

MoMo #34 – Mobile Travel “Planes, Trains & Automobiles”

Geneva, Monday 6th May 2013: Peter Angelos of MobileMonday Switzerland, welcomed over 40 Mobile/Hi-Tech enthusiasts to the headquarters of SITA (Société Internationale de Télécommunications Aéronautiques), who kindly offered their facilities for the event.

1. Introduction

Peter introduced the MobileMonday organisation, its dependence on volunteers to run events... and how it's always looking for inputs, suggestions and volunteers! He introduced the evening's topic (Mobile Travel) as being linked to the Steve Martin/John Candy movie “Planes, trains and automobiles” where 2 strangers attempt to make it home for thanksgiving by plane, car and train... and no end of disasters ensues. Peter's message was that if Steve Martin and John Candy had had access to some of the 36,000 mobile travel apps now available in Apple's Appstore, their journey might have been a lot smoother! Peter explained some of the different types of mobile-travel app available, including some highly specialised ones like SeatGuru which helps people choose the best airlines and best seats for legroom when flying.

2. Dominique El Bez (Director Messaging & Mobility Solution Line, SITA)

Dominique introduced SITA and how it supports airlines and airports in 140 countries, and therefore needs to provide truly global services. Its (IT) service portfolio is broad ranging from telecommunications/IT infrastructure to airport passenger handling, government, through to air-to-ground aircraft communications. Dominique explained how the mobile channel is becoming increasingly adopted by customers throughout all steps of air-travel, as well as by employees of airlines. Some of his main points included:-

- **IT Architecture:** Backend IT is highly important – building a mobile app isn't just about the sexy front-end but also about the underlying back-end systems and services, which need to be capable of powering these apps.
 - **End-to-end solution:** Each mobility solution requires a 3 dimensional optimisation of device, network, and application, including fallback scenarios (eg in cases where coverage issues exist)
 - **Clear Business-case:** Airlines have extremely low margins – therefore for an airline to invest in mobile that must mean there is a clear business benefit. Either a) clear cost-saving b) more revenue or c) clear improvement to customer-satisfaction. Going mobile must not just be for the sake of it but must always be to support/improve a specific business process. Airports are looking to speed up access/throughput – mobile solutions are key here
 - **Mobile complements existing channels:** Mobile is an extra channel on top of current ones – (it doesn't substitute other channels) Check-in has taken 15 yrs to move from check-in-desks to Kiosks to Web-check-in. Expect mobile to make the same shift in 5 yrs (as web check-in migrates to mobile).
 - **Technology adoption accelerating:** makes it difficult for airlines because speed of change (customers demand the latest devices and OS... eg shift in demand from initially iPad to Samsung tablets to Windows 8 devices...)
 - **Mobile ATl workforce:** Mobility has been around for airline operations since years (eg with ruggedized devices). However now there is a growing demand for tablets (eg for cabin crew and pilots). Many airlines have now a 5 yr mobility strategy. Business-cases & ROI can often be very positive e.g. for replacing paper manuals with tablet (reduces weight and hence fuel/cost needed).
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3. Sabine Deinhofer (E-Commerce Manager SBB Mobile)

Sabine's presentation titled „SBB - Digital transformation in an old economy company“ gave a fascinating look at one of the most popular mobile-services in Switzerland today (SBB Mobile downloaded 3m times, and #1 free app in the Swiss app-store).

History: SBB-mobile was a “flop” (only 200k downloads) till 2009 when the iPhone version was launched. (Now 1.7m iOS downloads thanks to Steve Jobs!). Timing is therefore everything... especially when it comes to launching new market innovations. (Consider Laker Airways 1st low-cost airline in late 70s, Vanilla Pay (Ringier innovation from 2010), both of which didn't survive).

Assets: Sabine explained SBB's “assets” like # of passengers/day, # of retailers in train-stations, #of captive minutes per day per passenger, and even largest public toilet operator in CH!

SBB Connect: Sabine explained how social-media concepts and mobile can combine to provide a superior travel experience. SBB has launched the SBB Connect app which allows you to see who's on the same train as you or in the same station, and also provide localised offers (eg vouchers from station-shops) just as you arrive at your destination.

Sabine repeated a famous quote “Sometimes customers don't know what they want until we've shown them” (Steve Jobs). She therefore emphasized the importance of experimentation and trying out new services/concepts, and then learning from the results.

4. Tooxme (Taha BenMrad and Olivier Perrotey)

Taha kicked off Tooxme's presentation with a story involving “a red Bentley and a red lady”... ! He explained how he arrived in Milan station one day and was waiting ages for a taxi. Whilst waiting he saw a beautiful lady in red & in a red Bentley drive past and eventually saw her again at his hotel where he was heading. His message was if he'd known that they were both heading to the same destination, then he would have asked for a ride!

Market opportunity: Taha shared interesting figures to prove the market opportunity of car/ride-sharing.... (12-15 mins global average waiting time for a taxi, 1.6 person/car average occupancy every day, estimated global taxi market size \$60Bn). There are multiple key drivers for a mobile-app based ride-sharing service (cheaper, less waiting in peak times, environmentally friendly..... and above all, a huge interest in anything mobile... and in mobile-apps to simplify people's lives..)

Sharing-economy: Taha explained the rise in the “collaboration economy” where owning assets is no longer necessary. (e.g. Airbnb, Openshed, Zipcar)

Tooxme service: Olivier introduced the Tooxme service which was launched January in Geneva and Lausanne. Its mobile-app is designed for 2 types of users – Drivers and Riders. It allows people to find rides or look for riders in real-time on the spot for short distances, in contrast to traditional carpooling services more based on long distance and upfront planning.

It also provides useful information to riders to allow them to decide which mode of transport to take (train, ride or taxi, based on comparative cost, ETA and availability). Some of its highly innovative features include an original Business Model that allows Tooxme to pay drivers even when they do not have passengers on board & has several features to provide trust which is a key requirement, including full integration into Facebook.

Marketing: A service like Tooxme needs to reach a critical mass of users and therefore Tooxme's team ran a full on and offline media campaign, including special Tooxme branded cars running through

Lausanne and Geneva. The next phase for Tooxme will be to extend to other parts of Switzerland later in 2013.

5. Matthias Lüfkens, Co-Founder, “In Your Pocket” City Guides & Digital Practice Leader, Burson-Marsteller

Everyone knows the famous guide-books of Lonely-Planet, Frommers, Fodors etc, but their future may be at stake, given the 40% drop in sales (US) during last 5 years as people have increasingly turned to the internet for travel advice. This has also been driven by the increased & ubiquitous availability of WiFi – spot the tourists migrating to Starbucks and McDonalds in order to download the local chapter of their online guide app...

Wikivoyage: apparently this is one of the culprits – apparently one of the internet’s largest source of user-generated content a la Wikipedia model..

Tripadvisor: also a very popular service, but Matthias asked – “how much time did you spend last time reading the often 30+ user-reports that can frequently vary massively in rating and opinion....? (this can easily turn into a several hour research activity..)

Content curation: Matthias therefore asked if there remains a need for content “curation” – i.e. someone to organise and aggregate content and presumably edit/ensure content quality...

“In Your Pocket” city guides: Matthias introduced In-your-pocket and the 75 European guidebooks it has in circulation (5million/year). The guide books are available from Hotels, Travel-Agencies and Tourist-Offices across many European cities, and best of all they are FREE. The content has actually been free too on the internet since 2000 (downloadable pdfs) and on the appstore since 2010. Matthias emphasized the importance of LOCAL input – each guide is produced by permanent residents in each city, also with real suggestions and tips from locals. The guides are therefore continually updated, and available through multiple output formats thanks to a flexible CMS.

Social-media: Matthias explained the importance & integration of social-media into travel-guides (e.g. In Your Pocket are on Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, and Flickr). He mentioned how Foursquare can help chart one’s travel-experiences, and therefore why In-Your-Pocket now have an online presence on Foursquare.

In summary – Matthias suggested that the printed-guide book is here to stay... maybe not in the same format and popularity as before, but that as “Video didn’t kill the radio-star” neither will the printed guide book disappear, especially given the many advantages they have over smartphones, tablets etc (can’t be broken, flexible, and can perform many other functions... sunshade, megaphone etc...)

6. Q&A panel discussion

The audience didn’t hesitate to ask many great questions and certain key points of discussion developed such as

- Tooxme/sharing-economy – car/ride-sharing is not only about saving money. These sharing services can also be driven by softer factors too (such as wanting more social interaction with one another)
- “Social” is booming – any new service today must clearly be linked into social media
- Algorithmic approach – is the Google-way the right way for Travel services? Can meaningful information/services be put forwards to consumers based purely on automated algorithms? The answer seemed to indicate that algorithms alone will not be sufficient.

- Public-APIs – a question arose about “opening up” APIs to data.. This seemed to be a common concern and raised the key question about when should a company open up and allow the development community to link into their precious information and APIs. This also raised the major point of security and robustness of allowing developers to call your company’s back-end services, without risking their integrity and overloading them.

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