Consumer engagement today is shaped by technology

By Gil Sperling

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By leveraging rapid advancements in technology to create increasingly innovative products and services, businesses are driving unprecedented change in the way brands engage with consumers.

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Speaking at the Accenture Liquid Studio during the second Popimedia Shift workshop, a series of interactive engagements that aim to shift the thinking of senior marketers around design, marketing and business in the digital age, Rory Moore, innovation lead at Accenture, offered practical examples of how this can be achieved.

"Accenture's Liquid Studio is a delivery engine that leverages technologies such as Internet of Things (IoT) networks, virtual reality (VR) equipment, and artificial intelligence (AI) to demonstrate how to quickly turn innovative ideas into proofs of concept, or test application to reduce development and deployment times."

Attendees experienced a number of active projects, which offered the ideal setting to discuss how marketers can shift their mindset around innovation ideation and creation, against the backdrop of five key trends forecast to unfold in the next three years, according to Accenture's most recent Tech Vision* report titled *Intelligent Enterprise Unleashed*.

Reshaping engagement and experiences

"Technology is being woven and embedded into the fabric of a consumer's life and is reshaping engagement and experiences. This means that the CMO or CDO plays an integral role in moulding the technology-customer interface," explained Moore.

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"However, as companies infiltrate every aspect of consumer life through technology, they must consider the implied social contract – how they deal with customers and the world – in the same way that Facebook and Uber now focus on how their technologies work in ethical and trustworthy ways," continued Moore.

This is the context in which CMOs need to think about future brand interactions, a concept termed 'citizen AI'. While this technology has been around for some time, it's only now being implemented in practical ways.

AI, Moore explained, has shifted from its traditional back-end automation and processing functions, with deployments now seen in a number of front-end interfaces.

AI will shape customer experiences

"As it becomes more ubiquitous, this technology-human interface will become the primary point of engagement and will shape customer experiences," expanded Moore. Deploying AI will, therefore, need to be done in a manner whereby it acts as a responsible representative of the business because AI-based decisions have an increasing impact on human lives.

Accenture's second trend is extended reality (XR) – the blurring of the real and simulated worlds. Augmented reality (AR) and VR are transforming how people see and imagine scenarios and connect with each other and with brands. While not a new technology, massive investments by Microsoft, Google and Facebook are driving this trend forward.

This creates potential for XR-based disruption to deliver brand experiences as a service, supporting the shift in consumer preferences away from material goods and basic interactions that fail to deliver on an emotional level. Businesses are therefore finding a competitive edge with the design of virtual customer experiences.

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Expect the next evolution of this technology to include AR layers on top of smartphone-enabled engagement. These tools will be native in apps, enabling users to augment objects or scenery during live video chats or real-time experiences. This holds significant applications in the retail environment, with the ability to overlay information at the point of purchase to inform decisions.

Social contract of technology

The third trend also talks to the social contract of technology, highlighting the importance of trust through 'data veracity'. "In a world increasingly beset by fake news and misinformation, data has become a new commodity. The quality of this valuable resource is dependent on a company's ability to collect, 'sanitise' and analyse data from external sources using AI," explained Moore.

Data veracity will, therefore, become a key concern for enterprises, above that of basic data security. “Once inaccurate, biased or contentious data has been used to inform business decisions or shared with the market, it creates a difficult, if not impossible, situation to come back from due to the viral nature of the data value chain. This requires that companies have mechanisms in place to ensure they're comfortable with what's shared to avoid a corporate crisis.”

The impact of the fourth trend – frictionless business – is already being felt in society, stated Moore. “Companies are evolving their digital capabilities by transforming legacy systems and operations. The challenge faced in this regard is creating a seamless experience between the front and back ends of the business to meet shifting customer expectations.”

Moore also offered an example of how blockchain – fundamentally a ledger of value that holds transactional histories – and smart contracts are being used to build a strong foundation for technology-based frictionless transactional models of the future, which hold numerous applications.

Bringing intelligent environments to life in the physical world

Blockchain technology would take product marketing from a merchandising practice to something that delivers greater value to the consumer, which makes it a massive trend that must be taken notice of.

The final trend highlighted was the intelligent distributed system or the 'internet of thinking'. “We're moving beyond IoT, where peripherals connect with and relay data to a centralised hub in the virtual world. Now, due to the amounts of data being fed into the cloud, limitations are being imposed on the computational power experienced at the core, which erodes the cloud's value proposition of unlimited processing power.”

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Instead, businesses are increasingly using robotics, AI and immersive experiences at the periphery to bring intelligent environments to life in the physical world. A trend is emerging whereby intelligent devices at the edge have the ability to process data at the point of acquisition to make real-time decisions. Soon these devices will start to interact with consumers in this way, materially transforming the computer-human interface.

Marketers must consider how this new world of engagement will directly impact their businesses. Here is where all the trends intersect: where decentralised processing and AI analyses data to create actions at the point of engagement through interfaces such as AR. This is possibly the most compelling example of how technology is reshaping and redefining the channels through which brand experiences occur. And without a shift in the ambit of the CMO, they'll have no control over how these customer touch-points are shaped to ensure consistency in a brand's values and messaging.

ABOUT GIL SPERLING

Gil Sperling is cofounder and co-CEO of Flow, a proptech company that goes straight to the source of the largest social platforms in the world - to match people with property.

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