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Give your customers what they haven't even asked for

Reacting to customer needs is good service, but anticipating those needs is what businesses must do. The next generation of prescient technologies will help build applications that are aware of past behavior, context and location, enabling you to build a truly great customer experience. What may sound like science fiction is now at our doorstep, thanks to the rapid adoption of smartphones and wearables, and advances in big data.

Two technologies are at the heart of this revolution: web agents and micro-location. Web agents are services that continuously run, gathering actionable information for users. One example would be an agent that monitors product prices and can alert you to changes. Perhaps a TV you are interested in goes on sale in a store you've never visited.

The other technology, micro-location, can accurately judge the proximity of a user within feet. Instead of guessing when a user may be nearby, you now know who is standing in front of you. For instance, when a visitor uses FastPass at Disney, the ride operator can not only verify the FastPass, they can say "Enjoy the ride, Bob!" An early adopter, Apple has rolled out iBeacons leveraging Bluetooth 4.0 LE, a soon-to-be ubiquitous component in most devices, allowing for a low-cost, nonproprietary way to gauge a user's location. When micro-location is used together with web agents, amazing things can—and will—happen.

With billions of search requests available for analysis, Google asked the audacious question: "Can we provide search results before a user enters their search request?" The answer? Google Now, a service that pushes information to your desktop and phone before you need it. For example, since Google knows your schedule and your phone knows your location, Google Now can push a message to you alerting you





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to increased travel times to your next appointment based on traffic, even offering alternative routes. Apple has followed suit with their Passbook application. Passbook can store various reservations and display a ticket or pass when you approach your destination.

The next generation of wearable devices will only further this automation. Wearables gather more information such as changes in movement, ambient conditions, and biometrics to provide an unprecedented level of context to what a user is doing. Now we know what our customers are interested in, where they are, and the context of their actions. However, we can't expect customers to simply give up this information. We must rely on proper service design to ensure there is an equitable value exchange for their data. But once we have it, what can we do with it?

The answer is not to store all this data and look at it later. Unused data is worthless data. When a customer walks up to the cash register, their loyalty card should have popped up on their phone. When a customer walks into your hotel, their phone should tell them what room they are in, and their phone is their key. When a car is due for service, it should ask the driver if one of the following dates would work for an appointment. When a flight is delayed, a re-book and perhaps a hotel room should be a click away.

Amazing? For the moment, yes. But, as has happened many times before, "innovative" will quickly become "imperative." Building contextually aware automation into your customer experience will be required for continued customer loyalty.

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