

# The Omnimobile

Visitors to Egypt quickly notice a more explicit form of something that happens in tourist destinations everywhere.

Take a vacation there and you might find yourself in a fantastic Cairo hotel. If you're lucky, it will be a beautiful, historic building run by a charming manager who seems to know everything. His restaurant recommendations are remarkable!

It may not surprise you to find that he's not just using his own culinary expertise when he recommends a lunch place, however. He's also getting a kickback from the restaurant's owner. After lunch, the taxi driver who takes you to a delightful papyrus shop is, of course, also getting a little something from that shop. The next day, you won't go for a ride on just any camel. You'll be climbing on top of an animal owned by a man with a special relationship to the tour guide who drove you there in the first place.

## What does the self-driving car mean for brands?

It's called *baksheesh*, and through much of the world it's how out-of-home advertising is done. Essentially an elaborate courtesy system, *baksheesh* rewards those who physically bring customers to businesses.

In the US, travelers are exposed to advertising when in the car, but in much of the world, there is a *baksheesh* system that puts you in a car going to a specific business. Both succeed due to an eternal truth: marketing is incredibly effective when people are in motion. Want to reach potential customers? Get into the car with them.

However, unless you've been under a rock the last few years, you know that cars are changing. And fast. Technological advances—including interactive mapping systems, vehicle connectivity, and,

ultimately, self-piloted cars — are about to change radically how the world moves. This has profound implications for brand-building.

### CHANGING THE (CAR) CHANNEL

Today's consumers are on the go in almost every sense. Whereas a generation ago, it was common for people to travel from home to work and back, nowadays people are less grounded than ever. The most effective marketers reach them as they move.

As Stephen Quinn, chief marketing officer of Wal-Mart once said: "Mobility is going to be a massive game changer and it will change the entire retail industry. If you don't like change, you will like irrelevance less."

The facts speak for themselves. At least 43 percent of customers have used their mobile phone while walking through a brick-and-mortar store. Google research shows that 98 percent of Americans switch between devices in the same day, and drive nearly twice as many miles as they did in 1980. According to the US Census Bureau, the average one-way daily commute for Americans is 25.5 minutes. That's a lot of time spent in the car.

For many, it feels like a lot of time wasted. However, as Uber and services like it have already shown, there's a big difference between driving and being driven. Passengers can work, play and consume media, all while mere feet from physical stores. Cities are being reshaped through two huge, revolutionary trends: car sharing and self-driving cars.

As the Uber economy has exploded, so too has speculation about how brands will approach this enormous new audience. Brands like Starwood Hotels and Chobani have already run experiential campaigns. Last year, new riders of Lyft received a case of pumpkin-spice yogurt in exchange for booking a car, resulting in 19,000 people receiving free yogurt in two hours.

Advertisements in shared cars have lots of advantages. Drivers are able to earn more money from work that they are already doing. Marketers can influence buying decisions of their target audience by delivering real-time, contextually targeted ads immediately before passengers make purchasing decisions.

Uber riders are often passively enjoying the ride rather than stressing out about traffic, and as such are eager to watch a video, listen to a DJ or check out a spot for a nearby flash sale.

#### THE CAR AS MOTHERBRAIN

Ride sharing is fostering innovation in the car-media space, but it's the self-driving car that has the potential to really transform things.

Nearly all automakers believe autonomous vehicles are both a good and feasible idea. Google's self-driving cars have already driven millions of miles on US roads. The only thing experts disagree on is timing, although 'by 2020' has become an increasingly popular refrain.

Forward-looking marketers are already thinking up ways to reach consumers who are no longer preoccupied with navigating through traffic. A mall retailer might send a self-driving vehicle to a consumer's home, give her a lift to the store, and then a ride back home.

Autonomous vehicles can essentially become access points for brands, possibly leading to new revenue streams for automakers—in cooperation with advertisers and network providers—that could profit from data collected from passengers.

Self-driving cars have tremendous potential not only to collect data but also to respond with interactivity. This is already happening with a technology that's been around for years but has only recently gotten good enough to rely on: voice recognition. New services are not only responding to consumer needs, but anticipating them, as well.

You can already ask your phone to "Take me to the nearest gas station," do basic algebra, research product prices, send text messages or update a Facebook status. Google Now can tell you what's playing on the radio and alert you to traffic jams, train delays and concert tickets going on sale. If a radio ad for McDonald's spurs your appetite, Google Now can instantly offer you directions to the closest location.

More seasoned marketers will remember the days of error-prone voice-recognition software, where by the time one had cleaned up the errors, it would have been faster just to write out the message. Those days are long gone. These services operate like something straight out of *Star Trek*, recognizing brands, email contacts, and even application commands seamlessly. In a study done by Stone Temple, a digital marketing firm, Google Now scored an impressive 88 percent success rate in answering voice queries. Siri scored 53 percent, and Cortana 40 percent. As promising as these numbers are, it's deeply exciting to think about

100 percent success rates, and the ability to analyze more intricate queries. Expect all of this (and more) to be built into the dashboard console soon.

Media in the car thus serves as a kind of mobile command center. Voices and images tell consumers about products and services. Shoppers can simply speak a coupon code to redeem a purchase entirely through voice control.

Of course, not everyone loves this futuristic vision. You can expect to see a land rush over who controls which aspects of in-car advertising. At an industry convention in June, Audi Chief Executive Rupert Stadler took a dig at software companies like Google. "A car is one's second living room today," he said. "That's private. The only person who needs access to the data onboard is the customer. Audi takes that seriously."

Whether Audi, Google or someone else brings it to you, there's little doubt that this kind of in-auto interactivity is coming. Amazon's recently released Echo takes the logic of Google Now and Siri and uproots it from the smartphone entirely. This always-on addition to the home allows users to play music, control connected devices in the home, check sports scores and even restock selected home staples using Amazon Prime. Echo is a glimpse into the future of voice control: Everything is available by voice, anywhere, at any time.

The fully-integrated car, where drivers effortlessly access the complete extent of their cloud-based data, applications, and the trove of data to be mined from the web will forever change the game of omnichannel marketing.

The automobile is awakening from its status as a digital cul de sac. Imagine the possibilities when radio-based promotions are activated via a voice command to a smartphone or GPS, or a song heard on the radio can be instantly purchased on iTunes.

Ultimately, omnichannel is about reaching consumers on the move, wherever they are, on their own terms. It still has some catching up to do with America's primary form of transportation, but if you want to get a head start on the next big innovation in omnichannel marketing, keep an eye out for the self-driving car. ■



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