Technology For Technology's Sake

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It has been done a thousand times, in museums, government buildings and schools: ancient, lumbering institutions using technology in an attempt to become cutting-edge—and falling flat in the process.

We're not talking about the smart-grid, which shows great potential for consumers and governments alike, or even smart boards, which take education to a different level.

The problems arise when governments plan out grandiose publicity stunts without thinking it through, like putting QR codes in the London underground with no internet service. It's technology for the sake of technology.

Technology can and should be fun (pizza button [1], anyone?). After all, part of the appeal of new technology is getting a new toy. It's playtime for adults.

But when the expense of implementing a large-scale technological change are justified as an investment in the future of a large company or a town, it needs to be less whimsical and more practical—particularly when it comes to tourism and travel.

While a desire to stay relevant and take risks is commendable, tourism technology can't be all about flash. The progression needs to be more organic with a long-term vision. It must outlast fads.

How may the avatar help you?
First, let's look at the decision by The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey [2] to implement a system of customer-service holograms at John F. Kennedy International, Newark Liberty International, and LaGuardia Airport. Currently, the airports serve 106 million passengers per year and employ 350 customer care agents to help passengers navigate the airport and transportation options.

In addition to adding 70 agents, officials recently decided to add five virtual staff members called "Airport Virtual Assistants" (AVA) at select terminals to provide basic information to travelers. The AVAs, designed by Arius Media, are motion-activated images rear-projected onto plexi-glass to produce a realistic human figure. Currently, customers can't interact with the holograms, they can only listen to prerecorded messages.

An interesting idea to gain passengers attention, but is it worth the price?

A six-month rental for the avatar systems will cost $180,000. If the agency decides to purchase the technology, it will cost the agency $250,000 per avatar.

Seems like a hefty price-tag for someone to talk about the location of bathrooms and taxis.

The holograms should raise questions—and eyebrows—about the use of innovative technology when a simple sign would suffice. The avatars might become a viable option when the technology improves enough that a passenger can interact with the hologram, but until then, it’s basically a fancy television set.

Fortunately, Port Authority is also putting money into proven techniques like a new smartphone app with real-time flight information for fliers. When resources are finite, the focus should be on proven solutions, not debatable technology.

The town that Wikipedia built

Wasting money in an airport is one thing, but dragging an entire town into the mix is a different matter entirely.

A town in Wales has recently anointed itself the world’s first “Wikitown.” Monmouth, or Monmouthpedia as it’s now known, has added over 1000 QR codes to schools, businesses, historical sites and various other areas of the town. Each QR code brings the tourist to one of nearly 500 Wikipedia pages in 25 languages about the town. The codes are printed on ceramic and metal plates, which town officials claim will survive for decades.

Let’s start with the positives. Because of unreliable cellular service in the town, officials implemented a free Wi-Fi network throughout Monmouth, so visitors can access the information embedded in the codes. Improving the infrastructure of a

small town—the first in Wales to offer free Wi-Fi—is a worthwhile investment in the future, even if the short-term plan was debatable.

The problem with QR codes—aside from the garish aesthetics of the technology—is consumers aren't interested in using them.

According to a recent study by Archrival, a company that focuses on youth marketing, even though 81 percent of college-aged people have smart phones, only 21 percent knew how to scan a QR code and 75 percent said they weren't likely to use the codes in the future.

When considering the entire U.S. population, the numbers are even more unimpressive—only 14 million people per month, which is less than five percent of the total mobile user base, according to a study by ComScore. In the U.K., a paltry 4.6 percent of mobile users had scanned a QR bar. Technology is only as useful as the amount of people willing or interested in using it.

While the numbers are improving, the technology is still unproven. Plus, is this a long-term solution to tourism? According to town officials, the QR codes will survive, while maps become outdated. This begs the question of what happens when the QR technology itself becomes outdated.

At the end of the day, gimmicks are great for PR, but they're not the best use of dwindling government resources.

Photo Credit: Wikimedia/Monmouthshire County Council

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