We’d just turned old enough to get into the Manhattan bars, and we were planning on thoroughly enjoying ourselves before crashing at someone’s house in Mount Vernon. That was the plan. There was one problem—the last train left Manhattan about a half hour before midnight, not at midnight as we’d thought. We were stuck with no cash for a cab. Back then using a credit card in a taxi just wasn’t a thing.

Our cold, merry band started walking in whichever direction seemed logical in search of an ATM—one that would work with our out-of-state cards. Laws allowing banks to have branches in multiple states were still a decade away. In 1987, the best we could hope for was a local bank that was connected to our bank through a brand new network like STAR.

After we passed a half-dozen ATMs without success, someone joked that I should just put my card in the next ATM we saw. “Any card works in any machine now,” she said. ATMs had only arrived in my small town a few years before, and the idea that I could use one in New York was laughable.
A wager was negotiated, the card went in, the PIN was entered, and the ATM's green monochrome CRT monitor blinked, “Transaction in Progress...” It seemed to size up our group, the transaction, and the existential meaning of life. Then, the words “Transaction Complete” appeared along with $100 in 20s. We shouted in disbelief! The impossible was actually possible.

It works.

That trip to New York City took place in the middle of the Information Age. “There was so much possibility, but the platforms didn’t always work. We were forced to upgrade our computer operating systems every few years with software that famously failed, and we tended not to blame the company but to blame ourselves for not being computer literate. 30 years later, the idea of sticking with a product that doesn’t always work is difficult to comprehend.

We now live in the Age of the Consumer, where every transaction must delight, every company must compete, and, most importantly, everything must work.

It’s not an age of brand loyalty. If people love Apple, it’s only because they believe Apple works. If they get directions using Google on their iPhone, it’s because they believe Google Maps works better than Apple Maps. Loneliness is the new best friend—ever for only a few seconds—they’re convinced Waze works better than Google, they’ll switch again.

Those decisive seconds aren’t just perceived. First Data’s Innovation Lab, led by Kevin Lewis, did an extensive study to determine just how long customers tried out new apps. “Companies have a surprisingly short period of time, really a matter of minutes, to delight potential converts,” Lewis says. “If the app doesn’t work or it’s hard to understand, users will delete it, and they’ll never try it again.”

First Data created enabling technologies based on the real needs and desires of consumers.

Customers actually want what they say they want isn’t always easy. When First Data began working on a new experience for quick service restaurants, customers said they wanted to use their phones to pay for their food. The team created some prototypes that included a tap-to-pay system like Apple Pay® and Samsung Pay®. However, when testing the prototypes with consumers, they noticed a different frustration. Lewis says, “What customers really wanted was to avoid the long lines.”

In response, the team started working on an “order ahead” feature combined with a separate pick-up experience where mobile customers could grab their food and go. This work was especially handy when First Data and Chick-Fil-A began working together on what would become the new Chick-Fil-A One app. It became the most downloaded free app in the iTunes App Store for a time in mid-2016.

Creating an experience that provided convenient payment and loyalty was exactly what Chick-Fil-A wanted. First Data created enabling technologies based on the real needs and desires of consumers.

First Data’s Head of Corporate Strategy and Intelligence, Glenn Fodor, plans corporate strategies around the demands of customers. “In the Age of the Consumer, business need to be engaged with the customers, anticipate what they want, get their attention amid unprecedented competition, and then present them with a unique buying experience—when they want it, where they want it, and how they want it. You either do that or perish.”

Convenience versus experience.

The hunt for new customers begins with understanding today’s mobile lifestyle and then leveraging a company’s strengths. “Roughly half of Home Depot’s online sales are fulfilled in the local store,” says Fodor. “Effectively, Home Depot has thousands of distribution centers across the country, which when used with a proper interface is a clear competitive advantage versus other retailers. So, when Home Depot added the mobile element, enabling customers to search and pay for products before they get to the store—that’s how they combined convenience with a great experience.”

Conversely, quick service restaurants don’t need to work on convenience—it’s already one of their strengths. But add a great mobile app, and that can easily win market share. Fodor says, “Just look at the continuum of retail brands, ranging from those that are growing to those that aren’t—nearly all those at the top of the growth chart are food or some derivative thereof. Food service is at the forefront of getting digital right!”

If convenience isn’t a company’s strength, it must compete based on experience, such as making shopping fun, decadent, wholesome... whatever the customer wants. REI has a half-dozen apps that cater to its customers’ love of the outdoors, from finding the best hiking trails to a comprehensive guide of US national parks. And unsurprisingly, REI ranks near the top for customer experience.

They want it now.

The final frontier in the Age of the Consumer is meeting the demand for seamless purchases at the point of sale without keeping the customer waiting, and without asking the buyer to take on credit card debt. Millennials came of age during the Great Recession, and they are known for avoiding credit card debt and high-interest payments.

Looking forward.

The rush to fulfill consumers’ desires has dramatically reshaped the way we make payments and has allowed new market disruptors to form. Four students in New York City today would never face the same predicament as me and my friends 30 years ago. Today, they’d point their smartphone at any train station or bus stop to get the next departure time. And if they wanted to get home faster, one touch would summon a lyft or an Uber.

And even those experiences are becoming even better. Lyft has announced a deal with Taco Bell that lets riders go into “Taco Mode.” An app will prompt the driver to take the passengers to the nearest Taco Bell, which will light up with the words “Taco Mode” when the car arrives. For the rider, there’s a special in-car menu and free Doritos Locos tacos.

For any college student heading home after a night on the town, that’s the pinnacle of giving the consumer what they want, when they want it, and how they want it.
Sources


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