



The Most Versatile Piece of Technology Most Retail Companies Don't Even Own

By nature we are a multitasking culture, maybe to a fault sometimes, but the speed at which we live our lives almost demands it. So it's not surprising that the technology we develop has also become multitasking. We have printers that copy and fax. We have laptops that are also DVD players. We have TVs that are also computer monitors, and vice-versa. Least we not forget our smart phones, the Swiss Army™ knives of technology. They are not only our phones, our music players, our cameras, our video game players, our GPS...do I need to go on? Will it ever end? Of course not. The very essence of technology is to make our lives easier by doing more with less. Make it smaller. Make it use less energy. Make it more intelligent. We can do all of those things by making technology that multitasks.

So why don't we see more of this multitasking technology when we leave our homes, say at our local department store or home improvement center? The only multitasking devices we see in most retail establishments are the smart phones in our pockets. The digital signage? No, it's one-way communication designed for messaging. The self-checkout stand? No, it's there to speed up the check-out process. Could it do more? Maybe, but most people don't know it and frankly I don't want to be standing behind the person in line exploring the function of each icon on the touch screen. Scan your items, swipe your card, and move on.

There is one technology that most retailers simply under-utilize. Kiosks. Yep. Kiosks. But wait, we're not talking about the big, free standing "PC-in-a-box" type of kiosk. That type of kiosk can be really expensive and take up a lot of space so you really can't afford to have too many of them around. No, we're talking about small-form-factor kiosks...mini-kiosks. Fully self-contained, embedded devices that can be



installed virtually anywhere, and because they are more affordable, they can be scattered around the store like Easter eggs.

Ok, so big deal. So we're talking about "price checkers" right? Wrong. We're talking about fully functional computers that can run application software allowing them to offer up a multitude of time saving tasks to customers as well as store employees. These are devices that when properly deployed can mitigate customer frustration by giving them instant access to information they need, without having to track down a sales associate... and the opposite of customer frustration is customer satisfaction.

The fact is, we as a society are well past the "technology aversion" phase. We're using it everywhere. Whether we are at home, work, or in the car, we have so much technology literally at our fingertips. Why should it be any different when we're shopping? Why must we seek out sales associates for a price check or stand in the check-out line to sign up for the loyalty program or fumble with our smart phone when we want to check out something we saw on the store's website?

Here's just a sampling of what an installed array of mini-kiosks can do for retail customers:

- **Verify a price.**
- **Look up a gift card balance.**
- **Sign up for loyalty programs or email lists.**
- **Play a short “how to” video for the product of interest.**
- **Check stock in the store or nearby stores.**
- **Call for a sales associate.**
- **Print out a recipe.**
- **Print coupons.**
- **Suggest complimentary products.**
- **Scroll ads or promotions when sitting idle.**
- **Browse the store's website.**

The list could go on, but the point is that the mini-kiosk can truly be a multitasking device. It doesn't have to simply hang from a pole and wait for someone wanting to check a price. It should be displayed in an inviting fashion, and capable of performing a wide variety of tasks, virtually screaming to the customer *“Use me! I'll make your life easier!”*

Some retail companies have already deployed price verifiers in their stores and many have begun adding second and third applications, starting to grasp the idea of multitasking. But there is still so much more that can be done. Too many companies let the investment cost hold them back or feel there are too many other “bigger fish to fry”. But what's more important than keeping a customer in the store and helping them to make a buying decision, as opposed to going down the road and buying from the competition?

In regards to the investment cost, mini-kiosks are a fraction of the cost of full-sized freestanding kiosks. This means multiple units can be deployed for what it would cost to install one full-sized “PC-in-a-box”, and as we all know, the cost of technology just keeps going down. Beyond the initial investment, mini-kiosks are

fully embedded devices meaning that they don't have beefy power supplies that go out or hard drives that crash or fans that burn up. Once configured and installed, they are highly reliable.

To be fair, there's more to deploying mini-kiosks than just plugging them in. Application software has to be written, not only on the mini-kiosk, but on the back end as well. Most of the data that we need to retrieve for the customer is already sitting in a database somewhere, but there has to be some “glue” that connects the software application on the kiosk to the database on the server. But at the end of the day, the payoff could be enormous. Give the customer the information that prompts a buying decision without having to wait in line or wait for a sales associate. Happy customers mean more revenue, and better utilization of staff and resources means more profit.

The bottom line is that technology is the answer to doing more with less. As retail companies move to deploy mobile apps and digital signage, mini-kiosks should become part of the overall strategy to engage the customer with technology that is interactive, useful, and convenient. Most successful retail companies are mired in their “multi-channel” makeover, if they haven't already completed it, but if the “brick-and-mortar” component is going to stay relevant and contemporary, putting interactive technology at the customer's fingertips is crucial.

