Staples Turns Gimmick to Gadget

Connected Easy Button serves as a functional tool for the workplace

By Patrycja Malinowska

New York — Looking beyond both brick-and-mortar stores and its e-commerce websites, **Staples** is embedding itself directly into the workplace by turning its iconic Easy Button gimmick into a functional tool for Staples Business Advantage members.

"The way we view the modern Easy Button is it represents a new 'set function' change in terms of the user experience," said Ryan Bartley, Staples' head of growth and applied innovation, during a January presentation at the National Retail Fed-eration Retail's Big Show. "We're at a place where the Easy Button represents truly anywhere and everywhere commerce."

Designed by Austin, Texas-based **Mixer Design Group**, the modern Easy Button lets businesses order supplies with simple voice commands and is part of an entire "Easy System" powered by IBM Watson that also delivers the ability to order via text message, email, photo, Facebook Messenger and other communication channels.

"Part of what we're building with the Easy Button is not only the physical manifestation of it that we'll put in offices, but we'll also publish that same experience to pretty much every conversational channel that we can so [shoppers] can interact with Staples anywhere and everywhere," Bartley said.

The system not only meets users whenever and wherever they are in a shopping
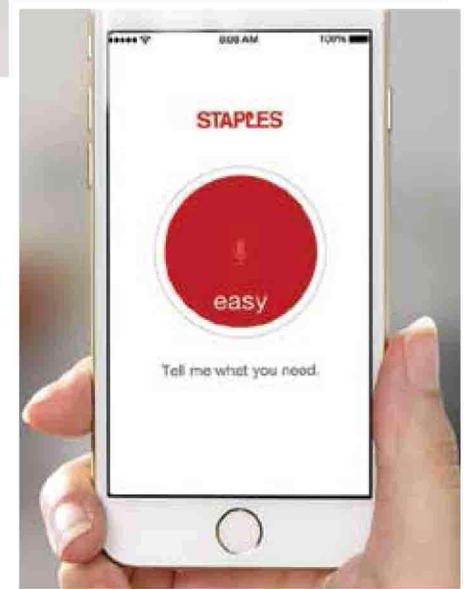
The Staples Easy Button lets businesses order supplies with simple voice commands.

mindset, but also is programmed to learn over time to become more personalized and intuitive. It can learn preferences such as preferred products and quantities, and make recommendations. Users also can track shipments and check product availability – all by voice command.

Not intended for consumer-use cases at home but rather designed for the office – a very different and much less forgiving environment – the system also has been tuned to specific pain points reported by office administrators. For example, Bartley's team added a function that lets them teach the Easy Button answers to questions that often get asked at offices, such as "What is the guest Wi-Fi password?"

Essentially an "assistant's assistant" – a term coined by Staples chief technology officer Faisal Masud – the system is currently in beta phase. At the Big Show, Bartley said it would launch in more than 100 locations across different markets in the coming months and that the same software was already beginning to roll out in different conversational channels such as mobile.

Tasked with rapidly testing new ideas across various functions within Staples, Bartley's applied innovation team spent thousands of hours conducting customer design research around how they want to interact with the retailer. The team was formed about a year ago to modernize the entire Staples operation as speed-to-market becomes more important across the industry.

"We've essentially set up a platform for the internal company to try out new things and really try and disrupt their own businesses," Bartley said of his team. "If you're in retail and you're launching something with a large retailer network, it's typically been done in months and years. There's nothing in my world that's ever been months and years; it's always days and weeks."

As it continues to fine tune the Easy System, Staples also is looking into such future Watson-enabled tasks as flight booking, ordering flowers, making dinner reservations or ordering toner when a printer is low. SM