Let's Get Phygital:
What Retail Can Tell Advisors About Balancing Tech and Touch

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, advisors and clients discovered the efficiency of online video meetings. Many advisors now insist there is no reason to return to in-person meetings. Everything can now be done online, and clients don't want or need to come in. Perhaps. But consider the case of retail.

Despite predictions of a "retail apocalypse," consumers are flocking back to physical stores while they also keep using digital tools.

Why? Because in most cases, digital is about delivering efficiencies, while personal service commands premiums.

The same lesson applies to financial advice. The choice of in-person or digital experience is not necessary. The blending of the two is what matters. So let's get "phygital."

Retailers, restaurants, car dealers and real estate brokers have discovered the power of blending digital convenience with physical, in-person connection—a strategy that financial advisors must also adopt.

Basic Tips for Phygital Engagement

- **Use virtual tools** for transactional updates and document sharing.
  - These are the advisory tasks where efficiency is key.
- **Reserve in-person meetings** for pivotal moments like life transitions, major financial decisions and meetings with adult children.
  - Make in-person meetings count; clients should feel like coming into your office is worth their time.
- **Create hybrid client events** that combine the accessibility of online webinars with the impact of live Q&A and networking.
  - Zoom is not just a video call tool; it's a way to create a virtual meeting place and connect the physical and digital worlds. Use hybrid meetings to create high-impact and far-reaching programming that keeps clients engaged.

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The Retail Rebound: Why Personal Matters

Open-air shopping centers are experiencing their lowest vacancy rates since 2006. Discount chains like Burlington Stores, Ross Stores and T.J. Maxx have added hundreds of new locations, while retail giants like Walmart plan significant expansions. This is happening not because e-commerce has waned but because it has plateaued in areas where human connection and physical interaction offer distinct advantages.

The trend highlights an important insight: **Personal experiences are irreplaceable for many consumers.** People value the ability to touch, see, and experience products in person. They also value the social connection and sense of community that in-person shopping provides.

Shopping is not purely transactional. Nor is financial advice. Clients may appreciate the convenience of online meetings, but they still value the trust, connection and personal care that in-person interactions uniquely provide. A handshake, a cup of coffee, small talk about the weather and eye contact during a meeting all contribute to a trusted personal relationship between client and advisor. **At the same time, digital tools can help advisors efficiently prepare for their meetings and deliver results** after the advisor has exchanged goodbyes.

Retailers are proving that personal engagement is not just surviving in the digital age—it's thriving. Financial advisors have a similar opportunity to differentiate themselves by doubling down on the personal.

Ask yourself: Are you truly connecting with your clients, or are you merely managing their accounts? Are you using the power of in-person meetings to deepen relationships, or are you relying too heavily on digital convenience?

Your answers to these questions will shape the future of your practice. If retail's resurgence has demonstrated anything, it's that personal remains premium—and in financial advice, where trust and connection are critical, it's an advantage that cannot be ignored or taken for granted.

The Right Balance

The challenge for financial advisors is not to choose between online and in-person—it's to find the right balance. Retailers have demonstrated how to integrate digital and physical experiences seamlessly, using each to complement the other. Financial advisory firms can do the same by rethinking how they approach client engagement:

1. Content delivery:

Digital platforms are ideal for delivering timely, actionable content. Advisors can use webinars, videos and newsletters to share insights, updates and educational materials that clients can consume on their own time.

2. Transactional interactions:

Routine check-ins, minor plan adjustments and document reviews can be handled efficiently online. These interactions save time and reduce the logistical burden for both advisors and clients.

3. Relationship building:

This is where in-person interactions shine. Annual reviews, major life transitions, the introduction of new team members and deep discussions about values and goals are best done face-to-face. These moments create lasting trust and demonstrate genuine care—qualities that cannot be fully replicated online.

As you consider how to structure your client relationships in the future, take a page from the retail playbook. The future isn't just physical brick-and-mortar or digital—it's phygital. Advisors must embrace the power of this approach—embrace digital tools for efficiency but recognize that relationships are built on shared experiences, trust and the human touch.