The Physical Web Leapfrogs the App

As technology continues to improve how people experience the world around them, researchers and marketers are taking notice of the next evolution in proximity marketing

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Combine the Web and the Internet of Things (IoT), and you get the Physical Web: the open Web standard poised to reshape consumer behavior.

The Physical Web simplifies consumer interactions with nearby things by eliminating the need to download apps or to type search terms. The result is simplified consumer engagement. For marketers, these focused interactions will lead to new opportunities to influence consumers and predict their behavior.

Apps rose to dominance in the mobile era because of their convenience. On small smartphone screens, it became important to consumers to be able to easily organize and access common tasks without much typing. The single-purpose role of apps served this need, but also created problems.

The biggest problem is the increasing friction around mobile app downloads as more-and-more apps are developed. The increased clutter with so many apps means that the app model does not scale. In her recent OglivyOne article "The Physical Web Will Impact Marketing: Are You Ready?," Jeanette Cajide wrote, "There are over 1.6 million apps in the Android market and 1.5 million apps in the iOS market…[and]…80-90% of users will use an app once." It is simply not possible for consumers to install, find and use an app for each of the millions of possible interactions they need.

Enter the Physical Web, which takes single-purpose interactions down to the atomic level, while further simplifying the user experience.

In 2014, Google introduced the concept of the Physical Web as a new proximity technology. According to its website, "The Physical Web is an approach to unleash the core superpower of the Web: interaction on demand. People should be able to walk up to any smart device—a vending machine, a poster, a toy, a bus stop, a rental car—and not have to download an app first. Everything should be just a tap away."

In operation, the Physical Web model is simple. Beacons (small wireless radios) broadcast standard URLs up to 100 meters, and they are read by compatible browsers. Content owners place these beacons where content is needed, and consumers use a Physical Web browser to access this content. Since content is ordered by proximity to the individual, potential perceived clutter in beacon-rich environments is not an issue. It's a universal technology and any browser can be a Physical Web browser. Early adopters include Chrome and Opera, with Firefox building the functions into the OS itself.

The Physical Web relies upon consumers to self-select content, avoiding the potential backlash of push messages. Consumers scan the Physical Web either because they are aware of local content or because they see the universal Physical Web logo (see left), which indicates the presence of content. For example, if consumers see this symbol in the window of a coffee shop, they know that they can scan to access the shop's menu or specials; or if at a shoe store (or even on specific shoes), they can see product information and promotions.

The brilliance of the Physical Web is its simplicity. With the Web, content is accessible through keyword searches. With an app, content is chosen from a library of targeted applications. With the Physical Web, consumers directly interact with nearby things based on proximity. It's living signage that

can seamlessly transfer local content onto a consumer's mobile device for interaction, saving or sharing.

The Physical Web is the result of an evolution toward less friction and greater precision. Where apps compartmentalize user interaction, the Physical Web democratizes it, bringing location-based content and interaction to the mass market. The universality of the Physical Web and its ability to address interactions too mundane for an app will make it an information-rich and dynamic place for consumers.

New Marketing Channel

The Physical Web is a new dimension of the Internet that has two outlets that factor into any omnichannel strategy. The first are the Physical Web sites that incorporate content that is relevant to a consumer's time and location. The second is the search screen in the Physical Web browser. Because the consumer's location is known, the display itself can be a call to action. For example, if the search display promotes an upsell and moves a consumer to purchase, then it's not important for that consumer to "click-through" to a page with more detail.

The Physical Web is built to succeed by being as frictionless and as friendly to consumers as possible. The default mode is incognito, so it protects consumer privacy, thus ensuring broad adoption. Given such, what data can marketers expect to collect?

1 **Scans:** When a consumer scans the Physical Web for nearby content, the browser will resolve the nearby URLs, resulting in a "scan" count. Much like "impressions," a scan count is a general measure of activity.

2 **Click-through Rate:** The Physical Web relies upon standard URLs to present content, and these clicks can be counted whenever a landing page is accessed.

3 **Click-through per Location:** Since the same promotion might appear in several stores, it is possible to monitor the location origin of each access.

4 **Sharing:** By time-stamping each access to a URL from a physical location, it is possible to monitor later accesses when that URL is saved or shared.

5 **Loyalty:** The Physical Web is built on standard Web technology, which means existing Web-based loyalty programs can be utilized by having consumers log into a physical website, then return visits can be monitored via cookies and content can be personalized.

Momentum

In a white paper titled "Preparing for the Post-App Era" developed by information technology research and advisory company Gartner, analyst Nick Jones writes, "The post-app era is bound up with the changing definition of mobility, which will evolve from a focus on devices to a focus on ubiquitous services." And Jason Parker of Leo Burnett says, "The biggest trend we see for 2016 is the Physical Web."

When Google ships the Android version of Chrome (expected by the end of Q1 2016), the Physical Web will have automatically prompted onboarding to as many as 800 million devices worldwide.

There are also already enterprise-class Physical Web platforms coming to market that will allow Physical Web beacons to be remotely managed by the thousands via dashboard, in groups, via schedules, or programmatically by API.

By all indications, the Physical Web is positioned to become the dominant approach to proximity marketing. At the very least, it is a transformational technology that smart marketers—and the marketing researchers who guide them—will learn to harness early. **MI**

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