companies investing more and more in digital technologies to increase customer interactions with their brands and products or even to redefine the shopping experience altogether.

Many retailers are finding ways to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) with applications that recognize our voices, interpret what we are asking and respond to our questions immediately and accurately. They are launching these tools to both better serve their customers and arm sales associates with product or order information. We saw significant growth in the use of AI in 2016 and it’s likely to accelerate further in 2017.

IoT technology has rapidly expanded across almost all categories. From apparel to accessories to home, we are finding products that track indicators of health, performance, energy consumed and more. The best IoT products provide data and information that consumers grow to rely upon, strengthening their relationship with the brand. As IoT technology continues to evolve, we expect to find even more uses for connected products, not only for consumers but also for companies.

IoT enabled manufacturing and supply chains will become increasingly important.

Aside from digital innovation we also see continued focus on material innovation and sustainability as we enter 2017. The leaders in material innovation continue to be the athletic and outdoor brands, however consumers are putting pressure on all retail and brand companies to ensure their practices are socially responsible and environmentally friendly.

We saw many exciting retail innovations in 2016, and we look forward to an equally innovative 2017.
2016 RETAIL INNOVATION ANNUAL REPORT

Noteworthy Examples Of Innovation

Customer & Consumer Experience Innovation.................................6
  Macy’s Improves Shopping Experience with Artificial Intelligence..................7
  Samsung’s New Retail Space Doesn’t Sell Products......................................7
  Timberland Launches Digitally Connected Store........................................8
  Ikea’s Digital Pop-Up Store .......................................................................8
  The Dandy Lab is Innovating with In-Store Experience and IoE ...................9
  Amazon Go – the End of the Checkout ............................................................9

Merchandise Product Innovation.........................................................10
  Nike Introduces Self-Lacing Shoes ............................................................11
  Under Armour’s 3D Lattice and Lasers ......................................................11
  Intel and Oakley Introduce Digital-Coaching Eyewear ...............................12
  Adidas Takes Wearables to a New Level ....................................................12
  Sensoria’s Smart Garments to Compete with Wearables .............................13
  Men’s Wearhouse Offers Performance Products for Everyday ....................13
  Material Innovation Inspired by Superheroes ............................................14
  Athleta Launches New Technical Fabric Activewear ...................................14

Business Model and Process Innovation .............................................15
  Silicon Valley Reinvents Retail ...............................................................16
  Packaging Innovation Enhances Brand Appeal .........................................17
  RangeMe Streamlines the Discovery Process ............................................17
  Vendedy Connects Street Vendors to Global Consumers .........................18

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Customer & Consumer Experience Innovation
Macy’s Improves Shopping Experience with Artificial Intelligence

Macy's is testing a new mobile app that leverages artificial intelligence to answer customer questions while they shop in store. Developed by IBM Watson, the app is currently being piloted in ten U.S.-based Macy’s stores and provides answers to many common customer questions about products, services, and the store’s facilities. By addressing customer questions immediately, the app allows customers to get the help they need without having to track down a store employee or becoming frustrated because they can’t get help for basic inquiries. At the same time, it allows store employees to spend their time addressing more complicated customer needs.

Ultimately, the “mobile companion” app could help drive customer loyalty by potentially providing styling advice, additional customized services, or alerting a store employee to come help when it recognizes that a customer is becoming frustrated with the app. As retailers continue to experiment with various types of technology, artificial intelligence could evolve to provide a truly personalized shopping experience for customers.

This begs the question, what will the future role be for traditional sales associates as many of their responsibilities are taken over by AI?

Samsung’s New Retail Space Doesn’t Sell Products

Samsung has just opened Samsung 837, a 40,000 square foot flagship space in the Meatpacking district of NYC (named after its address on Washington St). Calling this space a “store” would be misleading because Samsung does not actually sell any products here. Instead, the company is describing this new retail concept as a “digital playground and cultural experience center.” Samsung 837 is in part an event space that will host launch parties, film screenings, meet-and-greets, art installations, and other events connected to the company or its technology partners. It also has a customer support area where existing Samsung customers can bring in their products for troubleshooting help and attend workshops that teach them tips & tricks on the latest devices. Visitors can also try out new Samsung products before they are available in stores, experience Samsung’s virtual reality headsets on moving 4D chairs, or stop at the café for a caffeine break.

Opening a large retail space with no products to sell, in a neighborhood with notoriously high rents, demonstrates the company’s willingness to take a risk and try out a new concept. In an era where people are making more of their purchases online, Samsung is using the 837 space as a way to build its brand and engage consumers on a new level. The question is whether this will pay off or whether it will become simply an expensive tourist attraction in a busy part of NYC, with no financial benefit to the company. If it does succeed, companies that are currently struggling to innovate their in-store experience may follow suit and try out new retail spaces that are less product-focused and more experience-focused.
Timberland Launches Digitally Connected Store

Timberland is partnering with CloudTags, the creator of Connected Stores, to bring a digital customer experience to its flagship store in Herald Square, New York City. They are introducing tablets that can be used to provide detailed product information, styling tips, and recommendations for a guided shopping tour. Interactive tap walls have also been installed to feature an assortment of exclusive merchandise, including a range of colors and sizes, that are typically only available online.

While providing an enhanced shopping experience, Timberland’s Connected Store also benefits the retailer itself. The tablets and tap walls can pull data analytics from user searches to understand valuable customer insights which can be used to influence future product design and development decisions.

The integration of a physical and digital customer experience preserves the traditional “try it on” method of shopping while remaining competitive in a market driven by technology. Many customers want to try something on before they buy because we all have different body types and shapes. Now Timberland can offer the convenience of modeling their products with a larger array of variations online to choose from – because who doesn’t like having options?

Ikea’s Digital Pop-Up Store

Ikea Canada has a new pop-up kitchen store concept in downtown Toronto where customers use RFID-enabled wooden spoons instead of carts. The store offers around 50 products, including kitchen, dining, and food-oriented items (yes, the iconic Swedish meatballs are available). Shoppers tap the spoon on the display product’s sensor and it’s added to their virtual cart. At the cash-less checkout, the spoon is scanned, the cart contents are displayed and confirmed, a credit/debit card is swiped, and the order is gathered from a storeroom and handed to the customer.

But wait, there’s more! The shop has a kitchen display replete with cabinets and appliances, and when a VR headset is used, customers can “step into” and visualize other kitchen set designs. Bravo Ikea, for bolstering your “It Starts With The Food” global theme with digital content, highlighting how food unites us and providing a unique experience for your customers.
The Dandy Lab is Innovating with In-Store Experience and IoE

What do in-store experience and Internet of Everything (IoE) mean to you? At The Dandy Lab, a London-based men’s lifestyle shop, it means using the latest technology to engage and excite their customers and keep them coming back for more. Sensors in the store recognize customers’ shoes and ankles to get an indication of age, style preference, and demographic without compromising their identity. NFC-enabled products reveal information about the British designer brands carried in the shop, tablets embedded in the walls display product details, price and inventory levels when a product is held up to the screen, a virtual styling wall recognizes products held up and suggests matching products and colors, and window displays change based on who’s looking. And to up the fun ante, there are regular brand and product launch parties in the store, complete with mixologists.

The store’s WiFi helps to monitor foot traffic as customers’ smartphones pickup and interact with the wireless signal, showing which displays are most popular and providing a more accurate view of how busy the store is versus sales figures alone. Data collected from the store’s variety of sensors and apps is linked to the store’s network to show trend information such as foot traffic and sales compared to weather data. And if that wasn’t enough, The Dandy Lab employs IoE to integrate their e-commerce and in-store data. Not only does all this data provide deep, real-time insights into trends and operations, it can also be leveraged to negotiate with suppliers as it provides details on how customers interact with products beyond sales figures. Now that’s innovation!

Amazon Go – the End of the Checkout

Amazon does it again with its disruptive value chain and “just-walk-out” technology. Going from online, to brick-and-mortar, and now with this novelty, Amazon Go, Amazon has listened to consumers to solve shopping hassles at the checkout.

Most stores where I shop have incorporated self-checkout kiosks, mobile POS solutions, or mobile-app checkout options. In the later part of this year, California Fresh Market opened as a grocery store providing app checkout and so did Sam’s Whole Club with its Scan and Go app. Is Amazon then just catching up? No – Amazon has taken it a step further and removed any sort of work whatsoever from the consumer. Everything in the store will be pre-packaged in specific quantities and labeled.

And how will they do it? Artificial intelligence, RFID sensors, computer vision (cameras), and machine learning technologies that are all available today – all it took was for someone to activate these technologies in a way that creates a fantastic new experience for the consumer. The use of RFID and other automation technologies at supermarkets has been explored since early 1990’s. However, the cost of it used to be a show-stopper. Today, hardware prices have settled and the newer software technologies offer endless opportunities to study the consumer and the act of shopping. Tie that with Amazon account profiles, spend study, and a global distribution channel – you’ll never have to think of what to buy ever again!

Despite the hype and the benefits, some questions still come to mind. What happens when you take your family to the store? Is only one person allowed to put things in the bag/cart? What if your kid sneaks in another piece of chocolate? Do you really have to return the item to the exact shelf? In the case of packaged produce, can I rip one banana from the bunch?

Amazon will no doubt work out the kinks at their first store in Seattle, currently opened for employees only. The future of this technology has sparked interest among consumers, and could become a game-changer for brick-and-mortar retailers.
Merchandise Product Innovation
Nike Introduces Self-Lacing Shoes

Great Scott! Marty Mcfly’s Nike shoes are finally no longer just an iconic prediction of how shoes might evolve in a future world. In the 1989 American classic, “Back to the Future II,” Marty Mcfly steps into a pair of Nike Air Mag’s that quickly self-tighten and adjust perfectly to his feet. For years, sneaker heads and Nike fanboys have waited with bated breath on the idea that these concept shoes might one day become a reality.

Since that Hollywood portrayal, and with a personal commission from current Nike CEO Mark Parker, some of the world’s most brilliant designers and engineers worked tirelessly in the depths of Nike Skunkworks to develop what some are calling the most exciting innovation the footwear industry has ever seen. On November 28th, Nike will introduce its HyperAdapt 1.0. Gone are the days of bending over to lace up your shoes, or the frustrations that come from having to stop midstride to retie a loose shoe. The HyperAdapt doesn’t use a traditional lacing system, but rather a battery-powered series of pulleys that cinch the shoe to the perfect tension on your foot. Based on sensors on the bottom of the shoe that read weight and the position of the foot inside, the auto-pulley system will adjust accordingly. Version 1.0 will have the option to manually adjust the tension, but as the “1.0” in the name suggests, the team is already developing ideas on how to improve this technology to eliminate the need for manual adjustment.

Remember the first time you learned that somehow bunny ears, and jumping through holes, turned into a perfect bow? Well, with Nike’s new innovation, the next generation might not have these memories. While the cost might be lost nostalgia, we could not be more excited about what this break-through innovation will do to the footwear and apparel industry. Today we tip our hats to Nike, for successfully predicting, or should we say, “developing” the future.

Under Armour’s 3D Lattice and Lasers

On March 18th, a limited production run of 96 pairs of Under Armour’s UA Architech will hit the consumer market. What makes these shoes so unique? Under Armour is using additive manufacturing or 3D printing to manufacture the midsole. Although the use of 3D printing in the retail supply chain is a growing trend, the Architech is one of the first performance shoes to be manufactured with 3D components that will be offered directly to mainstream consumers.

Similar to competitive technologies such as Nike’s Flyknit, the use of 3D printing and other digital technologies is revolutionizing the way products are manufactured. The technology employed by Under Armour allows for the digital design file to be transformed into the physical component by Selective Laser Sintering or SLS. In this process, a high powered laser is used to fuse powders layer by layer into the finished component. The result achieved by the 3D printed lattice of the midsole makes this shoe light and springy, but with added stability when compared to more traditional trainers.

Click here for a video overview of Gizmodo’s trip to the Under Armour Lab.
Intel and Oakley Introduce Digital-Coaching Eyewear

Intel, in partnership with Oakley, will soon launch their first smart glasses for athletes. Oakley Radar Pace provides coaching to runners and cyclists. This smart connected product does much more than collect data like many other apps and devices currently on the market. Radar Pace helps interpret the data and provides information to use in real-time. The wearable-tech monitors performance and coaches you during your workout. Yes, it coaches you. Or, “she” coaches you. The voice-activated system speaks in a Siri-like voice, telling you what to do, when to do it, and how to do it better. She assists with your goals by identifying problem areas and suggesting technique improvements. She will also respond to your questions, such as information on your speed or distance travelled.

Radar Pace has a design edge over its competitors. It looks like normal pair of sunglasses with earplugs and a small microphone. You can interact completely by voice—no swiping required.

Launch is expected to be in late 2016, but no details on price have been provided. Click here to see how Craig Alexander, three-time Iron Champion, uses Oakley’s Radar Pace.

Adidas Takes Wearables to a New Level

The world’s first connected racing driver’s suit was recently tested by drivers at the 2016 FIA (Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile) World Endurance Championships in April. The Adidas Climacool Smart Suit was created in response to a growing counterfeit market; each suit contains a unique smart tag with an embedded NFC (near field communication) chip that is used to confirm the suit’s authenticity and ensures that it complies with strict FIA safety regulations. The chip also stores the driver’s identification information.

The immediate benefit of this technology will be to provide more transparency to racing products bought and sold amongst collectors and to tackle the growing counterfeit market. In the future, the embedded NFC chip could also store the wearer’s medical information, which could be used to provide immediate and vital information to medics at the scene of a racing accident. Of course, the impacts of this technology could extend far beyond racing gear; there are countless other high-risk sports and professions that could benefit from having medical data embedded into clothing to be used in case of accidents. Who knows, maybe future NFL players will be sporting NFC-enabled uniforms.
Sensoria’s Smart Garments to Compete with Wearables

Smart, connected products have been slower to hit the apparel and footwear industries, leaving the connection enablement to hardgoods or accessories. Wearables like the fitbit have met the needs of consumers seeking to track workout performance, elevation and speed. Other products like the wahoo TICKR heart rate monitor use a chest strap to track heart rate, calories burned, time, distance and pace.

Sensoria is entering the market to compete with wearables, while offering consumers arguably less invasive means to monitor body metrics or workout performance. Rather than relying on an extra product to provide this functionality, Sensoria uses a fabric with embedded electrodes that is connected to a fitness app. Through the connection to the app, certain cardiac irregularities can be recognized, family or friends alerted, and wearer can be located via GPS coordinates. Sensoria has developed two products using the fabric - for men, a short sleeve tee-shirt, and for women, a sports bra. The fabric is washable, UV protectant and is promoted to have the ability to “reduce the appearance of cellulite and muscle fatigue.”

The smart, connected apparel can be pre-ordered but is reliant on crowdfunding to support the manufacturing and production.

Men’s Wearhouse Offers Performance Products for Everyday

It’s not glamorous… it’s not even polite to talk about it—but can we just admit it already? Sweating doesn’t just happen at the gym. Call it glistening, perspiring, excreting liquids produced by glands in the skin—it happens when we’re active, but it also happens when we are still. When we are anxious, stressed, nervous… it happens.

The good news now (for men anyhow, or anyone in the presence of men) is that the product and fabric features that were once relegated to active and performance apparel, are now available in clothes for everyday living. Features like moisture wicking and cooling technologies can take on the commute, the meeting room, the parent/teacher conference, and beyond (including the in-law visit).

Kenneth Cole and Men’s Wearhouse have partnered to deliver tailored and sportswear apparel made from performance fabrics that use the 37.5 technology—the patented technology formerly used exclusively for high-performance sports gear. Products are branded under the AWEAR-TECH label, a division of the Awearness Kenneth Cole product offering. The AWEAR-TECH assortment includes suits, jackets, pants, as well as shirts and vests, with price points running from $70 to $270.

The AWEAR-TECH label, as with all other products sold under the Kenneth Cole Awearness line (exclusive to Men’s Wearhouse), will give back a portion of the proceeds to charity. The AWEAR-TECH giving will be directed toward Hire Heroes USA, an organization that helps veterans get back into the workforce.
Material Innovation Inspired by Superheroes

Spiderman may have given spider silk its fame, but not all elements of that story are fiction. The performance characteristics of spider silk are not far off from what is featured with the fictional superhero; it is strong, lightweight, and stretchy. Since it is a protein fiber, it is also naturally breathable, receives dye more easily, and does not melt. However, without the ability to produce in volume, it has not been a marketable option for any supply chain. Until recently...

We may soon see spider silk as a viable part of the performance apparel manufacturing process because of two leading companies which have made great strides in material innovation. Bolt Threads (a California start-up) and Spiber (a Japanese company) are working toward developing a synthetic spider silk fiber constructed of the protein base so the same performance characteristics can be engineered into the fiber. Industry analysts report this new fiber to have the potential to be the biggest breakthrough since nylon.

The North Face will market a high end parka to its Japanese market this year, having sourced the spider silk fiber from the Spiber. While Spiber is still in the early phases of manufacturing and overcoming scalability challenges, competitor Bolt Threads is reported to be manufacturing in kilos and shipping in metric tons this year. Bolt Threads’ spider silk qualities will be competitively priced against other premium fabrics.

Spider silk may never be the option when competing for price, but like the superhero that gave the fiber original fame, synthetic spider silk has the potential to offer more than a one hit wonder. Compared with other synthetics, spider silk is strategically positioned to win the war on sustainability and the social conscience.

Athleta Launches New Technical Fabric Activewear

After years of strong growth for the athleisure market, customers have now come to expect certain fabric properties such as wicking, odor-resistance, and breathability as commonplace. In order to stay ahead of competition and continue to meet the customer’s demands, companies need to offer new material technology innovations.

Athleta is launching a new line of technical products called Sculptek that offers a “360-degree stretch” to improve fit and better respond to the wearer’s movement. The fabric, which was co-created with a fiber technology company, is seamless and has zero pinch-points - the point at which fabrics resist further stretch and hampers the wearer’s movement. Athleta’s new fabric spent over a year in a testing phase before launch and the result is a line of activewear that is sculpted around a woman’s figure and reacts to every movement, no matter the wearer’s body type.

The activewear market has become increasingly crowded with everyone from fast-fashion companies to established athletic brands offering something new. Product differentiation is essential for survival and companies need to continue innovating to remain relevant. Athleta’s new Sculptek offers something above and beyond the standard active wear fabrics and will hopefully keep the Athleta brand relevant among consumers.
Business Model and Process Innovation
Silicon Valley Reinvents Retail

We had the pleasure of recently speaking with b8ta CEO and co-founder, Vibhu Norby. An engineer who most recently came from Google’s Nest, Vibhu has created a 1,400-square foot ‘store of the future’ in Palo Alto, right in the heart of Silicon Valley. After realizing how many new and innovative products, especially those that leverage the internet of things (IoT), were unable to find retail space in order to get access to consumers, he created a new business model that leases table space in the b8ta store for emerging brands to showcase their innovations. Merchandise may include products found in other stores as well as products unique to b8ta.

Vendors pay for display presence, which also gives them access to b8ta’s expert store team—known as b8ta testers—who help customers with questions and demonstrations. The products are all featured out-of-the-box and available for demo while nearby tablets provide product information and videos. Vendors get real-time data on metrics such as store traffic and customer engagement with the product. The vendor controls the pricing, merchandising and marketing of the product.

Vibhu believes that the future of retail in today’s online-focused world is to offer more than stacks of boxes on a shelf; he believes retailers should provide an immersive environment where the customer can discover, learn, and try these emerging products. b8ta combines a new business model with an innovative customer experience to bring us new products which we may otherwise never see in traditional retailers. So far, the reaction from both consumers and industry experts leads us to believe this new concept has legs.

Ethically Sourced Cotton

Consumers are demanding more transparency to social compliance along the entire supply chain, and the Responsible Sourcing Network (RSN) has responded.

Labor abuse in the apparel industry is often associated with exploitation of garment workers; those laboring in factories to cut and sew clothing. But forced labor is also being used earlier in the supply chain during the harvest of cotton. Cotton produced by slave labor has been documented in many countries and has made its way through the global supply chain to apparel and home products sold by major retailers.

A gap in transparency currently exists between where the forced labor occurs in the cotton fields and the facilities in which different cottons are blended and spun together into yarn. On September 1, 2016, the RSN announced a new initiative called YESS: Yarn Ethically & Sustainably Sourced, a group bringing together corporations, suppliers, and NGOs to create a single industry-wide verification of spinning mills. Spinning mills are targeted because they are the first in the supply chain to open bales of raw cotton, making them uniquely able to identify the cotton’s provenance and prevent it from entering the corporate supply chain if forced labor was used in its production.

YESS aims to close the transparency gap by establishing a training, assessment, and verification process for spinning mills. YESS also assists corporations in compliance with new anti-slavery regulations, establishes an industry-wide traceability approach, and manages a global list of verified spinners.

The initiative has already been endorsed by apparel brands and retailers including Adidas, BJ’s Wholesale Club, and Hudson’s Bay Company. On the long journey towards more transparency to social compliance along the entire supply chain, the YESS initiative provides one great step forward.
Packaging Innovation Enhances Brand Appeal

I had the pleasure of speaking with Kelly Cramer, Senior Manager at the Sustainable Packaging Coalition, about their How2Recycle labeling system that is helping to transform the way consumers recycle. The idea started in 2012 as a standardized labeling system designed to communicate what and how to recycle. With most recyclables still ending up in landfills, this is an idea whose time has come.

I heard the head of a recycling company the other day on TV lament the fact that so many consumers recycle incorrectly. For example, they often try to recycle grocery plastic bags which may clog recycling machines (these must be recycled by taking them back to the store). Cramer says stores can accept things like bags from inside cereal boxes and plastic wraps from toilet paper packages (which most shoppers are unaware of). How2Recycle Store Drop-off labels contain all of this information. Additionally, she said all caps should be replaced on bottles. The How2Recycle label for plastic bottles instructs the consumer to “empty & replace cap.” How2Recycle also lets consumers know what cannot be recycled.

This system is supported by 50+ member companies representing over 500 brands including retailers with private brands. Research by the Sustainable Packaging Coalition shows that consumers who view the labels recycle more and more accurately. In addition, survey respondents had a more positive impression of the companies that use How2Recycle labels.

With so many consumers and companies striving to be greener and support sustainability, How2Recycle is a breakthrough innovation that is gaining traction in the market, and one that promises to improve the environment while enhancing the brand appeal of adopting companies.

RangeMe Streamlines the Discovery Process

Retailers are increasingly recognizing the importance of becoming digital – that interface between technology and strategy.

Shop.org selected the ‘Digital Commerce Startup of the Year’ during last week’s Retail Digital Summit in Dallas. Multiple applications were submitted but only three finalists were selected: imageSurge, Netra and RangeMe. From transforming the physical storefront, to using visual intelligence, to providing a platform to discover product innovations, these three firms will likely alter the retail industry.

The CEOs of each startup gave a one-minute pitch to retail industry leaders to explain why their product or idea would become the biggest disruptor of the year. The ultimate 2016 winner was RangeMe. The company offers an innovative online platform designed for suppliers and retailers. This offering solves a real pain point in the industry: streamlining the discovery process so that suppliers can offer their products (especially emerging brands) to the right people, and buyers can minimize the time-consuming process of finding product innovations. According to Nicky Jackson, Founder and CEO of RangeMe, a study demonstrates that 93% of retailers agree that new product innovation is the industry’s #1 problem.

RangeMe entered the United States last summer and now features more than 30,000 products from more than 7000 suppliers. Target, Jet.com, Heinen’s Grocery Store and Lucky Vitamin are among the companies that have signed up. We are happy to see a startup like RangeMe being recognized for finding a high-value interface between technology and strategy, and using it as a medium for small and large businesses alike to thrive.

Click here to watch a short clip from the conference.
Vendedy Connects Street Vendors to Global Consumers

Christine Souffrant was recently nominated by Forbes as one of thirty millennials reinventing the way we will shop in 2016. She is the CEO and founder of Vendedy, a social enterprise startup aiming to digitize the street market economy by connecting local vendors with global consumers using SMS and cloud. What differentiates this app from Etsy and Ebay? Vendedy is the first online platform for artisans in developing countries. The company sources and uploads street vendor profiles and products onto mobile networks so that potential shoppers can search and purchase local handmade products.

Within eight months of beta testing in Haiti, the startup closed a partnership deal with IBM and Microsoft to scale the technology into 150 countries. This business model will definitely change the way we shop for unique local products, but more importantly, it will help promote local business development.
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