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HOW TO CREATE A CONSUMER APP

Independent Market Research

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INTRODUCTION

We undertook a cross-comparison of 35 shopping/ fast foods/services smartphone apps against a set of criteria in order to derive key consumer usability features for apps to support the growth of e-commerce.

The apps were split into fashion (PrettyLittleThing, Missguided, Burberry, Zara, ASOS, Bershka, Urban Outfitters, H&M, Topshop), cosmetics (LUSH, Boots), food & drink (Deliveroo, Caffe Nero, Starbucks, Morrisons), general (Apple Store, Argos, B&M, Ikea, John Lewis, Waterstones), marketplaces (eBay, Depop, Gumtree, AutoTrader), sports (Nike, SportsDirect), other (Amazon, Audi, PayByPhone).

Apps aren't the only way of shopping on smartphones or tablets. However, once set up, they offer retailers and consumers greater opportunities for personalisation and low effort usability.

The insights have been split across four sections: in-app browsing, (post) checkout, delivery, issue resolution.

Davies Hickman Partners is a customer experience market research agency with a 10 years track record in helping businesses thrive.

The research, data and views in this report have been prepared in good faith. Davies Hickman do not take responsibility for any actions or otherwise taken by those acting on the advice and content contained in the report.

IN-APP BROWSING

AUGMENTED REALITY, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Of the 35 apps assessed, augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI) was rarely integrated into the function of the app to improve shopping experience and usability.

The quality of images varied from app to app. Being able to have a 360-degree view of the product helps the customer in their choices but wasn't always possible.

Of even more use is the ability to view products, particularly furniture/homeware, in the surroundings of a customer's chosen location. For example, this could involve seeing how a bedhead would look in a bedroom at home. The John Lewis app has the ability to super-impose furniture on a picture of a room.

ASOS has AR features. The 2020 trial of their "See My Fit" tool allowed the customer to see how a piece of clothing looks on 16 different models (UK size 4 –18, height 5"1 –5"9). Its 2018 Fit Assistant is powered by machine learning, and allows personalised sizing guidance based on the size other customers have kept/returned.

Of course, machine learning and AI is used behind the scenes to tailor the app to the individual customer.

VIDEO

With the demise of the physical high-street, in-app (catwalk) videos of the product can improve the shopping experience. Less than 1 in 3 of the apps included more than a few videos of their products. This is surprising as Davies Hickman's consumer research for Avaya shows that the trend to use video for product demonstration has grown by three-fold since 2015.

VISUAL SEARCH

Visual search is a key aspect of in-app shopping, as on e-Bay, Nike, and Argos, to name a few.

With some industry analysts estimating that visual/voice search will constitute 50% of all searches in 2020*, this feature may become increasingly normalised.

Indeed, being able to scan a QR code, as for example, on cosmetic items, creates a worthwhile shortcut for those frequent in-app repurchases. In a similar way, order history is a 'must', not only for personal records, but with the option to repurchase.

Further to this, Topshop's #TopshopStyle is an impressive feature which allows the customer to see how others have styled the fashion items pre-purchase.

More mundane search is enabled by filtering which virtually all apps offer. Some give much more comprehensive tools such as 'body type' or mini/maxi skirt.

In-store availability was offered by all relevant brands.

HOLDING ITEMS IN THE 'BAG'

Out of the 35 reviewed apps, only 2 reserved items placed in the 'bag'. ASOS, for example, holds items for the customer for up to an hour before releasing them for others to purchase. Despite this feature having the potential to be problematic, if not abused, it can be extremely useful for customers in certain situations, namely during huge in-app sales.

Perhaps setting a short reservation time of 15 minutes would maximise utility for all customers. Indeed, the customer could be given the option whether to hold/reserve the item in the 'bag', and even give a recommendation whether such would be necessary dependent on stock figures.

REGISTER FOR AVAILABILITY

Despite mainly applying to products that are sold consistently over time, the ability to register when an out-of-stock item is made available again is a useful feature. This is a tool less relevant for fast-fashion, and more employable for long-term products, such as a Russell Hobbs toaster sold within the Amazon app. But less than 5 out of 35 offered this facility.

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Less than 5 out 35 offer register for when an item is back in stock

REVIEWS

1 in 2 of the apps assessed have a review function, either for the seller/buyer, as in the case of Depop, for example, or for the actual item.

Reviews are an industry hygiene factor, despite issues regarding subjectivity and fraud. Our consumer research for BT shows that over 40% of people rely on reviews when making purchases and nearly 1 in 5 like to give reviews.

Likewise, in the case of second-hand sale apps, such as Depop, being able to review both sellers and buyers follows the standard set by Uber and others.

BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMICS

Less than 5 of the 35 apps were obviously using behavioural economics or 'nudge' techniques to increase sales. 'Top rated' was used by Urban Outfitters and eBay referred to the number of others watching the item. However, there are more obvious 'nudges' being used on websites. Examples include Taggstar's use of 'social proof' to drive transactions.

(POST) CHECKOUT

GUEST CHECKOUT

For the in-app shopper, guest checkout is an important usability feature. It allows for a quicker, less-hassle checkout, being especially useful for those one-off purchases. Some of the apps allow guest checkout on their websites, but not in-app. This sort of inconsistency makes for a poor in-app experience.

ORDER AMENDMENTS

Almost 2 in 3 of the 35 apps allowed some form of change to placed orders, either in the form of edits or cancellations, or ideally, both. It is more common to be able to cancel an order than amend it.

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Almost 2 in 3 of the 35 apps allowed some form of change to placed orders

Those apps that have this useful function often have short amendment times, usually of up to an hour after the order is placed. LUSH's app has the useful option to cancel the order right up until despatch. In-app customer support for this matter is strongest if the cancellation can be undertaken within the app, without having to either call or e-mail customer service to do such.

The ability to change order details afterwards, e.g. an address, is another very useful feature not commonly used.

PAYMENTS

With the push for cashless payments linked to Covid-19, as well as the rise of the use of Apple Pay and Google Pay more generally, how payments are taken in-app is becoming increasingly important for customer experience. With approximately 48% of all iPhone users having Apple Pay*, the option to pay with Apple Pay is imperative. This can especially be the case when payments are taken 'on the move' by people who rely on Apple Pay and don't have their physical cards to hand.

Virtually all apps had the option to save the payment details if the customer so wishes.

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https://www.
statista.com/
statistics/911914/
number-apple-pay-
users

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Less than half enable Apple Pay

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https://www.
chargedretail.
co.uk/2020/03/12/
klarna-reaches-7-
million-uk-users/

Finally, the option to pay in-app with schemes such as Klarna (reportedly 7m UK users*) and ClearPay was given by 7 of the 35 apps. A further 2 offered their own, such as eBay's 'Bill Me Later'.

ID&V

Further to this, employing Face ID as a feature to the app, especially in order to access saved address/payment details, is another way to improve usability. Only 8 of the 35 had this feature in some form. It can be used to log in to the Burberry app, for example.

Our research for BT has consistently shown that the ID&V process on the phone, website or app is consistently a source of frustration for customers.

DELIVERY

NEXT DAY AND NOMINATED DELIVERY SLOTS

Approximately half of the apps give the option of next-day delivery.

Only a third, however, offer nominated day delivery. Indeed, some of these are only limited to London postcodes.

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The majority of apps have the option of next-day delivery, but only 2 had same-day

With the decline of the high-street, especially in light of Covid-19 guidance and concerns, this kind of speed when making an in-app order is becoming increasingly important for those who are unable to 'nip' to the shops for a more rushed purchase.

GPS TRACKING

Of the 35 apps assessed, only 2 utilised GPS tracking on the day of delivery. It is far more common to give a delivery slot, often up to a few hours (e.g. "between 1–4pm"). Or indeed, to merely get an estimated delivery date.

Amazon's tracking service, for example, offers a live map that shows the progress of the driver towards your delivery address. It also tells the customer how many 'stops' away the driver is.

This links to the need for businesses to offer proactive service strategies. Our Smart Service research highlights the need to anticipate the needs of consumers and keep them informed of progress.

CLICK AND COLLECT

Most of the apps offered click and collect for their stores (if they had them). For some this involved purchase and collect, for others reserve and collect, for others it is store availability only.

OTT NOTIFICATIONS

Virtually all of the apps provided the option of OTT notifications. ASOS provides order updates, while Audi gives reminders for MOTs. Depop tells sellers when an item is sold or liked.

ISSUE RESOLUTION

CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Resolution of issues, problems, queries and questions is always vital to customers.

Some of the apps only offer support through the web browser. For example, clicking on 'FAQs'/'Contact Us' within the app opens a web browser for the app user. Usability is improved if everything is kept 'in-app'.

CHATBOT/LIVE CHAT

Both live chat and automated chatbots, or virtual assistants, were underused across the 35 apps we reviewed. Less than 1 in 3 offered live chat, and approximately 1 in 6 offered a chatbot function. Davies Hickman's consumer research for BT has shown the growth in the popularity of messaging applications for customer support.

" Less than 1 in 3 offered live chat

Of the 'virtual assistants', most were found on the fashion apps. However, the recurring issue of being taken out of the app also applies in the case of these chatbots.

Live chat, on the other hand, was less common amongst the retail apps, and more so for others, such as Apple and Argos. If placed in a queue, Apple's approximate 'wait time' is a useful feature. One app offered live chat but only if allowed by the automated chatbot. PLT calls their chatbot Madison.

VIDEO CHAT

Again, as people begin to have less face-to-face interaction in a Covid-19 world, the option of video chat should be offered. Indeed, video chat is becoming the 'new normal' way to communicate, with Davies Hickman's data showing over 50% of people regularly use video communications including Zoom, Facetime and Teams. In light of this, it is surprising that not even one of the 35 apps assessed used video chat. As such, video chat would make for a means of communication in-app with many of the same positives of live chat such as convenience and immediate issue resolution, but in a more personal way for the customer.

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None of the apps offered video-chat with an advisor or agent

SOCIAL MEDIA

Not all offered support through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.Clearly, it will be faster to handle issues through an in-app support channel where details of purchases will be stored.

PHONE

Just over 2 in 3 offered a phone number for customer service on the app. Amazon and eBay offer a 'have us call you' facility. With Apple it's possible to schedule a call and Ikea offer an estimated wait time. Whatsapp was an alternative for some apps.

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Only 5 had a specific in-app complaint handling process

IN-APP COMPLAINTS

Being able to make complaints in-app is another feature essential to usability. The majority of the 35 apps merely offered a 'Help'/'Contact Us' section. Despite this, and FAQs, being important for the transfer of helpful information to the app user, the ability to make in-app complaints makes for a more seamless process. The feature of direct, in-app complaints contact is available for only 5 of the 35 apps.

TAKE-OUTS

Davies Hickman Partners has helped organisations to develop channel strategies over 10 years. This comparison of apps across 35 well-known brands shows some key take-outs to improve customer support and usability.

1. IMPROVING THE IN-APP BROWSING EXPERIENCE
With many consumers avoiding high street stores, apps still have some way to go to match the physical experience of shopping. The use of AI, AR and virtual reality offers potential to improve the in-app experience hugely.

2. SUPPORTING THE BUYING DECISION Better use
of reviews, 'in the bag', 'nudges' and even actual human support through live chat or video could give customers the confidence to make more purchases.

3. EASING PAYING AND AMENDS Improving check-out,
chasing the elusive one-click experience and offering customers the opportunity to make amends are all likely to drive transaction rates.

4. DRIVING DELIVERY PERFORMANCE With popping to
the shops becoming a less common behaviour, shortening delivery time and being more exact about drop-offs will improve customer experience.

5. ELEVATING CUSTOMER SUPPORT Many apps offer
limited customer support usability, yet problems with products, issues with orders are not uncommon. Offering in-app support will benefit customers satisfaction and business efficiencies.

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Since 2007, Davies Hickman has been analysing and visualising customer, employee and market data to help businesses thrive. We would love to hear from you.

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