

Features

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Ready for Technology Shifts?

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The technological creep is overtaking us and we don't necessarily see or feel it. In the 1990s, the man who forgot an anniversary had to call her favorite restaurant and talk the manager into reserving a preferred table. Then call florists until someone agreed to take the flowers to the restaurant in the evening so they arrive for his hot date. Today, the forgetful Romeo goes on Open Table for the reservation, hoping the app smiles favorably on his situation. Then his favorite florist's app allows him to order flowers to be instantly delivered by Uber/Lyft/Postmates. This is a customer's expectation today. Rather than shopping around, he lets the apps he already has handle his needs. Uber/Lyft provides "instant access" to transportation by putting demand-and-supply together over the ubiquitous mobile phone. Alphabet announced its Fiat Chrysler Self-Driving Minivans will hit the streets later this year. How will this new technology become the "new normal" your customer is expecting from you?

Finding the Pain Point

Wayfair, founded in 2002, went online in 2011. Today, its online furniture sales are on track for more than \$5 billion annual volume. In comparison, Ikea, founded in 1943, currently has 355 stores worldwide with sales around \$45 billion. While Ikea has millions of square feet of retail, Wayfair fits on a screen. Wayfair's "geeky" management team lacks any significant retailing experience. Instead of thinking about acres of display, they think about customers interfacing with technology. In 2017, they introduced an app that dissolves the biggest question prospective buyers have, "What will it look like in my home?" Augmented reality (AR) technology allows mobile users to see new furniture in their home's setting.

Steve Conine, Wayfair's co-founder and co-chairman, says they've solved the pain point because customers know what they're getting. Imagine your landscaping customer asking, "What will it look like?" Many garden centers have landscape departments that do mock-ups of what it might resemble, with heavy IT and personnel costs. Wayfair has automated it so each additional layout has no incremental cost, but their initial IT infrastructure was a huge capital expenditure. Unlike the local garden center model, each new customer using it doesn't increase the costs. Additionally, the customers power any re-dos or view additional products, rather than trained sales associates or landscapers. Wayfair customers have experienced this since last September. Soon these customers will expect the same from their garden center and other retailers.

Easing Your Own Pain Points

A friend with four cats has kitty litter bags stacked 6-ft. high in her garage. She bought it on Jet.com on a whim. She went on the site to check it out and realized the more she bought, up to a point, the cheaper each bag became. She bought 500 lbs., which built a wall in her garage. Jet's unique ordering ability lets the consumer put together an order that saves on shipping/handling and returns some of the savings to the customer. Walmart bought this technology

for \$3 billion. What can you do to protect your sales of bagged products?

Instagram is becoming a B2C advertising vehicle, with one-third of their stories coming from businesses. In 30-days, Instagram logged 180-million business interactions with individual customers. When you can engage customers to provide content that supplements your own, you'll generally see a three-times sales lift from the products reviewed or promoted. Customers trust other customers more than companies.

Be wary of potential public backlash when fake reviews are discovered. Your reviews should look and sound like your customer, not a copywriter. It's even better if reviewers are identifiable as real people in your community. For the most effective ROI, encourage your customers to become influencers by spreading the word.



Opening Lines of Interaction

Phones and computers are always on. We expect instant responses to texts and emails. How can your company handle this, consistent with payroll budgeting, and wage-and-hour restrictions in your locale? If you aren't available 24/7, make it clear so your customer knows when to expect feedback.

Pictured: Wayfair's app allows customers to see prospective furniture options in the designated room, thanks to new Augmented Reality technology. Imagine if this were perennials in a landscape?

Customers like the chat function. Many chat service companies offer statistical proof of how much business you'll gain by using chat services. The key issue is writing the scripts and educating the people to answer questions intelligently. While many chat operators are overseas, our industry nuances make that more difficult. Unlike a washing machine that's the same everywhere, plants respond to local conditions. How do international call centers handle those questions? The answer may lie with buying groups or geographically broad-based growers. It'll take a large database and investment to gather the information to make a chat service effective.

Customers want frictionless interactions. This includes paying. While Visa and MasterCard are still the 800-lb. gorillas, other methods exist. Apple Pay and Google Pay have their fans. Zelle is allegedly an up-and-coming payment app, allowing users to send money instantly to anyone with a mobile phone and bank account. If you cater to Asian tourists, consider Alipay, the global leader in payments and a favorite of many Chinese travelers. The Japanese often choose the JCB card.

Check with your card processor. Most of the EMV (chip) compliant card readers can accept these. Near Field Communication (NFC) cards are growing in popularity. It's possible adding these capabilities may have zero cost, but could expand your market potential, depending on how your customers have adopted technology. If you're worried about credit card chargebacks, the NFC and Apple Pay/Google Pay type services are more secure with virtually no chargebacks.

Embracing Tech

Written memos and three-ring binders are gone. Imagine your sales team answering questions directly off an iPad, connected to your databases. No more running to the POS or computer terminal. Additionally, the employees can access grower/manufacturer databases and authorities, making them "the source of all things garden-related." Retailers using employee apps report the employees read more, stay more up-to-date and respond quicker than with any other form of communication. More and more employees join your firm as "digital natives," trained to avoid bulletin boards and memos while treasuring what's on their phone. Can you tap into this natural affinity or are you trying to change long-installed behavior?

Customers on their phones in your garden center appreciate Wi-Fi access. Make it easy for them, while encouraging them to stay longer. Offer free Wi-Fi on a system that's separate from your internal systems. Watch for hackers. Your public system should support only customers' Wi-Fi. Your store system needs a different provider. It'll cost a bit more, but the safety is worth it.

Look around! Consider what's changing in your world. Now determine how to make that relevant to your customers. It may take working with others. It's a great opportunity for buying groups and other associations. **GP**

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