

# The internet of customers is just getting started

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Over the past 15 years, marketers have seen new channels proliferate, customer behaviour change, and old practices become redundant at a dizzying speed - all because of the rise of digital technologies.



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The web has turned the world into the consumer's library and shopping mall; the mobile device means that he or she is always connected and in search of customer service; and social media has changed the balance of power between brands and their customers.

As incredible as it may sound, we're just at the beginning of the digital customer revolution.

With technologies such as wearable computing, the Internet of Things, and augmented and virtual reality all maturing at a rapid speed, the next stage in the development of a connected world is starting to unfold. In the future, we can expect many of our old assumptions about in-store marketing and broadcast advertising challenged as digital technologies are woven deeper into our customers' lives.

These emerging trends mean that digital is no longer just about offering eyeballs. It is about creating personalised customer experiences that fuse digital technologies with the real world. Such experiences will be driven by customer data and they'll bridge the distance between what we once thought of as the real (analogue) world and the Internet.

## **The Internet of everything and everywhere**

Mobile devices mean that our customers have access to the Internet wherever they go. As marketers, we now have layers of contextual information about customers' behaviour, added to what we were already able to track using web analytics tools.

The entwined threads of the Internet of Things and wearable computing take this theme of mobility and data to the next level. These trends see everyday objects such as cars, watches, fitness trackers, televisions, and even fridges and thermostats connected to the Internet.

All of a sudden, we have a wealth of new customer data available as this network of devices share information with each other and the people who use them. And we'll have even more new points of interaction and transaction with customers, thanks to new connected devices.

For example, consider the rise of beacons. Mobile apps and .mobi sites gave us the ability to engage with customers nearly anywhere and everywhere. Now, we're seeing a range of location-based technologies such as beacons mature, allowing us to gain rich contextual data and interact with customers in new ways.

## **In-store and at home tied together**

Beacons are affordable, simple to install in nearly every store, and run on an opt-in basis. Though no significant implementation has taken place locally as yet, international retailers such as Macy's are currently piloting beacons. They can track a consumer's presence, and offer the shopper location-specific deals, discounts, recommendations, and rewards when he or she enters the store.

The technology can also unify the digital and in-store customer experience. For example, if the customer puts a pair of boots in the wish list on the mobile app, he or she can be reminded that there's a special for the product when passing the shoe department.

## **Augmented reality in the shopping aisle**

Augmented reality (AR) is another technology that promises to add an interesting digital element to the in-store experience. AR is a technology that overlays computer-generated content over a live image you view through a digital camera - in future, that camera could be a pair of smartglasses rather than a smartphone.

The tech has been around for a while, but has been seen as gimmicky, a bit clunky, and not practical for mainstream deployment. But Microsoft's HoloLens and other innovations are making it cool again.

The marketing applications are quite exciting. Imagine a shopper looking at a product in a store window through a digital camera and seeing an overlay of the features and benefits. Or even trying on a virtual watch or dress to get an idea of how it looks.

In future and with permission, you could track the user's eyes and interactions and use this data to create personalised offers to the customer in real-time. "Hey, the red dress isn't in store now, but would you like to see how you'd look in it anyway, and we'll order it for you if you like it?"

## **Eyes on the road, hands on the wheel**

Change is also coming to the car, where so many of us spend so much of our lives. Over the next few years, a growing proportion of automobiles will roll off the production line with connected features, informational touchscreens, and voice

activated interfaces.

Where broadcast radio and billboards used to be best way to reach drivers with ads in the past, we'll soon be able to speak to them via digital interfaces such as streamed Internet radio.

The connected car could be a source of insight into customer behaviour, for example, their routes to work, commuting times, media consumption, and shopping trips. Taken to the next level, marketers could also use this information to offer personalised, geo-targeted services or buying recommendations. For example, your supermarket could offer to have your shopping ready for collection when you're 20 minutes from the store.

## What does this mean for marketers?

The technologies I've discussed are just a small sample of how the marketing world is changing because of new digital channels and the rich, big data they gather about our customers. The smart home, media streaming, and many other developments are starting to permeate our customers' lives.

They change consumer behaviour in fundamental ways - just look at how a digital native consumes short form video on YouTube or Vimeo rather than watching broadcast TV. Marketers must start thinking about how they will interact with customers as these technologies reshape their expectations and behaviour.

How can we earn consumers' trust to access their data and how do we use it in a respectful way that enhances customers' lives? And, how do we use the new digital interfaces and channels to build relationships with our customers?

Most importantly, perhaps, we must ask ourselves how the Internet of Everything can become an Internet of customers. How do we use new technologies to create integrated, immediate and personalised customer journeys and experiences that span all our touchpoints? Marketers who have compelling answers to these questions, will be well positioned for the future.

## ABOUT ANDRE STEENEKAMP

As CEO of 25AM, Andre Steenekamp leads the company's expansion in South Africa's fast-growing digital marketing and advertising space. His 25-year career has seen him work in a range of sales, marketing and management positions for leading traditional and digital publishers and agencies. Steenekamp was appointed to his current role following the acquisition of a 50%-stake in Acceleration Media by Times Media Limited.

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