Ditch irrelevant mobile-first strategies and put people first

Author: Tom Goodwin - The Guardian
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Some of the most exciting technological developments are distracting businesses from focusing on consumer needs

Virtual reality: do consumers actually want it? Photograph: Philip Toscano/PA

While businesses hurriedly develop digital strategies and think mobile first, are they shifting the focus from the only thing that matters – customers?

We're surrounded by some of the most exciting technology the world has ever seen; we've got contactless payments, robotic assistants, mobile ticketing, 3D printing and numerous other developments. It feels like whatever we need there is an app for it, and together it's changing how we behave in profound ways. Sometimes this moment of time feels similar to the optimism and energy of the 60s, but instead of peace, love and the promise of abundant free energy, it's code, ideas and easy venture capital.

But as I found at this year's CES show, it all feels removed from what people actually want. We've a thousand companies trying to rush out wearable devices before Apple, enthusiasm undiminished by a total lack of consumer interest. It feels like the only things 3D printers can't print is a reason to have one. Personal drones still seem like the product of an enthusiastic scientist who doesn't get out much. I find virtual reality (VR) interesting, but real reality is pretty good too. For all the technology in the world we've very little empathy. We've businesses doing what it wants to do, rather than giving people what they need in

their lives. I'm sure if electronics companies listened, they'd find people wanted better designed remote controls, better ways to discover content and menus that made sense, not a 4K curved and bendable screen.

Consumer focus

Without exception, the companies that thrive in the current environment are those that focus entirely on what people want. They don't obsess over technology, but find a way for it to solve people's problems. They've arranged themselves not how they want to, but how it best serves customers. Uber isn't a technology company. It's a company that realised that the entire taxi industry was built around its needs and not what people wanted.

Amazon isn't the cheapest way to buy most things, but they knew that removing barriers to the purchase process was the simple way to become the default way to order anything online. Apple's success is primarily based on finding a way to create electronics that do roughly the same things as other products, but make using them feel great. It's a simple recipe.

We're living in disruptive times. We've an abundance of energy, money and focus on how technology can improve every aspect of a business, but it's often still arranged around business needs. At a branch of Reiss this week, I browsed the till-side iPad while buying a jacket only to see it available online in another colour. It took 20 minutes to cancel my original purchase and over 200 typed keystrokes into a badly functioning iPad to order the new item. During this time, the sales associate seemed frustrated because they'd lose the commission. When I asked why I couldn't just pay for my new purchase on their till, I was told I couldn't buy it because "it wasn't their stock to sell", as if that's something I would consider reasonable.

Technology should solve problems first

It's a common problem. There are retailers across the world who must be armed with incredible insights about how people shop, why they buy, what the purchase funnel is, yet seem to hand over site development to teams who seemingly know nothing about retail. The end product is identical and effectively a content management system with nice photos, why hasn't anyone made a e-commerce site a joy to use?

We have Tesco and Virgin using Google Glass (that is if it's still around), despite no human ever coming close to wanting to wear such a thing. We've grocery stores desperately forming iBeacon strategies when I've never met anyone seeking more information to be beamed to them in the high-stimulus environment of a store. Starwood hotels are using robots, when what would be more handy is having iPhone chargers and power adaptors you could borrow.

What if technology was used to solve problems first and create better products? Fewer than half the subway stations in New York have no real-time train information screens and airlines around the world continue to order planes with in-built screens. Why can't both

systems simply implement fast and free Wi-Fi and let our mobile screens become the default way to access information and entertainment in these places.
Would it be impossible for a bank to offer a way to keep all receipts electronically? I'd happily move my business to a bank that allows me to never have to keep paper copies of receipts.

I'd pick any doctor that would simply share how late or early they are running that day and allow me to plan my visit accordingly. I'd pay more for gym membership if the gym had machines that could share my exercise data with an app and I'd choose longer, more expensive train rides because they offer fast Wi-Fi free of charge. Nowadays a good product is the best advertising, let's bring technology and empathy together to surprise and delight our customers, not do things because they simply can be done.

Tom Goodwin is the senior vice president of strategy and innovation for [Havas Media](). You can follow him on Twitter [@tomfgoodwin](). He is a speaker at this year's [Guardian Changing Media Summit]()

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