Mobile Tech: Wave of the Future

Technology is advancing at a 'smart' pace with mobile devices leading the charge and depended on for much more than just making a phone call. BY MARIA WEISKOTT

INDIVIDUALIZED CUSTOMER SERVICE: THERE'S AN "APP" FOR THAT. Relationship building: there's an "app" for that too. Enjoyable shopping experience? Indeed, there's an "app" for that as well...and then some.

Because as we know, when it comes to retail, customers most always get their way. So, yes, the building blocks of solid brick-and-mortar retailing—like "shopping experience" and "customer service"—now have comparable digital applications, or apps. And more are on the way.

Whether it's business-to-business or business-to-consumer, users are insisting that online retail interaction must occur as seamlessly and as easily as it does face-to-face. Additionally, users insist as well that interaction must be able to occur ideally on all available electronic platforms: desktop computers, tablets, smart phones, you name it.

Driven by overwhelming demand from users, advances in retail technology are occurring at a pace that is frenetic and unparalleled. And there is no end in sight for the foreseeable future.

Fasten Your Seatbelts

According to a recent report by Accenture, a global management consulting company, "retailing will change more in the next five years than it has in the last 50." This phenomenon will occur, the report states, because "consumer uptake of new communication technologies has continued to compress over the past 125 years."

The report considers radio as an example of earlier consumer adoption of technology. "It took more than 30 years to achieve a consumer adoption rate of 50 percent. Mobile phones took only 15 years to reach the same level, and social media, a mere 3.5 years," the report notes.

IN OTHER WORDS..... RETAILING IN THE WEB 2.0 ERA

Webrooming: When consumers research products online. This phenomenon gives retailers an opportunity to provide potential customers with information about its brick-and-mortar physical presence as well as product information like pricing and reviews.

Omnichannel: Adoption by consumers of digital technologies and devices in all stages of shopping, sometimes integrating digital and physical brick-and-mortar in the process to final purchase.

Seamless Retail Experience: Expectation that a retailer is and will be present—physically and digitally—at every stage of a consumer's buying process from discovery to purchase to possible return.

Customer Experience Management: Compilation of the processes retailers use to track, oversee and organize its interaction with customers in order to enhance and optimize customer loyalty.

Customer Relationship Management: Managing the loyalty of customers and attracting prospective customers through electronic means like email, search options and social media as well as by more traditional means.

MOBILE DEVICES WILL BECOME THE MOST COMMON WAY FOR PEOPLE TO ACCESS THE INTERNET ... WITH PHONES AND TABLETS [MORE] THAN WITH DESKTOPS AND TABLETS.

Jeremy Hirsch
Aptus Digital

"The message for retailers is simple: While you had literally decades to perfect your radio-era go-to-market strategy, with social media you will be lucky to get a year, and in the future, a year might be a best-case scenario," the Accenture report advises.

As a new year comes into view on the horizon, it is becoming apparent exactly which technology trends are moving to the forefront, finding favor on the retail landscape and which have become entrenched as the new normal...if only in tech time.

From Mobility to Mensa

It was just a bit more than a decade ago that mobile, or 'cell' phones were considered the next-best-thing-since-indoor-plumbing (or sliced bread... whichever). But acclaiming them for their 'mobility' today would be so last century—make that so last millenium.

If there were a Mensa organization for mobile phones, today's smart phones would surely be in it. Not only have this hour's version of smart phones become a vital connection to the world, they have become in-

dispensable to the large majority of adults who use them for accomplishing myriad tasks ranging from bill paying, to making bank deposits, to scanning prices and coupons, to finding the nearest gift shop, to webrooming; all reasons why they are becoming especially indispensable to the retail sector as well.

In the coming year—2014—the market will witness a tremendous shift to mobility in user preference for accessing the Internet. As it now stands, 25 percent of web users only access the Internet with mobile devices.

When combined with tablets, "mobile devices will become the most common way for people to access the Internet," Jeremy Hirsch tells *Gifts and Decorative Accessories*. "In other words, more people will access the web via phones and tablets than with desk-tops and laptops," adds Hirsch, founder and president of Aptus Digital, a marketing consultancy.

But it is the phone that retailers find most challenging. During the 2012 holiday season, more than half of adult cell phone owners used their phones while they were in a store to seek help with purchasing decisions. According to a Pew Internet & American Life research project conducted in January 2013, during a 30-day period before and after Christmas:

AS THEIR CUSTOMERS HAVE BEEN SPENDING MORE TIME ON MOBILE PHONES AND TABLETS, RETAILERS NEED TO BE SURE THAT THEIR WEBSITES PRESENT THEIR PRODUCTS IN A COMPELLING WAY.

Eric Dean
Whereoware

• 38 percent of cell owners used their phone to call a friend while they were in a store for advice about a purchase they were considering making,

• 24 percent of cell owners used their phone to look up reviews of a product online while they were in a store, and

• 25 percent of adult cell owners used their phones to look up the price of a product online while they were in a store, to see if they could get a better price somewhere else.

"Taken together," the report states, "just over half (52 percent) of all adult cell owners used their phone for at least one of these three reasons over the holiday shopping season and one third (33 percent) used their phone specifically for online information while inside a physical store—either product reviews or pricing information," according to the Pew report.

"I just have to stand there and listen to them talking about my displays," a retailer bemoaned to *GDA* during a recent interview. "It's infuriating," he said, "especially when they leave the store without making a purchase!"

Can You See Me Now?!

With web access by smart phone becoming even more popular, it will be imperative that a company's web offerings are uniform in appearance across all platforms—including mobile. If a company's web offerings "appear decent only on desktop screens," that company will be excluding a large majority of its "customers who only use mobile," Hirsch advises.

"Retailers have been investing in general eCommerce sites for a few years," he acknowledges. "But as their customers have been spending a lot more time on mobile phones and tablets, retailers need to be sure that their websites present the products in a compelling and effective way," he adds.

Eric Dean, president of Whereowhere is also convinced mobile will continue to gain ground among users. "The mobile world is front and center in the gift and home industry," he says. "Whereoware's online benchmark index reported mobile traffic on B2B websites rose 86 percent in Q3 2013. Mobile email growth is even more pronounced—up 353 percent over last year. "

Going forward, Hirsch advises that responsive design is a 'best practice' in creating retail commerce sites. "With this type of design, a website changes how it presents the web pages based on screen resolution." When designed this way, pages on PC screens look different than on a mobile phone, he explains, adding, "The benefit is a much

*CRM REDUX: ONLINE NETWORKS

- A business—or even a customer—creates a fan page for a company or product on a social network.
- People who like the brand will sign up as fans, creating a venue for communication, marketing and networking.
- A business can quickly get information out to users who are interested in the company or its products.
- A business can follow conversations about its brand for real-time market data and feedback.
- A customer can easily tell a company—and everyone else—about their experiences with the company, whether those experiences are good or bad.
- A business can respond very quickly to negative feedback, attend to customer problems and maintain, regain or rebuild customer confidence.
- A customer can use social networking sites to offer ideas for future products or tweaks to current ones.
- Customer Relationship Management

(SOURCE: ACCENTURE)

more positive user experience—resulting in more sales for the retailer."

KISS—Keeping it Simple, Still

A website blueprint geared to achieve a positive user experience, as always, includes being user friendly as well as responsive on all platforms; the goal for which Brandwise aimed in the recent redesign of its company website.

Company spokesperson Brianne Houck says the new website's "clean layout, modern look and feel, and easy navigation is geared toward guiding existing and potential customers in accessing the information they want, quickly. Not only that," she adds, "but it's optimized to adapt to Agile Marketing, much like the Agile process that Brandwise uses in software development."

During redevelopment, Brandwise also simplified the new website by reducing to five, the number of its key flagship products, from 11 "hard to understand products," Houck explains. "The five flagship products focus on use cases and offer add-ons for a truly customizable solution," she says.

> A SIMPLIFIED NEW WEBSITE PROVIDES A MORE POSITIVE USER EXPERIENCE. FOR BRANDWISE CUSTOMERS, 11 HARD-TO-UNDERSTAND PRODUCTS WAS REDUCED TO FIVE EASIER TO USE PRODUCTS.
>
> **Brianne Houck**
> Brandwise

"Customers can now identify key areas they want to improve within their business, such as order taking, product presentations, reporting, growing online sales, etc., and easily find a solution to accommodate their needs, and then add on options from there," Houck notes.

Less is More (Again)

Following years of adding any number of bells and whistles to their websites, companies might want to consider getting back to basics sooner rather than later, (remember the core competency mantra?) and declutter, experts advise.

While customer service is still the bottom line where retail is concerned, with so many retail entry points, the retailer is seriously challenged to serve each entry point equally. Because not only does the customer want service, the customer wants service to be seamless. Customers want to be able to browse (webrooming), price check, size check, order, purchase and return on any platform whether online or in store, during business hours or after hours.

"Responsive design" of websites creates different screen looks from desktop to mobile phone for a more positive user experience.

When faced with these requirements, Whereowhere's Dean suggests that the industry take the age-old advice of Occam's Razor: "when faced with competing hypothesis, you should select the one with the fewest assumptions."

"In other words," quips Dean, "keep it simple and easy."

Dean says that although the Razor is 150 years old, the principle still applies to our fast-paced, cluttered lives. And nowhere is this more relevant, he notes than in the online world. "Looking forward to 2014, the concept of 'less is more' will certainly continue to trend upward in importance and should be front of mind for those looking to stand out in a very crowded online marketplace," the executive says.

And given the explosive growth of mobile web use, the importance of 'less is more' only increases in importance. Limited space on handheld screens forces economy; making simple, concise messaging imperative in email and on the web, according to Dean.

"Our mobile world makes more white space, fewer buttons, intuitive and click-friendly calls-to-action, and a simplified user experience the new rule," he says.

Dean points out Twitter, which grew quickly on the concept of making users condense their messages into 140 characters, as representing the success of the 'less is more' concept. "In just a few short years, Twitter's popularity exploded to over 400 million tweets per day, setting the stage for a blockbuster IPO," he notes. "This feat is due, in part, to the ease that users can quickly consume, discuss, and share information," he adds.

"Whether you are a digital marketing pro, a small mom and pop business, or a Fortune 500 corporation, you are in a cutthroat, global competition for your customers' attention," Dean warns.

Regardless of who the customers are, however, they hear and see advertisements and products on their TVs, radios, computers, tablets and smartphones, virtually 24/7, Dean says, adding that in this nonstop digital age, only the best 'less is more' messengers can cut through the clutter and noise to win customers' brief attention. •

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