

Opinions

Invest in tech without neglecting the human voice

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Technology investments are great, but they must be balanced with human interaction, which can protect and enhance a brand's relationship with its customer.



By Chris Mumford

My son has recently started to pester me to buy him an iPhone X.

A couple of his friends' parents have Apple's latest smartphone, and for some unknown reason he believes this means he has a chance of acquiring one for himself. I think deep down he knows there is more likelihood of his beloved Arsenal finishing top of the Premier League this season than him getting an iPhone—or any phone for that matter. But he still keeps trying to wear me down. He is eight years old after all. Of course he has no interest in an iPhone for its phone capability but rather for its “i-ness,” specifically, its ability to play FIFA Mobile.

He is not alone. More than [1.5 billion smartphones were sold worldwide in 2017](#) and yet, in my completely unscientific opinion, people seem to be using their phones less and less for the purpose they were designed for, namely speaking to other people.

A panel at the recent [International Hotel Investment Forum](#) in Berlin titled “Talent management and retention,” long the Achilles heel of the hotel sector, confronted the rise of automation and the increasing ability to have technology reduce the traditional reliance on manpower for certain functions. Industry luminaries Gary Davis, CEO of Malmasion & Hotel du Vin; and John Brennan, CEO of Amaris Hospitality, made the case that cost savings resulting from automation allow a hotel business to invest more in the labor they need. For example, app-enabled, mobile check-in may reduce the number of staff needed at the front desk from five to two, allowing a hotel to invest more in pay and training for the remaining two staff members, thereby improving the quality of guest experience and interaction.

These two themes, less talking by phone and increasing automation in the hotel sector, raise the question of how to balance the advances in technology with the needs of customer engagement.

Triggered by the expiry of our office lease in London, we recently took the decision to move our team into WeWork office space. Three weeks in and the team is so far loving the convenience, lifestyle, design and “do what you love” vibe that WeWork offers. Similar to how hotel experiences are evolving, our check-in at WeWork was at most a 30-second affair involving handing over of a key card with directions to the WeWork app for registration, plus a cheery “Welcome to WeWork.” Everything is managed through the app and it works.

There are times, however, when you need to deal with a human being. There have been a few occasions where the app doesn't have the answer (or I am too technically inept to find it) and I have presented myself to one of the friendly WeWork team members. While responsive and eager to help, no matter what my issue may be, I find I get the same response, which is, “I'll send a message.” At no time has anyone picked up a phone and called someone. I have no doubt that sending a message may be the most expedient and efficient process to follow. A message can be logged, tracked, can go to multiple people at once, can be seen and prioritized by the recipient who may be in the middle of doing something else. My issue as a consumer, however, is that I don't have the same level of confidence that the task will be completed. If I can see and/or hear the receptionist relaying my problem to someone who is responsible for fixing it, I have a higher level of trust that something's going to get done. With a message approach there is greater demand on me, as a consumer, to place my faith in their system.

Verbal communication conveys genuineness and instills trust in each party in a way that an email cannot. Where technology falls short in communication is when things go wrong. It's the 1% -10% of the time when a problem arises and needs addressing that human interaction can help resolve matters in a way that technological systems cannot. Human interaction can protect and even enhance a brand's integrity with a consumer.

Our business is a big fan of the Expensify app, which has transformed each of our lives in terms of how we manage and file our monthly expenses. It is one of those apps that you value in your life so much that you find yourself promoting it to colleagues and friends. What more could a brand ask for? But then things went wrong. Or more specifically, something broke that needed fixing.

There is not a single phone number on the Expensify website to call for help, and over the ensuing 3-4 months, we dealt with their support desk exclusively through email. Matters were eventually resolved and everything is now back to efficient working order. It was an extremely frustrating experience,

however—one that damaged the trust and faith that until that time we had placed in their product and brand. It was an experience that could have been positively improved at any point with the words, “Sorry, we understand how disruptive this is and we appreciate your patience while we do everything we can to fix this.” That sentence, uttered by a human voice over a phone, would have done wonders for the strength of our business-to-consumer relationship.

Trust is a valuable commodity in business today, especially in a sector such as hotels where brand proliferation is rampant. As hotels adopt new technologies to run their businesses in a more efficient, cost-effective manner, they would do well to follow Gary Davis and John Brennan’s advice: to invest in the remaining human capital and protect that relationship between with the guest, especially when things go wrong.

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