Articles
Ahead of the Curve
Gaining market and mind-share using emerging technologies
by **David Polinchock**

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A host of emerging technologies are being enthusiastically embraced by rapidly growing numbers of digitally savvy consumers. Leading brands and retailers should be harnessing these technologies to create engaging experiences and practical tools that enrich consumers' lifestyles. If they are to stay ahead of the game, brands must explore and intergrate these new developments.

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How are you looking at innovation today?

Is it something that you reject because it doesn't fit with your business model, or fear because we are only just coming out of recession?

Ask yourself now: Am I really connecting with my audience? With more and more people becoming 'digital natives', staying ahead of the curve is critical to a brand's success. As such, brands should be exploring emerging technologies in order to create experiences that make digitally savvy consumers want to engage with them.

Far-sighted brands realise that being innovative during a bad economy is a great way to gain a leadership position. While everyone else is pulling back, brands must work out how to open up. It may even be the right time to form a new company or spin-off brand.

There is no such thing as a 'no risk' position, and hanging on to an existing business model may leave brands and retailers vulnerable to competitors that are more open to innovative thinking. Take the case of the old encyclopedias. When I was growing up, the Encyclopedia Britannica was Google and the world wide web of information. However, the company did not adjust in time to a world in which information could be disseminated online. They couldn't see the big picture. Today, instead of being Google, they're relegated to a back seat at best.

Emerging technologies

Across many industries, innovative companies are using emerging technologies to gain market share and mind-share. These technologies enable brands to connect with audiences on a whole new level. Notable among the more recent are augmented reality (AR), QR codes, and gestural technology.

I will come to these in a moment, but first, a caveat. Brands should tread carefully when approaching these technologies. Too many companies are using them to try to be hip and cool, not because they are really interested in seeing how the technology can be used.

The AR revolution

We are at the very start of an AR revolution. AR is beginning to change how we interact with the world around us. It allows us to control the information that we receive, and brands will have to provide relevant content if they want us to take any notice. Essentially, AR enhances our experience of the real world by layering virtual content over real-time footage. Initially a computer-based technology, it has now entered other parts of our lives through the mobile phone, with a good number of applications already available on Android phones and the iPhone. For example, Layar is an AR application that allows users to view information on their surroundings, which is layered over the real-time view from their mobile phone camera.

AR can also improve the retail experience through its ability to deliver information in an engaging way, allowing consumers to explore and discover for themselves. Ikea, for example, has created a mobile phone application called the Portable Interior Planner, which allows customers to take pictures of its new Ikea PS range in-store and use their handsets to see what the items would look like in their own homes. The furniture image can simply be integrated into a photo of the intended room, and scaled to size to achieve a more realistic fit. Conceived by ad agency Ogilvy and developed by Mindmatic, the mobile application has been made available online and through Bluetooth pillars in-store.

Gestural developments

Gestural technology has in fact been around for decades. However, only over the past couple of years have we seen it being used in a more commercial way, most notably in multitouch surfaces and interactive store windows. A very recent example of this is sports website ESPN and ad agency Wieden+Kennedy's 'Is it Monday yet?' campaign for Monday night football, an important series of fixtures in the US. The agency worked with Monster Media, experts in non-traditional advertising, to create touchscreen billboard games that recognised gesture. These were installed on storefronts in New York, Boston and Chicago and encouraged passers-by to play virtual games of catch with digital quarterbacks.

One of the most extreme examples of gestural technology that I have seen is SixthSense – which also incorporates elements of AR – developed at MIT (for a video, visit www.pranavmistry.com/projects/sixthsense/). Its creator, Pranav Mistry, describes SixthSense as 'a wearable gestural interface that augments the physical world around us with digital information'. A small web camera, pico projector (a compact handheld device) and mirror are combined and linked to the internet via a mobile phone. Users can seek out the information they need – about a homecare product in a supermarket or a flight on the way to the airport – and interact with the device using hand gestures. Each finger is covered with a different coloured cap to allow more complex gesturing to be recognised by the device. A screen is not needed, as information can be projected onto almost any flat or flattish surface, even a human hand. The prototype did not involve expensive components, and technology review site Cnet predicts that "if MIT's little SixthSense gadget sees the commercial light of day, we can toss our multitouch devices out the window".

Gestural technology is becoming even more significant as the wireless age and mobile devices enable technology to leave the desktop and enter the rest of our world. Gesture could become a standard way of interacting with new devices. It could also help the gaming sector to reach wider audiences, by eliminating the need for games consoles. Microsoft, for example, is launching a gesture-controlled gaming platform for the home, called Project Natal, which operates without a console and allows users to control a game using just movement and spoken commands.

Wearable technology

Extending this idea of gestural developments, wearable technology could be the next big thing, but first the designers need to devise more realistic applications. This type of technology could be especially useful for people who carry a variety of portable devices, such as mobile phones, BlackBerrys, MP3 players and digital cameras, not to mention the accompanying chargers. How long before someone clever develops a fully functional, wearable garment that is embedded with some of these technologies?

SixthSense gestural technology developed at MIT

QR code campaign by Vespa scooters in Toronto

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Clothing and accessories that incorporate new technologies could prove extremely useful in the automotive industry. BMW is working on augmented reality goggles for mechanics, which display useful instructions layered over their view when working on a car. And at the launch event created by o2 Creative Solutions for the new Scion IQ car at the New York International Auto Show, brand representatives wearing clothing embedded with RFID technology and display screens acted as walking information points. Attendees could swipe their RFID registration cards against the reader installed in the representatives' sleeves, and use the screens to access information about activities within the space and future events.

QR code culture

QR codes – 2D bar codes that can be scanned with a mobile phone to access information stored online – also provide a new way of presenting information to consumers on the go. A good example of QR codes being used in this way is a campaign by Vespa scooters in Toronto. Colourful posters featuring QR codes could be scanned by consumers to access a mobile site that offered the chance to win prizes such as a Vespa t-shirt, 40% discount off branded merchandise or even a brand new LX50 Vespa scooter. The campaign was a great success and the brand experienced a huge increase in sales while it ran.

Visualising 3D

When brands are considering emerging technologies, some thought must be given to 3D, which is currently being used in playful campaigns such as the one run jointly by Sainsbury's supermarket and Channel 4 in the UK. The supermarket has sponsored a week of 3D television programmes as part of Channel 4's Era of 3D season in autumn 2009. Branded bins containing free 3D glasses will be placed in 500 supermarkets across the country in the weeks before the shows air. While this will no doubt be fun for consumers, I feel that 3D really needs to be taken further and made both useful and easily accessible in order to be taken seriously by consumers. I was pleased to learn that Samsung is reportedly developing 3D monitors and televisions for the home, which could signal an important change.

The socialisation of place

These emerging technologies all facilitate a new way for consumers to communicate with each other and their surroundings – a phenomenon that I call the 'socialisation of place'. The socialisation of place has a long way to go, but when it reaches fruition it promises great rewards. It will hold real impetus when the power and interactive potential of the internet is fused with the world we live in, for example, when a user's phone alerts them to the fact that Facebook or LinkedIn friends are nearby and allows them to connect in a physical way.

The challenge with this technology is creating a structure that protects the user's privacy yet still allows interaction to take place. In the real world, if someone is at a cocktail event, they can consciously decide when to give a business card, and to whom. But how does that decision – which depends on personal intuition – get made through technology?

We are starting to see the beginning of this level of interactivity with tools such as Loopt, a mobile phone application that lets users see if any friends are in the local area. Using the location technology built into many smartphones, Loopt will highlight nearby friends on a map and allow the user to call, text or send them invitations to meet up. To further facilitate physical meetings, Loopt has also partnered with online review site Yelp to offer information on the surrounding area, and plans to work with other local companies to improve this feature further. Users can also access reviews of local bars and restaurants written by friends, or share information on their whereabouts by linking Loopt up with their social networking profiles. Loopt has put extensive security rules in place and users have the option to 'hide' their location from others.

Applications such as Loopt demonstrate how new technologies have the potential to turn anonymous urban landscapes into friendly, populated places. Perhaps in the not too distant future, this vision of the socialisation of place by UK newspaper the *Independent* will become a reality:

"It's an average city street: buildings, buses, people with shopping bags. Suddenly information bubbles pop up in your field of vision. The woman over there is listening to Florence and the Machine and you have five mutual friends on Facebook. The building opposite was built in 1932 and is 31m tall … TopShop is having a sale, there are 14 coffee shops in a one-mile radius … Say you're in Trafalgar Square – by looking at Nelson's Column with your phone's camera, pictures of friends posing with it three months ago will fix on your phone's screen, and so will a tweet you wrote there last year. You can also call up reviews of nearby restaurants or plays showing down the road."

Audience gaming in the US

"Remember, we don't live online or offline – we just live. Rather than placing emphasis on the physical or digital, brands need to create a seamless experience that fits with and facilitates the lives of consumers."

Future forward

Brands have to be authentic when implementing these emerging technologies, as customers won't be fooled by those who adopt them as add-ons to an existing marketing mix. Any new projects need to be fully integrated with the brand culture, and both the newer and more traditional strategies must be in tune, communicating the same brand message.

Remember that we don't live online or offline – we just live. Rather than placing emphasis on the physical or digital, brands need to create a seamless experience that fits in with and facilitates the lives of consumers. Rather than online and offline, it could be called it 'oneline'.

It is important to always keep the user in mind, both when selecting which technology to use, and in the way it is applied. 3D glasses are a fun idea for younger kids, but adult audiences will appreciate the more practical solutions offered by gestural technology. And while QR code stickers that provide access to music downloads will captivate youth audiences, slightly older users are more likely to respond to QR codes in product catalogues that reveal regularly updated offers and promotions. What works for one audience may not appeal to another, and getting it wrong may result in alienating consumers.

And it goes without saying that brands using new technologies really need to understand how they work and source the very best expertise to operate them. Customers will lose faith if they're always encountering glitches.

Conclusion

Finally, I would urge brands to have fun and enjoy themselves. There are so many new technologies and ways of using them, and it's surprising what great results can come from experimenting a little and playing around to get the right fit. People can tell when a brand is passionate and believes in what it is doing. And consumers are far more likely to want to get involved if it can see that a brand is enjoying itself. ■

Elevating the cinema experience

Bringing these pioneering ideas down to a digestible level, during my time at the Brand Experience Lab I led the team in a project that aimed to socialise the cinema experience. Audience gaming invites cinema audiences to participate in an interactive game before the movie begins.

Newsbreaker Live was a new in-cinema experience for news site msnbc.com that encouraged the audience to form a human joystick through collective movements such as arm waving, which were tracked by motion sensors to control the action. In this case, the audience had to break a wall of coloured blocks using a paddle and bouncing ball, but other versions of the game with brands such as Volvo in the UK have included car-racing scenarios. Over two months,the game was set up at three cinemas across the country. According to surveys conducted at the end of the film, 93% of audiences were keen to see more audience gaming in cinemas and there was a 71% recall rate of msnbc.com as the game's sponsor. What's more, audiences who had participated in the game found the film more entertaining than those who had watched it in a regular auditorium.

We can expect cinemas to become more interactive. I have heard that some chains are wiring cinema screens up with games controllers so that some auditoriums can be turned into gaming theatres on quieter nights. And there is an event in Amsterdam where people vote online for user-generated videos uploaded by other members. The winning entries are screened at a cinema each week, bringing the online community and voters together in a physical environment.