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Catching Up With That Shopper

by [Steve Smith](#), Thursday, July 1, 2010, 2:46 PM

Retailers both online and off had better get their mobile act together -- because their customers are already using cell phones to shop, research, compare and find better deals elsewhere.

"Google it," my partner now says to me as a matter of course when we go shopping for appliances. Remember the days when the digitally unaware would ask you to print out emails for them because they couldn't handle using the Web themselves? Many smartphone users are in a similar situation now, I think. The less-wired people around us now rely on us to use our smartphones in-store to get details about an item or locate better deals elsewhere.

There is a big disconnect between the readiness of retail and consumer habits, according to some recent research. Knowledge Networks just found that 40% of smartphone owners consult apps at least sometimes when making shopping decisions, and 32% say they are more inclined to buy from companies that advertise in apps. And yet another survey from Acquity Group finds that even among the top 500 Internet retailers, only 12% even have a mobile Web site. The share of companies with mobile apps was only 7%.

I suspect this is one place where marketers and retailers have to play catch-up with users. I am already seeing in my unscientific eyeball survey of shopping habits that the dude with the smartphone is often doing some kind of product look-up in store. A new Harris Interactive survey sponsored by Placecast shows that interest in mobile promotions is notable. About 8% are extremely interested in getting text alerts from their favorite merchants while another 28% are somewhat interested, up 3 percentage points and 2 percentage points respectively from a year ago. Among the 18-34 segment, however, interest is up to 42%. Coupons are the key driver for most people, and grocery, restaurant and ticketing promotions are the most desired.

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When asked about the relative importance of different features on their cell phones, 25% said Internet access is extremely or very important, and 14% said the same about having the ability to search for a store location.

So on a percentile basis, whether it is being able to get notices of promotions by text or even accessing the Web and store locations by phone, the level of consumer interest in mobilizing retail appears to be higher than it is among retailers themselves.

I have already bemoaned the lack of a decent mobile program at my most-visited retailer, Borders Books. The Amazon and Barnes & Noble apps have hijacked sales from Borders on several of my visits. In both apps I can simply snap a shot of a book and get pricing and availability, reviews and pricing for used volumes.

Retailers have to look at mobile apps as something more than just opportunities to sell people



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STEVE SMITH

Contributing writer Steve Smith is a lapsed academic who saw the light, bolted the University and spent the last decade as a digital media critic and consultant. He is chair and programmer of OMMA Mobile and OMMA Behavioral conferences from Mediapost and is the Digital Media Editor at Media Industry Newsletter (MIN) from Access Intelligence. Contact him [here](#).



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things. The apps should be constructed as services and utilities. I use these book retailer apps as resources now. The Fandango app is not necessarily where I go to order tickets, but I am using it to locate new films and show times, and to access user and critical reviews. Likewise, the excellent Best Buy app for the iPhone is a deep trove of information about the goods at hand, along with user reviews. The app recently added a QR code reader that will be used with icons in its Sunday circulars. EBay's recent acquisition of the Red Laser code reading app is brilliant. It positions the retail brand as a broader reference service.

In the first wave of branded apps, many advertisers struggled under the responsibility of becoming publishers in order to make their apps credible utilities. An app with staying power needs to be refreshed and provide a much broader utility than simply hawking the narrow product line of the sponsor. I'm not sure many brands were ready for that.

But in retail there is a golden opportunity to follow Amazon's brilliant example from the Web and become a genuine resource. It is up to retailers to do this, because apparently the independent editorial segment of publishing simply is not up to the task. For the life of me I don't understand why Consumer Reports hasn't figured out a way to own the mobile platform when it comes to in-store shopping reference.

From the time I started covering mobile in the early 2000s, there was always this dream scenario that a user could access CR ratings and reports from his mobile phone, and the company made several false starts at achieving the goal. The latest iteration is a pay-to-play mobile Web site that offers subscription access and even day passes. The effort is passable compared to the regrettable early attempts at mobile apps, but it ends up being an exercise in drilling through entry after entry. And I bet most of you didn't even know an m.consumerreports.org existed until I just told you.

I am standing in the aisles, product in one hand and cell phone in the other, just asking for someone to super-serve me.



This commentary is insightful. I recommend it to others.
13 people recommend this article.

2 comments on "Catching Up With That Shopper"



Steve Smith from **Mediapost**
commented on: July 02, 2010 at 2:05 PM

Thanks Kemp. Looks as if we are on the same page on retailers need to go beyond mere storefronts on mobile.
Steve



Kemp Mullaney from **PlayPhone.com**
commented on: July 02, 2010 at 1:07 PM

Great article Steve. I took some of your stats and offered my own thoughts here - <http://bit.ly/cLzMLP>

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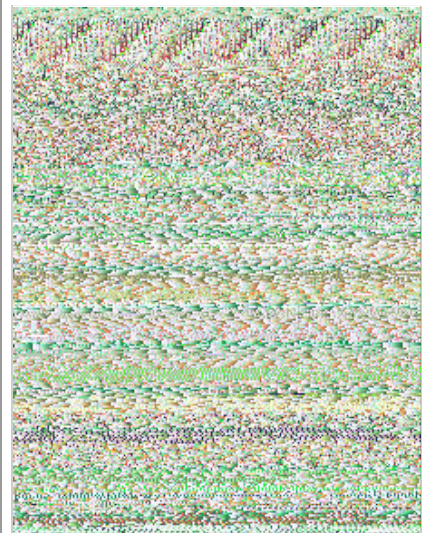
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