



Big Tech

The death of the high street? Maybe not. Forward-thinking retail tech company SES-imagotag has become the global leader in its market. Chairman & CEO Thierry Gadou talks about the opportunities presented by the changing face of shopping.

THIERRY GADOU
CHAIRMAN & CEO @ SES-imagotag

With a 30-year history culminating in recently announced revenues of 423 million euros, SES-imagotag is a company on the up. The innovative tech firm, headquartered in France, with offices on three continents, has grown to become world number one in smart digital labels and IoT (internet of things) solutions, as applied to retail. It's a field embedded in modernity, which proposes solutions to address some of humanity's greatest challenges.

Within the retail sector, IoT essentially refers to taking systems which work so well in e-commerce, such as consumer behaviour tracking, personalised shopping, or supply chain monitoring, and utilising them in a physical store. Digital shelf labels, for example, can deliver targeted advertising at shoppers, while in-store sensors can monitor footfall, and track in which parts of store customers spend most of their time. In this way, physical spaces can be optimised to produce positive outcomes with maximum efficiency. The technology can be applied to other areas too, such as the supply chain, or facility management. Predictions suggest this will continue to be a key growth area well into the future.

Positive energy

Current CEO of SES-imagotag, Thierry Gadou, took up his role in January 2012 and has overseen the company's recent surge. It was a position he took up with relish.

"My background is in retail tech," Thierry explains, "so this was an exciting opportunity for me. The company's mission, to support physical stores in addressing the key challenges they face and to turn the physical store into a digital asset, chimed with my own vision. It was clear this needed to be a point of emphasis, internationally. To be a driving force in this evolution appealed to me very much."

Among the policies implemented by Thierry since his arrival, is one which now shapes the company's entire outlook. The Roadmap for Positive Retail, a global programme launched in 2019, works through five policy pillars. Firstly, making physical stores into digital assets. Secondly, helping technology adoption by democratising IoT for retail. Thirdly, enabling a new era of retail collaboration across the entire manufacturer/retailer/consumer value chain to maximise synergies. Fourthly protecting consumers

by ensuring data protection, integrity and privacy and lastly making retail's digital transformation low waste, low carbon, and sustainable to help preserve the environment.

"We are very proud of this roadmap," Thierry says. "It is about what we need to be doing now, but it is also about the future. These changes must come, but of course it is crucial to implement them in the right way."

One year after being introduced, the five pillars of the SES-imagotag roadmap were brought into even sharper focus by the coronavirus pandemic. As national lockdowns swept the world from March 2020 onwards, brick and mortar retail plunged into a completely unforeseen crisis. Throughout the course of 2020, retail sales volumes fell by 1.9% compared with 2019, the largest annual fall on record. Some areas were hit harder than others and while e-commerce increased its market share considerably, high street fashion and fuel retail were devastated. Internationally, well-known retailers such as TopShop in the UK or JC Penney in the USA were unable to withstand this impact and collapsed. Others clung on by their fingernails, but doomsday predictions continue.

"When the pandemic first began," Thierry explains, "the company's primary duty was of course, to protect its employees. We quickly decided on prevention and working from home measures around the world and implemented them rigorously. I am grateful for how we pulled together as a company. It's very important →



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to have a collective ethic at times like that. Our teams have shown great resilience and commitment to serving our customers since the beginning of the pandemic.”

Despite the economic chaos wrought by the arrival of coronavirus, there was also a sense that SES-imagotag could offer reeling retailers a helping hand. Was there a way for retail to find a way out of the coronavirus woods? As physical stores emerged from lockdown, yet still faced social distancing and other restrictions, SES-imagotag’s systems began to look more than just forward thinking. They were becoming essential.

“Yes, it is true that retail has realised more than ever the need to digitise itself,” Thierry says. “As physical commerce is still a sector under great pressure. It is faced with increasing labor costs, flat consumption, price wars, online competition and shifting consumer behaviors. These are critical sustainability challenges, so it is crucial now to stay ahead of the curve.”

Digitisation & hybridisation

Not only is SES-imagotag at the vanguard of digitisation, leading the hybridisation of retail into a blended physical and digital experience, but it also retains a clear sustainability focus. Some elements of this are baked into its DNA.

Digital labels remove the need for dispensable paper or plastic ones, for example and therefore reduce waste. Its supply chain applications increase efficiency from the warehouse to the consumer, or “from the floor to the store” as Thierry describes it. However, there is more

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JOHNSON LEE
CEO @ E Ink.

to it than that, and SES-imagotag is a company which takes its corporate responsibility very seriously.

“It is not just about sustainability,” Thierry explains. “Sustainability is vital, of course and we reduce paper consumption, therefore preserving millions of trees in the years to come. We also fight food waste, and our applications are already being used in cold chain monitoring. But also, we are turning physical locations into high-value digital assets, enabling retailers, brands, and consumers to benefit from highly efficient stores. This helps provide a sustainable retailing model, leveraging what’s already here. And what is already there? The stores. No-one should underestimate the importance of this. At SES-imagotag, we see the necessity of physical retail. It is the biggest employer in the world and essential to the activity of cities and neighborhoods. By preserving its existence, we also act positively on society.”

With the continuing evolution of retail, a certainty and with digitisation playing an ever more important part in everyday life, the continuing success of SES-imagotag seems assured.

“The pandemic increased demand and anticipation for innovations,” Thierry says. “The resulting take-up of these innovative new products and services will play a key role in our continued growth.”

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E Ink Holdings Inc. (8069.TWO), based on technology from MIT’s Media Lab, has transformed and defined the eReader market, enabling a new multi-billion-dollar market in less than 10 years. E Ink’s low-power products are ideal for IoT applications ranging from retail, home, hospital, transportation, and more, enabling customers to put displays in locations previously impossible. The Company’s corporate philosophy aims to deliver revolutionary products, user experiences, and environmental benefits through advanced technology development. This vision has led to its continuous

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