

Retailer Intelligence

An analysis of recent initiatives at key U.S. retailers and their potential impact on commerce marketing opportunities for brands.

SEPTEMBER 2025

New Tricks for Old Shoppers (and Their Pets)

As part of their ongoing mission to help clients stay ahead of the competition in a fast-paced, constantly evolving marketplace, the field teams in Publicis Commerce's Retail Consultancy closely monitor the strategic activity taking place across all key retailers and channels.

Each month, the teams compile Marketplace Assessment reports on the retailers (including Walmart, Target, Amazon, and Kroger) and channels (such as Regional Grocery, C-Store, Club, Pet, Beauty, and On-Demand Delivery) that are most important to the business success of our clients. The following report outlines noteworthy events across nine key retailers from the team's most recent round of assessments. (To receive copies of the full reports, contact EVP-Retail Consultancy Kandi Arrington at arringtonk@marsunited.com.)

Best Buy, IKEA to Pilot In-Store Environments



Best Buy and IKEA U.S. are partnering this fall to test an in-store planning and shopping experience for kitchens and laundry rooms in select Best Buy locations. The goal is to give Best Buy shoppers inspiration and planning support, as well as the ability to shop select IKEA products and services — which will mark the first time that IKEA products will be made available through another U.S. retailer.

The new model will be introduced to 10 stores in Florida and Texas, where 1,000-square-foot showcases featuring inspirational kitchen and laundry room settings will let shoppers view major appliances from Best Buy alongside home furnishings from IKEA while getting expert advice and assistance from employees of both retailers. Two of the locations will also serve as pick-up points for IKEA products purchased either through the Best Buy experience or from ikea.com.

Relevance: The new strategic model is leveraging the inherent inventory synergies between these two retailers to deliver a fresh, natural in-store experience that can enhance product discovery and consideration — thereby giving shoppers a clear, logical reason to visit physical Best Buy stores.

Opportunity: Although currently contained to 10 stores with no publicly announced plans for expansion, this unique test underscores Best Buy's desire to fashion unique in-store experiences. Relevant brands should investigate how their products might fit into the environment — or if Best Buy might be open to similar product showcases elsewhere in the store.



Walmart Opens ‘Dark Stores’



Walmart is opening “dark stores” that will serve solely as fulfillment centers to speed up online order deliveries. The locations resemble a typical Walmart store in terms of the products stocked on shelves but dispense with signage and other shopper-facing elements.

The first of these miniature distribution centers opened recently in Dallas, with another on the way in the retailer’s hometown of Bentonville. The initiative is part of Walmart’s massive ongoing investment in fulfillment infrastructure, which helped it achieve ecommerce profitability for the first time earlier in 2025.

Relevance: Walmart’s dark stores illustrate a significant shift in retail operations that directly impacts how suppliers plan, produce, and deliver their products. Adapting to this model is not just about logistics but also staying aligned with one of the world’s largest retailers in a rapidly evolving commerce landscape. The retailer this year expects to offer delivery options of three hours or less to 95% of the U.S. population.

Opportunity: Adaptability, speed, data fluency, and retailer collaboration are essential for success in today’s evolving retail environment. The brands who embrace these needs will be better positioned to thrive as fulfillment models continue to evolve at Walmart and elsewhere.





Costco Tests Scan & Pay

Costco is seeking to eliminate checkout lines with a new in-app Scan & Pay system that's comparable to rival Sam's Club's Scan & Go offering. Rolling out to 27 clubs by the end of 2025, the service thus far has been "extremely successful in moving people through the lines and expediting the transactions," Costco Chief Executive Officer Ron Vachris said during the company's third-quarter earnings call.

If the pilot sustains its early momentum, Costco plans a phased retrofit across high-density clubs in 2026, starting with locations in California, Texas, and the Northeast corridor.

Relevance: Costco members consistently identify checkout speed as a top shopping frustration. With the new technology, management is targeting a 30% reduction in average front-end dwell time. Seeing as Costco has more than 142 million cardholders and nearly one billion annual transactions, the innovation is bound to result in efficiencies that will have a substantial financial impact — and keep the retailer on a technological pace with Sam's Club

Opportunity: Advancement in technology services at the request of members certainly has benefits for Costco — the retailer already has seen a sharp spike in adoption of digital membership cards in clubs where Scan & Pay is enabled. This allows Costco to link identities, receipts, and personalized offers with a single tap — and may open up new marketing opportunities for brands working with the retailer.



Petco Adds Lifestyle Products for Humans

Petco has expanded its product assortment to include a category for people.

Dubbed “My Human,” the curated collection taps into the pet-obsessed lifestyle of the retailer’s shoppers via apparel, decor, games, toys, accessories, and seasonal products designed to be giftable and affordable — with the majority priced under \$20. The items are already available in a dedicated shop on petco.com and in select stores, with a broader roll out expected over time. The retailer plans to refresh the human offering with new, exclusive products and collaborations on an ongoing basis.

Relevance: Petco previously forayed into products for humans through a limited-time, cause-driven brand collaboration with Skechers. The 2019 merchandising partnership entailed a coordinated line of footwear for people from the charitable Bobs from Skechers collection along with matching Petco-exclusive collars, leashes and harnesses. Elsewhere, Clif Bar & Co. earned merchandising for its flagship-brand nutritional bars at Petco in conjunction with the 2022 launch of Clif Pet plant-based jerky treats for dogs exclusively at the retailer.

Opportunity: For commerce marketers, the pet care category has always been about the owners and their wallets. While it may not quite redefine the meaning of pet retail, Petco’s creation of a dedication section for people products leans into the highly emotional “pet parent” relationships and could spark future collaborative efforts with non-traditional brands in the Skechers and Clif Bar vein.





Ulta Beauty Plans for AI Agents

Ulta Beauty has its sights set on modernizing core technology systems with a focus on AI agents as part of overall growth plans. Mike Maresca, Ulta's Chief Technology and Transformation Officer, recently outlined a plan to roll out AI agents in 2026 with IT news outlet CIO Dive.

The beauty retailer is looking to agentic AI to improve marketing and digital store operations, enable more personalized customer experiences, and drive other efficiencies. The plan includes deploying AI agents to employees so they can better assist shoppers through such practices as analyzing prior purchases to make product recommendations.

Relevance: AI agents are poised to dramatically change the commerce industry by transforming both back-end engagement practices and consumer shopping behavior. Although Ulta's plans are still in their infancy, these early announcements hint at the sweeping impact agentic AI will have on shopper engagement for retailers and brands.

Opportunity: Brands should work with their Ulta partners to understand how the retailer plans to leverage AI agents to improve product discovery, consideration, and purchase. To better learn more about the ways in which agentic AI is already reshaping commerce and what brands and retailers should do to prepare, read this [whitepaper](#) from Publicis Groupe Chief Commerce Strategy Officer Jason Goldberg.



Target Sets its Bullseye on Physical Growth



Target continued to grow its footprint this summer with the addition of eight new stores in California, Connecticut, Florida, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. The retailer has now opened 11 new stores in 2025 and has nine more in the works before yearend. Three of the new locations will be larger than Target's chainwide average of 125,000 square feet, which makes room for elements such as larger perimeter departments and more back-room fulfillment space to support delivery and pickup orders.

Relevance: Target's recent growth spurt continues the expansion plan to open 300 stores over the next decade that was announced last year. In 2024, Target opened 23 stores (and closed one) while also carrying on with a plan to remodel or enhance the vast majority of its nearly 2,000 locations. Other recent developments include the opening of Warby Parker eyewear shop-in-shops in five stores.

It is a period of transition at Target, which is moving forward with its ambitious store plans amidst sales and foot traffic declines. The retailer also just disclosed plans to end its store-within-a-store relationship with Ulta by August 2026, about five years after the deal was first struck, as both companies get back to retail fundamentals. Elsewhere, Target CEO Brian Cornell is stepping down after 11 years at the helm, to be replaced by current Chief Operating Officer Michael Fiddelke on Feb. 1.

Opportunity: Target's expansion initiatives underscore the ongoing importance of the physical store in Target's overall strategy and the corresponding need for brands to keep in-store marketing in the mix when developing their omnichannel plans. With so many new stores on the horizon, brands should look for ways to become a standard part of the grand-opening equation.



Uber Expands Grocery Delivery Partnerships

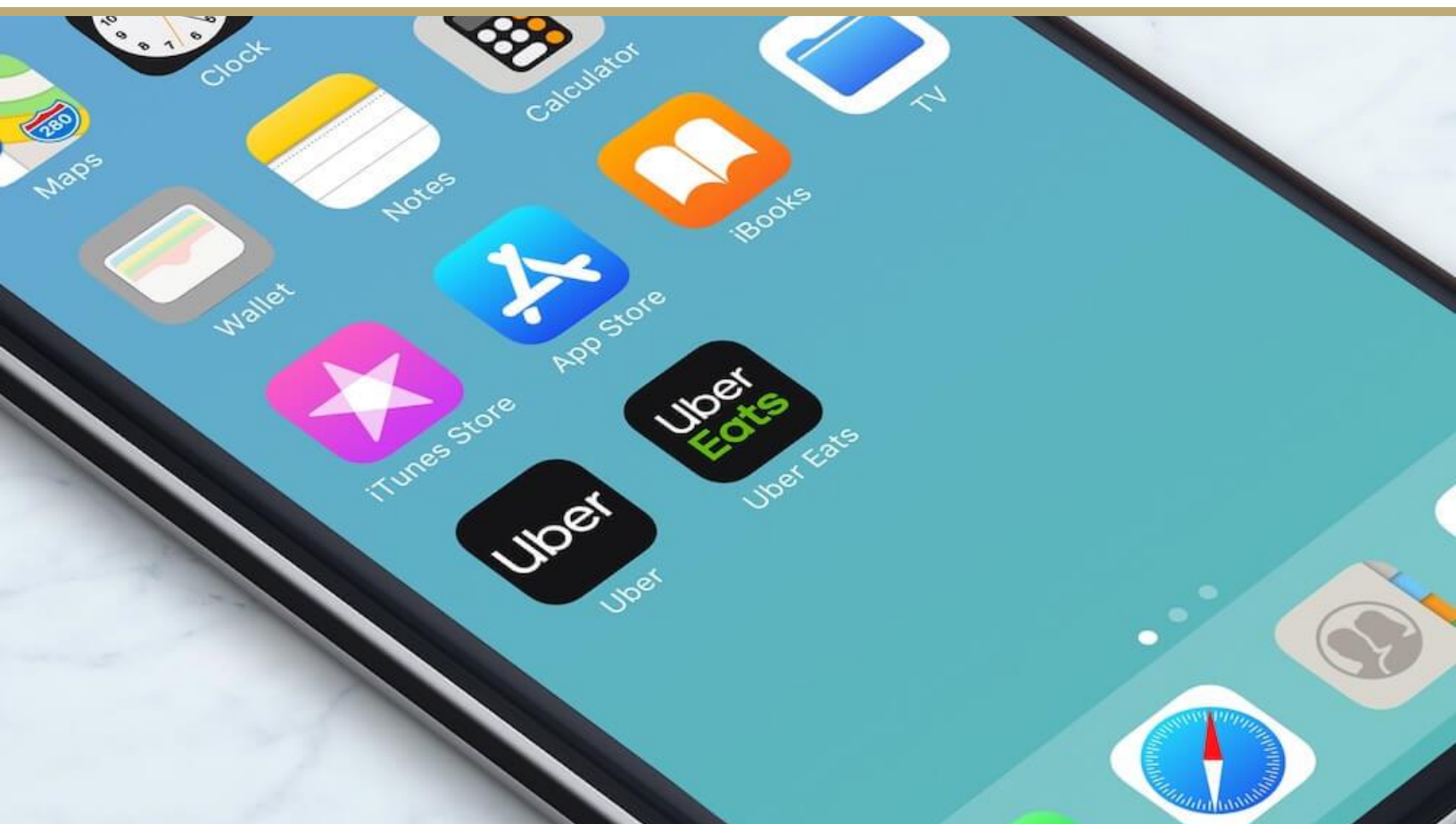


Uber Eats is significantly expanding its grocery delivery capabilities by partnering across the Northeast, Midwest, and California with six local grocers: Big Y, King Kullen, Superlo Foods, Lunds & Byerlys, Foxtrot, and Vallarta Supermarkets.

The on-demand delivery provider already partners with over 100 regional and independent grocers across the U.S., including notable chains like Meijer, ShopRite, and H Mart, in addition to working with national chains such as Albertsons and Costco. These latest additions enhance Uber's footprint in the fast-growing online grocery delivery space, positioning it to compete more effectively with Instacart, DoorDash, and Amazon.

Relevance: Uber's ongoing expansion also benefits these regional grocers, which are embracing last-mile delivery in a bid to stay competitive in an omnichannel marketplace and meet the rising demand for convenience among shoppers.

Opportunity: The importance of the digital shelf continues to grow for CPG brands, and partnerships like these at Uber and other on-demand delivery providers give them an opportunity to improve their opportunities for product discovery, digital promotions and incremental purchases across second-tier grocers that aren't often in the commerce marketing plan.



Sam's Club Offers New Perk for Four-Legged Members



Sam's Club has introduced a new service that gives members preferred access to the pharmacy and insurance programs from Independent Pet Holdings' Spot Pet Insurance.

The retailer's members are eligible to receive up to 15% off customizable pet insurance plans; discounts on roughly 110 pet prescriptions (including 50 at \$15 or less) that can be dispensed in clubs; and select preventative treatments for cats and dogs with no out-of-pocket costs. Members who sign up at launch also earn a \$25 Sam's Club gift card.

Relevance: Total U.S. spending on pets is on track to hit a record \$157 billion in 2025, according to MarketWatch. It's the latest evidence that the category is largely recession-proof, as consumers won't sacrifice when it comes to their pets even as they look for cost savings elsewhere. Savings from this new benefit could help Sam's Club members feel less of a need to reduce spending elsewhere in the store to properly care for their pets.

Opportunity: Brands in the pet category should clearly look for ways to cross-promote the new Spot Pet Insurance offerings or leverage the brighter category spotlight Sam's Club might provide to gain greater prominence in clubs. Brands in "human" product categories could look for opportunities to get in front of these pet owners as well.



Wawa Looks to Keep Things Fresh



Convenience store retailer Wawa is teaming with Relex Solutions, an AI-driven supply chain and retail planning platform, to launch fresh-food forecasting and replenishment technology across its 1,100 stores.

Relex's capabilities will help Wawa automate manual processes and reduce spoilage, helping the Eastern retailer optimize its foodservice program as it works to reach 1,800 stores by 2030 and pilot a new travel center format (at a Hope Mills, North Carolina, location that opened in August).

Relevance: The foodservice program is central to Wawa's business strategy. By sharpening inventory flow, the retailer will be able to speed up replenishment cycles, reduce spoilage, and track errors while ensuring that stores are stocked with the fresh items shoppers want most.

Opportunity: Wawa is currently leveraging Relex technology solely for fresh food assortment. But as the retailer continues to pursue its expansion goal, brands should watch to see if the technology might be deployed more widely. In the meantime, they should stay mindful of Wawa's fresh-food focus as fertile ground for cross-promotions.





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Publicis Commerce's Retail Consultancy is an unrivaled team of in-market commerce experts who simplify the complexity of retail for our clients. Located in Bentonville, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Chicago, Seattle and the "backyards" of other key retailers, they provide deep knowledge of the retailer, expertise in key business areas (like strategy, media and creative), and door-opening personal relationships with key executives to deliver an unmatched level of business success for clients across accounts, channels, and shopper engagement platforms. For more information, contact EVP-Customer Development Kandi Arrington at arringtonk@marsunited.com.

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