CHAPTER 8: EMERGING ISSUES AND TRENDS

As social media, app stores and global availability become standard, many companies are looking to enhance the online customer experience. And while retail and other transactions via Internet are customary, more than ever companies are simplifying the ways in which customers interact with their website and ultimately make online purchases. Here are eight trends happening right now in global ecommerce that seek to enhance the user experience:

1. Micro-payments: Among the most revolutionary changes in the coming months—not years—is the use of micro-payment systems from a variety of financial firms, e.g., Paypal, Visa, WesternUnion, among others, including banks. This trend is facilitated by the W3C working group that approved these protocols and technical standards for the interworking. These systems will change not only how we carry money but how we value money and think about purchases. (Consider how a purchase of $4.99 feels in a mobile app store vs. at Dunkin' Donuts.) Payment systems that make it easier to buy online, coupled with mobile technologies will accelerate the usage of global e-commerce applications.

2. Mobile technologies: More people access the Internet on their mobile devices than on any other device. We are rapidly approaching the time (if we are not already there) where designs must be created for the mobile web first, and for the desktop second. Mobile technologies facilitate comparison shopping; with the advent of barcode reader apps and price-comparison databases, a consumer could snap a bar code in Walmart and quickly reference product reviews and prices on walmart.com (or compare prices with Walmart competitors). Mobile technologies also facilitate impulse buys – especially with the advent of micro-payments tied to the mobile device. Just recently, Starbucks customers can not only place an order with their Smartphone, but also make a purchase.

3. Social media: As Facebook has become the most visited site on the Web, the role of social media, including Facebook and its local clones such as Twitter, is increasingly important. Social media sites Page **112** of **112** increasingly act as points of entry to e-commerce sites, and vice versa, as e-commerce sites build rating, loyalty and referral systems tied to social media. Group buying (e.g., Groupon) is also gaining mainstream ground, with many "deal of the day" sites competing for an increasingly savvy consumer base, but improvements lie ahead as the social aspects and user experience are refined.

4. Fulfillment options: I believe that users will want to have multiple fulfillments and return options when interacting with a vendor: ship to address, courier, pick-up in store, return to store, etc. Having many fulfillment options is how customers view their overall customer experience. Some companies have made a business proposition online by being exceptional in service to the online channel (e.g., Zappos).

5. Global availability: Increasingly, consumers want the availability to buy products from foreign sites and have them delivered locally. Thus, currency and customs will be of growing concern to many online retailers. Along with this, there will be concerns with local privacy laws and restrictions on related data collection and storage.

6. Localization: While the trend is to globalize, what's often more important is to localize. User Centric's (now GfK's User Experience team) research clearly shows that sites that _feel' local – with proper imagery, language, time/date, weights/measures, currency, etc. – resonate far more than sites that seem culturally distant or sterile.

7. Customizability: Consumers want control, and want to be able to design the details of the items they purchase.

8. Time-based availability: Some of the hottest and most successful sites are those that have a time-critical response component. Sites like Groupon, Gilt and others capitalize on the perception of limited-time availability. Creating a sense of urgency drives traffic and purchase behavior.