

COLUMNS

Mobile devices influence consumer decisions at local levels

July 10, 2012



By AN AMERICAN MARKETER COLUMNIST

By **Scott Metcalfe**

Now, more than ever, buyers are using their mobile devices to make their purchasing decisions and it is having an effect on business, even at the local levels.

The number of smartphone and tablet users in the United States is still on the rise. Current figures show that nearly 50 percent of mobile phone users in this country are carrying smartphones, and 25 percent of them also own tablets.

It is projected that by the end of 2013, mobile devices will surpass wired devices in Internet usage.

Until recently, issues with affordability and reliability were keeping mobile devices from being considered serious players in the consumer enabler market.

With the spread of 3G and 4G coverage and a decrease in prices, these issues have all been eliminated.

Today, consumers can get a Web-enabled tablet, such as Amazon's Kindle Fire or Google's Nexus 7, for just \$199, proving that a population of mobile-enabled customers is fast-approaching.

Mobile consumers change landscape

With an increase in this new kind of consumer comes a whole host of interesting changes.

Mobile-enabled customers behave differently than the traditional consumer.

Most notably is the velocity at which they conduct consumer research and make their purchases.

Just 20 years ago, the same buying process took significantly longer. Back then, when a consumer realized he needed a product or service, he would have to return to his home to scour the Yellow Pages, contact a few potential businesses and hope to reach someone.

The Internet changed things greatly, both in terms of speed and customer empowerment.

Potential buyers had a greater ability to gather information and get first impressions about a business on their terms. They were no longer forced to chase information via phone calls, but they were still tied to desktops in their homes.

Today, whether someone is at a soccer game, stuck in traffic or on the golf course, the moment he thinks he may want a product or service, he can take action, conduct research, make calls, fill out contact forms and schedule appointments.

How marketers can adapt

The most successful businesses in every market understand this and have made their businesses "mobile-ready."

Being mobile-ready involves having a mobile-friendly Web site. Companies do not necessarily need to have a separate mobile Web site, just a well-designed site with simple navigation, click-enabled phone numbers and a clear call to action.

It is also important that a site ranks highly in regard to important phrases a buyer may use to search out that product or service, such as "Akron gardener."

Beyond the site, companies also need to be prepared to respond immediately to a potential customer's inquiries.

The influence of mobile devices on consumer buying habits expands beyond just having a mobile-friendly presence.

Over the past five years, there has been a shift in how people seek out referrals.

It used to be that consumers would approach their friends and family for product or service referrals. Today, they are using collective experience sites such as Yelp or Zagat to inform their purchasing decisions.

A recent article, "[Are Review Sites Replacing Your Family and Friends?](#)," discussed this phenomenon in greater detail.

The research indicates that consumers are attracted to marketplace review sites because they know they will quickly find information specific to their inquiry, something a poll of their friends and family members cannot guarantee.

Google's acquisition of Zagat last year, and its recent incorporation of Zagat's 30-point review scale into the new Google+ pages, is just further confirmation of the increasing power of online reviews. This can be a double-edged sword for any business, especially a local one.

Three's a charm

It is imperative that smaller businesses foster a customer service culture that includes taking an active role in promoting online customer reviews. This is critical for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, they can manage brand reputation. Negative reviews tend to stick on the first page of search engine results like glue. Businesses slammed with poor reviews have virtually no chance of getting the reviews removed.

The best defense is to have as many positive reviews from happy customers as possible. That way, when a few negative reviews appear, warranted or not, they cannot destroy the reputation of the brand.

The second reason a business should actively foster reviews is that there is strong evidence that search engines such as Google use reviews as part of their ranking algorithms. It is very possible that reviews help search engines decide which businesses to place at the top of local listings.

Finally, there is huge value in having a long list of positive reviews for a business. These reviews attract prospective buyers and help convert them into new customers.

For businesses wanting to take an active role in promoting positive reviews, it is important to make leaving these reviews as easy as possible for customers.

The fewer steps involved, the better. Another approach is to offer incentives for reviews, in the form of gift cards or discounts on future services.

Getting good reviews may mean some invested time and energy, but the gains in ensuring positive client participation and customer growth make a whole lot of sense.

YOU CAN CHOOSE to ignore the encroaching mobile era, but you do so at your own risk.

Mobile communication actually enhances the opportunities facing your company, even at the local level.

Embrace the opportunities of mobile-friendly interaction, and your company will reap the rewards as will your customers.

Scott Metcalfe is chief strategist of [Fetch Local Customers](#), a Chicago-based online advertising firm that specializes in melding local search, social and mobile marketing, and local advertising technologies and strategies. Reach him at scott@fetchlocalcustomers.com.

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