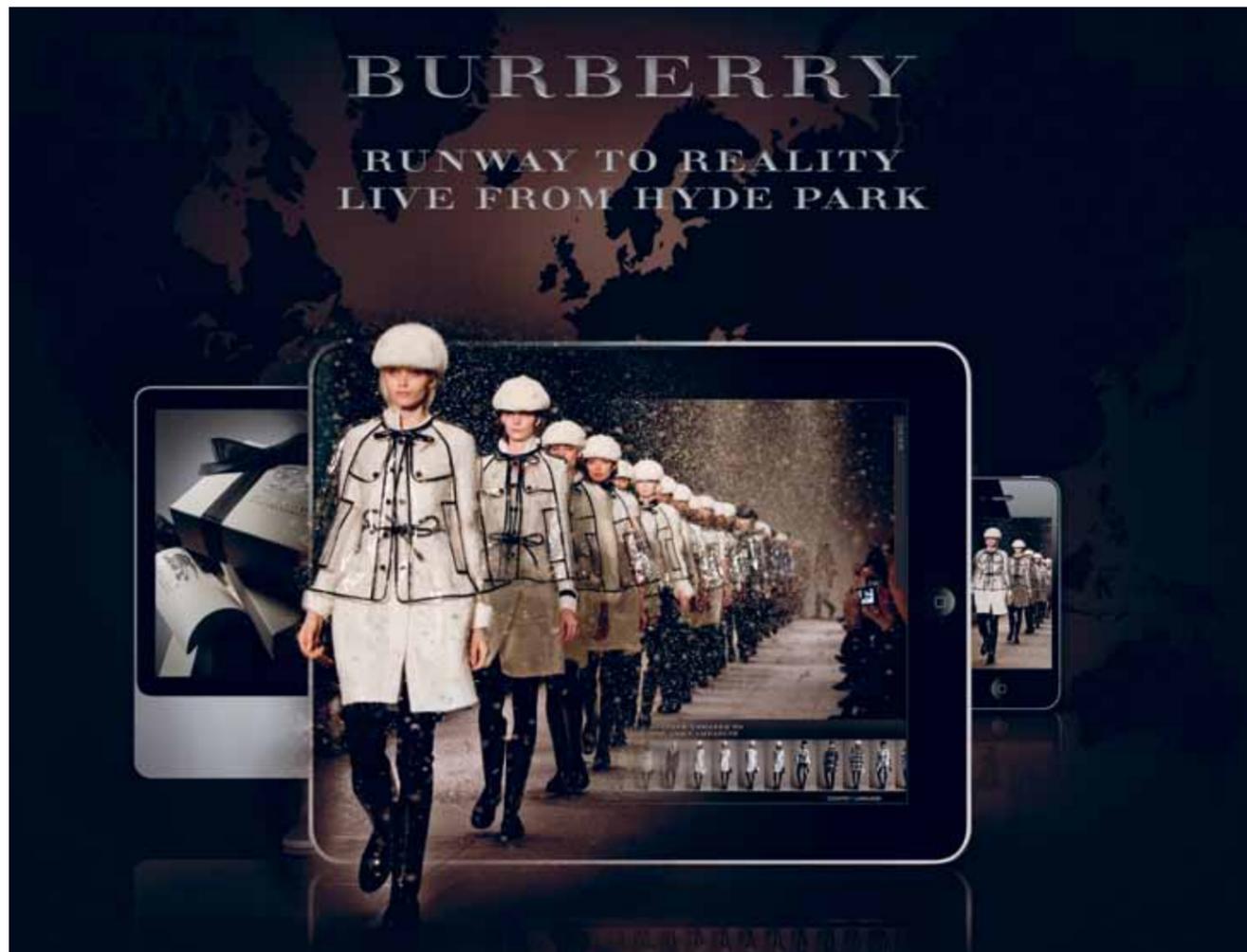


Right here, right now

We used to wait, to have patience. Now technology is allowing real-time communications to dominate the way we live. And the pressure to conform – on businesses, institutions and individuals alike – is growing, says ANNA SANSOM

Real-time leader: the Burberry Prorsum spring/summer 2012 womenswear show Runway to Reality was broadcast live from Hyde Park



E

verything in the world happens much faster than ever before, thanks to the technology boom, and we're all seeking instant gratification. Everybody wants to take photos on their iPhone and upload them instantly onto Facebook; the notion of depositing a roll of film and waiting a week to have it developed belongs to a bygone era. Forget about waiting for somebody to explain something to us; we'd rather go online and get the information straight away.

But who can blame us for becoming impatient and greedy? Companies are competing to be first to deliver the latest app that will offer us a new experience, right now, this very moment. News is streamed with minute-by-minute updates so we don't have to wait until tomorrow morning to read the paper. We can buy anything we want from anywhere in the world at the click of a mouse and have it delivered the following day. Concerts and fashion shows are streamed live on YouTube so we no longer have to wait months to read about them in magazines. And who bothers to memorise facts and figures, with information on every topic readily available online? Everything is here and now.

Whether we like it or not, this is affecting every area of our lives, from education to work and leisure. Consider how Luna Park, an Australian amusement park, has launched My Experience at Luna Park Sydney. Visitors who buy an unlimited rides pass can use their smartphone to login into the park with Facebook. Their Extreme-O-Meter rating, which is calculated according to the number of rides they go on, is posted to their Facebook newsfeed at the end of the day, as are photos taken on the Tango Train ride. Visitors can link their wristbands with those of their friends and also swipe their wristbands to update their Facebook status. As Luna Park's publicity material says: 'Why wait to tell your friends what you have been up to when you can share it in real time?' Luna Park's website does not fail to emphasise that My Experience is an industry first. In the race against real time, being first, being innovative and being relevant is what counts.



The Luna Park website emphasises its industry-first status



From catwalk direct to computer: the Now Fashion website

LIFE THROUGH A SCREEN

Real-time communications are an inevitable consequence of life online, or life through a screen. A few years ago, the fashion world cooed when style.com began putting up photos of fashion shows the same day. Now the Now Fashion website has started launching images from fashion shows in real time. And Maybelline New York, the official makeup sponsor of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, presented live streaming of fashion shows on YouTube in September. This is changing the face of the fashion industry, providing consumers with up-to-the-minute information on shows, looks and products. For its spring/summer 2012 show in Hyde Park, Burberry, which has already experimented with offering means of placing orders direct from the catwalk, partnered Twitter to create a live Tweetwalk show which included backstage pics of every look. Twitter followers actually viewed the collection before the front-row press and buyers. Burberry also created a link on Facebook so its 8.7m Facebook fans could also stream the show.

Numerous other companies are also taking advantage of social networking sites to encourage consumers to post comments via a smartphone or computer. Coca-Cola came up with the ingenious idea last March of commissioning the American rock band Maroon 5 to compose an original song in 24 hours with ideas provided by tweets sent from fans. Some of the Twitter comments were featured on a 3D wall to help inspire the band. The resulting track was performed live and released as a free MP3 track a week later. The initiative enabled Coca-Cola to interact with its music-loving customers in a non-commercial way and helped boost its credentials by association with Maroon 5.

'Their focus was not on driving sales but on creating brand awareness,' says Anna O'Brien, director of social media at the UK office of Greenlight, a consulting and technology firm in London and New York that specialises in maximising search engine operations and pay per click for diverse clients such as HMV, handbag.com and National Magazine Company.

'RAPID' RESPONSE? NOT RAPID ENOUGH

To stand out from their competitors, brands need to deliver fresh campaigns that create memorable experiences. One such example is the collaboration between Old Navy, the US clothing retailer, and Shazam, the music-

IN BRIEF

Real-time communications are coming to the fore in retail, leisure, travel and education; the winning factors are innovation, relevance – and being first into the market

Customers now expect real-time responses; brands that cannot deliver will fall from favour

Real-time communications is a powerful facilitator of social networking, learning, effective working practice – and political activism

While RTC can be addictive, it can also be stressful and privacy will eventually command a premium

Real-time comments can help brands realise that consumers are using a product in unexpected ways or suggesting improvements



Musical collaborator Old Navy's website



Failure to respond to real-time criticism cost Airbnb dearly



Groupon empowers consumers in real time

identifying application, last February. While watching the commercial online or on TV, viewers could use the app on their smartphones to tag the original music. This launched a virtual store where they could buy Old Navy's clothing and download the tunes. Customers could also use Shazam to tag the music playing in Old Navy's physical stores and, by so doing, win products in promotional giveaways. 'It's an interesting way of fundamentally changing advertising and augments the online social interaction concept,' O'Brien believes. 'When you surprise people, especially when they're not expecting a reward, is when you hit the sweet spot.'

Given the escalating numbers of online consumers, brands are more susceptible to avalanches of comments than ever before. A reputation can melt if negative criticism is not responded to efficiently – real-time response is increasingly expected. Take Airbnb, the travel industry website that takes short-term rentals for private rooms and apartments in 196 countries. Its image was dented on June 29, when a San Francisco host described on her own blog how her apartment had been vandalised by a guest. A month later, she blogged that Airbnb had requested that she shut down her blog or limit access to it. Airbnb failed to publish an apology until 1 August, by which time it had lost credibility for customer service. Admitting that the company had had 'a crash course in crisis management', Brian Chesky, the CEO and co-founder of Airbnb, wrote: 'we should have responded faster, communicated more sensitively and taken more decisive action to make sure she felt safe and secure.' The company announced that it was creating an Airbnb guarantee, whereby personal property would be covered for loss or damage due to vandalism or theft by a guest for up to \$50,000.

'Airbnb had to implement a \$50,000 policy just based on one blog post,' says Scott Bishop, the editor of the Real Time Marketer website and director of social influence at Bozell, an American marketing company. 'We live in an age where brands don't have full control over their image any more and are at the mercy of the masses because everybody can be a critic.'

The proliferation of apps touches everybody, says Carol Davids, an industry professor and the director of the Real-Time Communications Lab at the Illinois Institute of Technology. This has, she notes, allowed consumers to check prices for goods in competing stores as they are walking through shopping centres. At groupon.com, visitors can see which stores and companies in their city are offering coupons for anything from cupcake decorating classes to flower arrangement courses, full body massages and restaurants. There's an even an iPhone app for making donations to UK charity Comic Relief for its Red Nose Day next March.

BLURRING ONLINE AND OFFLINE

The borders between the online and physical worlds are colliding and collapsing. Party invitations can be created online and guests can respond immediately. Savvy iPhone users take pics on holiday, at parties, exhibitions or fashion shows and upload them to their Facebook profiles instantly, adding kudos to their profile. Minutes, or even seconds later, friends will leave comments and hit the Like tag.

'Posting photos, video and text updates amplifies the travel experience, affording an opportunity to broadcast far and wide how cool, privileged, worldly etc the traveller is,' notes the April 2011 trend report from JWT, the marketing communications company. It found that 83% of Americans and two thirds of Britons in the 18-33 age group were uploading photos while on holiday, moments after they were taken, and that 40% were uploading videos. Furthermore, 77% of Americans and 67% of Britons

in this age group felt that having their smartphone with them while on holiday made them feel secure, knowing that they could instantly get information about their surroundings.

Who needs a paperback travel guide these days? Travellers can check websites such as Wikitude and Wanderfly for information based on destinations and budgets, or Wikihood for information on landmarks and history as they pass through. And when Lonely Planet made 13 of its city guide iPhone apps, which normally cost £9.49 each, free for four days to help travellers affected by 2010's air traffic chaos caused by volcanic ash clouds, over 3m were downloaded.

On research engines such as Google and Bing, people can find the latest comments on any subject in real time. Figuring out how to stay on top of this is a nightmare for brands and complex algorithms are being developed to help them track what their customers are saying. American online research company OnResearch, whose clients include Microsoft, Shell, eBay and Hilton, has developed a research solution tool based on natural processing language, constantly updated to accommodate evolving slang. It allows any statement in the blogosphere to be scored out of 10. 'It's wonderful to know that 10,000 people are talking about your brand online and that an overall score is 6.5 out of 10,' says Zach Vetter, vice-president of research at OnResearch. 'But it's more important to know what themes people are talking about in order to understand the voice of the customer.'

A brand might realise, for example, that consumers are using a product in unexpected ways, or commenting about how the product could be improved. This is immeasurably useful for future product development and means that traditional market research surveys are no longer necessary. Instead, brand assessment comes direct from customers and in the all-important present. One way for brands to communicate with loyal customers is through advisory panels of carefully selected 'ambassadors'. Star Trek has launched a Star Trek Online Advisory Council whose members provide feedback on the game. Such panels operate like conference calls, engaging participants in real time.

FROM SHOPPING TO LEARNING

It's not just shopping that is feeling the real-time communications impact. Issues that are far more important, such as the quality of education or news coverage, are also being affected by the need to respond to the expectation of real-time communications. The media is increasingly reporting news in real time, providing updates every few minutes. This has the capacity to make people feel more implicated in events. When earthquakes struck in Haiti in 2010 and in Japan in 2011 donations poured in from over the world donated money as the news streamed on the web. Yet the price of this revolution could be that in-depth analysis and accuracy are being compromised. 'Bloggers and casual reporters have jeopardised journalism, turning the web into an ocean of infobesity,' says Wai-Ming Lung, a digital creative director who specialises in luxury brands and editor of *Infidèle*, a digital culture magazine.

And how about face-to-face learning and the much-lauded benefits of one-to-one teacher-pupil interaction? Texas A&M University is pioneering web-conferencing classes so that students can interact online without needing to be in an actual classroom. There's even an 'interactive whiteboard' that teachers and students can write on. Google+ has similar benefits, enabling users to share ideas within their social group. Google+ features Hangouts: users click on 'start a hangout' and are instantly in a video chat room. A message is sent to their social circle, informing them that their friend is 'hanging out'. As Davids says: 'You can see everyone, have Skype-like conference calls and draw together and work together.'

Kindle, a tablet with inbuilt WiFi, enables readers to download books in 60 seconds. It's like the iPod, but for literature. College students could soon earn their degree by attending online classes and could download books online as well. The need to physically attend classes or borrow books from libraries on campus is fast becoming a thing of the past. Instant download is, after all, much faster.

A DEEPER EFFECT

Professionals agree that the mobile phone is the future. 'It's the idea of life being a screen and how my phone augments what I'm doing on a daily basis,' says O'Brien. 'For brands, it's about relevancy and personalisation, and the opportunities are more vast than ever before.'

As technology becomes more sophisticated, we can expect to see more tailor-made websites that aim to give individuals a better real-time connective experience. Goby, a search engine that helps users find leisure activities tailored to their interests, has introduced a feed for mobile phones so people can get immediate, personalised recommendations. Bing has a new feature which incorporates your Facebook friends and makes your searches more relevant based on your personal connections. And, as valuable information on users is being increasingly shared across social media and partnered websites – users as 'product', in effect – we can expect more of this in the future.

Some consumers will welcome any system that allows their entire world to be constantly on. The issue of privacy is likely to be hotly contested by others, of course. But there are more profound implications too. Some seem positive: real time's ability to enhance democratic action, for example. The empowerment of people expressing themselves in real-time communications is being felt across the socio-political landscape in all sorts of different ways. The momentum of the Arab Spring was partly thanks to social networking and the online activists Lina Ben Mhenni from Tunisia and Israa Abdel Fattah and Wael Ghonim from Egypt were all nominated for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

Other examples include the protest against housing prices in Tel Aviv last summer, which was started by 25-year-old Daphni Leef via Facebook. Tents were erected on luxurious Rothschild Boulevard by a group of protesters whose numbers swelled to over 200,000. And even a real-time response to real-time protesting may provide a commercial opportunity: consider the story about Ian's Pizza in Madison, Wisconsin, in the US, which delivered free pizza to teachers and workers protesting against proposed budget cuts. The gesture was reported on Twitter and Facebook, and within a few days donors were contacting Ian's Pizza from as far afield as Egypt, South Korea and Denmark.

Real-time communications may influence our internal lives as well as our external ones. 'Anyone can be simultaneously speaking on the phone, watching a TV show and commenting about it in a forum,' says Lung. 'But recent research shows the human brain is not meant for multi-tasking like a multi-core computer. So real time is affecting our brains and Google is transforming our minds. We do not think in the same way any more and we do not use our memory like we used to.'

Real-time communications has already become an addiction for many of us. Separating ourselves from our mobile or computer for 24 hours can fill us with anxiety. Equally, it means we can never feel free. Being permanently reachable, permanently connected, can be stressful. 'I quit Facebook a month ago because there was a lot of pressure to be continuously keeping up with people on the network,' says Vetter. Saying 'Sorry, I missed your call' is no longer a valid excuse. As Lung anticipates, perhaps ominously: 'The ultimate luxury of tomorrow will probably be owning an unconnected haven with real privacy – a step out of the pressures of real time.' ●