

## Reality check

### clicks and mortar companies show e-tailers the way with 'back to basics' approach for B2C

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#### Abstract

Amongst other things, the bursting of the dot.com bubble signalled a reassertion of the principle that only businesses who have a good customer proposition can succeed in the long term. Simply offering products and services on-line via the web is no substitute for a sound 'go to market' model. Further, this paper demonstrates how many would be e-businesses, seduced by the lure of the emerging 'virtual-world' on the web, have ignored 40 years of accumulated wisdom in how to design usable information systems, and have seemingly forgotten that a satisfying 'user experience' is key to the successful implementation of any information system, particularly one in that operates in the public domain. The paper uses the allegorical experience of a 'real' user to provide some powerful insights into how, and by what rationales, the e-marketeers, graphic designers, web designers and programmers responsible for many B2C sites are creating user experiences on the web that are confusing, frustrating and time consuming. Having explained the main problem areas, it goes on to explain why 'clicks and mortar' companies may be better placed to exploit the web than many pure e-tailers, not just because of their business experience, brand identity and multi-channel capability, but because they retain a focus on the importance of user-centred thinking.

#### Introduction

Back in 1998 you may have read something like this:

"Somewhere out there is a bullet with your company's name on it. Somewhere out there is a competitor, unborn and unknown, that will render your business model obsolete. Bill Gates knows that. When he says that Microsoft is always two years away from failure he's not just blowing smoke..." "And what's true for Microsoft is true for just about every other company: The hottest and most dangerous new business models out there are on the Web." (Hamel & Sampler, 1998)

Two years later the stories seemed more like this one:

"The year 2000 will always be remembered as the year when the world finally realised that starting up a website and adding .com to your company name would not guarantee instant millions. Especially after the bankruptcy of internet fashion retailer, Boo, people started to realise that, like all other businesses around the world, internet companies needed proper business plans and ideas on how to make a profit." (Gowans, 2000)

So here we are two more years down the line and enough time has passed to reflect on comments like Gowan's and examine why the great B2C revolution largely failed to materialise, and it is now the 'B2B revolution' we are waiting for. The UK government wants the UK to be at the forefront of e-

commerce (Office of the e-envoy, 2001) and their National Audit Office's comments would seem a suitable departure point for this discussion:

A business consensus now exists that Web-based business services will remain only one amongst several channels for consumers and businesses to make purchases. And solely e-based companies have become less important than enterprises which combine a 'clicks and mortar' operation. (UK National Audit Office, 2002).

As such, this paper explores:

- what happened to the B2C revolution?
- why many pure 'e-tailers' continue to fail, and
- why 'clicks and mortar' businesses seem better than the pure e-tailers at leveraging the potent WWW opportunity?

To address these questions let us return to Gowan's core argument; what are these "ideas" that seem lacking in so many e-ventures, and why is it that 'clicks and mortar' businesses seem to have 'better ideas' or are better placed to be e-ntrepreneurs. It would have been possible to approach this discussion by exploring the reasons why e-ventures such easyJet.com and Dell's web sites have been so successful (Andal & Yip, 2002). However, it is hoped that exploring the failures of e-tailers will prove more interesting; the WWW was presented to the world as a paradigm shift for business; we were told of the 'virtual world' where 'things would be done differently', where 'new ways of doing business' would prevail for the benefit of us all, and that change was the only certainty. This paradigm shift is explored from the reverse perspective in the following short story:

### **A Rael experience**

*Rael walked out of the airport and onto the taxi rank; once again, he thought wistfully, how nice it would be to see some of the city for a change, but as usual, his tight business schedule meant just another day of meetings in sterile offices with wall talkers and bright coloured window frames. After a short wait in line, Rael was mildly relieved to find that the taxi driver spoke fluent English and knew the location of his first meeting. The flight over had been with a low cost airline, Rael thoroughly approved of these in principle, but this had meant missing lunch, so Rael asked the taxi driver if they could stop off and grab a burger somewhere along the way. Once the taxi driver had agreed Rael relaxed back into the invitingly comfortable black leather seats of the Mercedes and made another attempt to enjoy the foreign pop music that was playing on the radio. It didn't take long before Rael got bored and reluctantly turned to the financial pages of the newspaper he had found on his aeroplane seat. These were the only pages he hadn't already looked at, so it was with some apathy that that he began reading about how many redundant e-ntrepreneurs from dot.boms had managed to 'persuade' (some would say con) their way into senior positions in household name companies. He became a little more interested when the article went on to say how the very place he was visiting was at the forefront of 'bringing e-business concepts to traditional bricks and mortar businesses', a fact that was*

*actually not new to him. An interesting spin he found himself thinking, as his sense of awareness heightened — then the letters on the page began to spin, or was it the spin that was spinning, it was difficult to tell when his senses reeled like this...*

*Rael: "How far are we away from the getting some food, I'm getting hungry?"*

*Taxi driver: "Nearly there sir, just round the next corner on this retail park."*

*After turning the next corner...*

*Taxi driver: "We're here, but..."*

*Rael stared at the emptiness containing the shimmering white sign with 'CoolBurger: 505 error' written on it. It was really strange how the sign just seems to hover there, the sign seems so out of place there on the busy retail park, and the more he looked at it, the more it didn't stop looking like something that shouldn't be there.*

*Rael: "What..., what's that?"*

*Taxi driver: "Ah yeh, it does that when they get busy or they have an internal problem, it might come back soon."*

*Rael: "But I want my burger now, how can you tell when it gets busy or they have a problem?"*

*Taxi driver: "You can't! You just have to keep coming back and seeing if it's open".*

*Rael: "Can't we just wait and see if it just opens?"*

*Taxi driver: "No, you have to go away then come back again, it never comes back while you're watching, I guess they're shy or something". (Shrugging and smiling wryly)*

*Rael: "Hum, anyway all this is crazy."*

*Taxi driver: "Most stores send out text messages to your G4 mobile to tell you that they're open when you get near them, "push technology" I think it's called - I've turned this feature off though, I was getting 3,000 messages a day! I guess that's one of the problems with being a taxi driver, moving around so much and all."*

*Rael: "Well I'm taking my business to a competitor, is there another fast food place around here?"*

*Taxi driver: "Sure there's CyBurg, it's just round the corner."*

*In less than 30 seconds they are outside CyBurg, "Great!" Rael thought and walked towards the entrance following a group of teenagers. The teenagers stroll in but as Rael approaches the door a voice comes out of nowhere and says; "I'm sorry...to use this CyBurg you must have a G4-453.2 revision 3.15 compatible mobile phone". "What!" thinks Rael, and retreats from the door rather startled. After pausing for a moment, he tries to enter again; "I'm sorry...to use this CyBurg you must have a G4...". Actually the 'phones' were more like small computers, they had five terabytes of RAM, GPS and usually included a small brain scanner, but the name has stuck — Rael walk's back to the taxi...*

*Rael: "The, err door won't let me in, at least I think it's the door, it says I must have some special type of mobile phone or something."*

*Taxi driver: "Yes, you need a G4-453.2 revision 3.15 compatible phone, actually they are very common, over here, 80% of people have got them".*

*Rael: "But it let those kids in."*

*Taxi driver: "Sure, kids always have the latest phones."*

*Rael: "But why do I need a mobile anyway?"*

*Taxi driver: "Oh, in CyBurg you need them to pay for your food, actually they check your bank balance as you walk in to make sure you can afford a typical order".*

*Rael: "So why that particular phone?"*

*Taxi driver: Well, it's because their software uses a lot of the whiz bang features of that model, making it compatible with other phones would be more costly and mean loosing functionality, and not all phones support bank checking when you're abroad. Its rather like the browser compatibility problems there used to be with the old WWW, you remember, one browser became dominant so a lot of sites only used that browser, you could get more functionality for less cost by ignoring all the other customers."*

*Rael: "But those things are all benefits to them, it doesn't help me."*

*Taxi driver: "Yeh that's true, but it's just the way it is. Anyhow would you like to get one of these phones, they're free?"*

*Rael: "How long will that take?"*

*Taxi driver: "Oh, only about an hour".*

*Rael: "You must be joking, I'm hungry **now**, can we go somewhere else?"*

*Driving back past CoolBurger on the way out of the retail park they noticed it was open...*

*Taxi driver: "Looks like CoolBurger is open now, you can get in with any type of phone".*

*Rael decides to go in. In the entrance he sees a mouse, the mouse seems right out of place on the deep black matt, and inside, all sorts of pictures kept appearing, from all over the place, some as moving videos and others were, well, still and then, out of the nowhere, some guy came up to him and, without warning stuck a picture onto his forehead! Rael angrily turned to grab him but he disappeared elusively behind a window then ran into some distant space. Rael noticed one of the pictures was advertising a new film and another was advertising toothpaste. Rael thought to himself; "I don't want to see a film, and I've heard of cleaning your teeth after meal but this is ridiculous". Rael looked around the room for an assistant, or anything that made any sense at all, but all he could see were pictures and signs and some meaningless text; one momentarily caught his eye; "Integrate your own sustenance item using our nutrition wizard". "What the hell does that mean?" he thought as he noticed another announcing; "over here to see our annual accounts" — "Why on earth would I want to see those, I just want a burger" he heard himself say. After some moments, he spotted what looked like it might be a menu, but it wasn't, it was another 'pop up' advertising advertising space. Rael felt like a fly on a computer screen, the individual words were mainly illegible, if a little fragmented, but the context constantly eluded him. Before he could vent his anger Rael was startled once again by some loud rock music. His mind started shifting in all the directions that he saw and heard, or was it the context that was shifting in all directions, it was difficult to tell but the feeling was too disorientating until out of the chaos came the vaguely familiar smell of the taxi driver's cheap aftershave...*

*Taxi driver: "It's a customer wizard, its playing your tune — it's lunch time so I thought I'd get a burger too — yeh, the customer wizard must have got your birthday from your smart card and decided you'd probably like some rotorhead...say, your must be younger than you look."*

*Rael: "I don't won't any rotorhead, or toothpaste, or to see a film, I just want a burger".*

*Taxi driver: "Yep, its all a bit confusing at first isn't it? I was pretty scared when I first came here, apparently humans always get alerted when moving objects appear out of nowhere, it dates back to our cavedwelling days, it's in case a sabre tooth tiger is coming to eat you! You have to look at them, that's why they use them for the adverts instead of the every day things like the menus. Of course, it's OK if you're blind. Anyway shall we order?"*

*Rael: "I love to but how?"*

Taxi driver: *"Well first we have to find the food and drinks section."*

Rael: *"What do you mean food and drinks **section**, this is a restaurant."*

Taxi driver: *"No, CoolBurger is a vortal now."*

Rael: *"A what?"*

Taxi driver: *"A vortal, it's like a portal but for vertical markets."*

Rael: *"I don't know what a portal is either."*

Taxi driver: *"Its like a shopping mall full of other malls, and so on. Sometime you end up in a shopping mall itself but that's quite rare. All the malls are related vertically."*

Rael: *"Ah, you mean they all sell rock climbing gear, just kidding... I understand really; they thought I might want to eat my burger while I watch a film, then buy some super toothpaste specially designed for removing burger stains."*

Taxi driver: *"Yeh, that's it. Anyway lets find the food and drinks section."*

Rael: *"Surely you know how to find it; you've obviously been here before."*

Taxi driver: *"Yeh, but the store organisation mirrors the internal structure of CoolBurger. They restructure about once a month and I haven't been to a CoolBurger for a while now."*

*After locating the food and drinks section and stopping a flying menu the taxi driver helps Rael to choose a burger. The menu is animated and each item scrolls painfully slowly down the text matt. Against each item is a lengthy description and a beautiful 3D holo that takes about 30 seconds to appear.*

Rael: *"Why don't they just list all the items then I can decide to find out more about them if I want? And, anyway, this text is so hard to read on the blue background. And most of this menu is adverts or other pictures of one sort or another."*

Taxi driver: *"I asked about the listings before, they said; 'we are very proud of our products and want the customers to be fully informed in order to make the best choice before buying', actually they let the product designers write the text. The colours, well those are just fashionable at the moment, that's what the graphic designers say anyway, personally I've never liked green with blue. As for the adverts, the menu is prime advertising space,*

*but they have to reserve at least 30% for the menu items — it's the law you know."*

*Rael: "Well why's it so slow?"*

*Taxi driver: "Oh, you can make it go faster."*

*Rael: "How?"*

*Taxi driver: "You can get a 'Plug in', they're free."*

*Rael: "Don't tell me, that'll take about an hour!"*

*Taxi driver: "Oh no, it only takes about 20 minutes to get 'Plug in', mind you, when you plug it in the menu changes so you have to learn where everything is again, oh and sometimes it makes it go slower, so I don't usually bother."*

*Rael: "No thanks, I'll just order one of these "Giant doom burgers" and some fries."*

*Taxi driver: OK, I'll have my usual, let's go to the checkout desk"*

*After completing the order they entered the recursive corridor of many frames and, after navigating their way past the finance bots, mortgage drones in the bright pink dresses and the other granite tile crawlers, they arrive at the checkout booth to be greeted by a glass screen showing a corporate video about the CoolBurger group. The checkout assistant is absently watching the same video from the other side of the glass screen and the two can see each through the translucent flickering...*

*Rael: "Why doesn't she just take our money and give us the food?"*

*Taxi driver: "You have to watch the video first."*

*Rael: "Why can't you just skip the video?"*

*Taxi driver: "Oh you can, it's a new feature a lot of stores have added."*

*Rael: "Well let's do it then".*

*Rael: "OK but we'll have to wait until the end of the video, you don't normally get the option until then". (Again, the taxi driver delivers his customary shrug - the accompanying ironic smile playing across his face)*

*As the video ended the checkout assistant presented Rael with the food (which looked and smelled surprisingly good) and then asked how he would like to pay; smart card or phone?...*

*Rael: "Smart card" (he says wearily)*

Assistant        *"Certainly sir."*

*Rael hands over his gold smart card secure in the knowledge of his inflated bank balance.*

Assistant        *"I'm afraid that your card has failed the credit check sir, this in no way implies that your card is not in good order, it may be a system failure of some sort".*

Rael:             *"OK I'll pay cash then" (Rael says with a sarcastic grin)*

Assistant        *"Sorry sir we don't take cash, do you have a G4-453.2 revision 3.15 compatible mobile phone? You can pay with that."*

Rael:             *"No" (he shouts defiantly)*

Assistant        *"We could transfer the money by direct wire if you want."*

Rael:             *"OK then."*

Assistant        *"If you'd just like to complete this form."*

*Rael is presented with a small form with a few boxes on it and proceeds to complete it...*

Rael:             *"There you are."*

Assistant        *"Oh you haven't completed the form sir, let me turn to page two for you, oh, and I notice you haven't told us your mother's maiden name either, please fill that in as well."*

Rael:             *"I didn't notice any other pages."*

Assistant        *"Oh no sir, they only appear at the end of the previous page. We don't like to warn you of the other pages, it's kind of our little surprise."*

Rael:             *"So how many 'surprise pages' are there?"*

Assistant        *"Seven sir, but most of them aren't as short as this one, you'll be pleased to know, most of the others have lots of questions and adverts about things we think you'd like to buy from other stores in our group. Like on page four you can buy great new ring holos for your G4-453.2 revision 3.15 compatible mobile phone. Oh, sorry sir, I forgot you haven't got one of those have you, oh would you like to get one sir?" (Smiling eagerly)*

Rael:             *"No, forget it!" (Rael interrupts before staring at the burger in front of him, the ketchup seeping out invitingly)*

As he looks up Rael sees an image of his bother John in the glass screen, John has his cheque book ready to bail Real out, just as he had done so many times in Rael's teenage years. Rael stares, transfixed, the image of John looked at him, gave a brief and subtle acknowledgement with his eyes, then slowly turned around and left the booth...

Taxi driver: *"It's a tricky business checking out, isn't it, I thought you were doing really well, most people would have given up long before that. Of course, only about 30% of people make it to the end of the checkout. Still it's much better than it was on the old web even the best sites like Amazon only had completion rates of about %14 back in the hype days of 99 (Fischer, 1999). Oh, sorry that was a bit formal wasn't it — I used to be a professor but the hours got too unsociable. If you want I'll pay for it all on my phone, we can add it to your taxi fare."* After overcoming his surprise...

Rael: *"Great, let's go."*

Taxi driver: *"All we need to do now is find our way out."*

Rael: *"Can't be that hard, can it?"*

Taxi driver: *"No, I can usually make it in 15 minutes."*

Rael: *"**15 minutes!** Just to get out!"* (Rael yells, noticing the panic in his voice).

Taxi driver: *"Yeh, I used to be able to do it in 10 before they figured out how to disable the back beacons."*

Rael: *"Back beacons, what are they?"*

Taxi driver: *"They're little beacons that you dropped to help find you way out". Of course, in the beginning, it was even easier to get out, they even had signs that changed colour when you had visited a department, but then the marketing departments decided they wanted to keep you as long a possible so that you'll spend more, and the interior designers said that anyway, the signs changing colour the way they did, was restricting their creativity. That's why everyone started using beacons."*

Rael: *"I feel like a blind man".*

Taxi driver: *"Great, you know the way out then".*

Rael: *"What do you mean?"*

Taxi driver: *"Oh, sorry, yeh, slight misunderstanding, the err, blind people, they get special access, they can get in and out no problem — it's the law you*

know. Those blind people they really know how to stick up for their rights.”

Rael: “Right, that’s it, I’m going out through a window”.

Taxi driver: “You can’t they’re all locked”.

Rael pulled the catch on the nearest window which opened with consummate ease, before the smug yet respectful grin had time disappear from Rael’s face he realized that there was another window behind it — this one **was** locked...

Rael: “I’m sick of this, why don’t they organise this place according to what the customers want?”

Taxi driver: “I guess they could but that would mean they’d have to ask the customers what they wanted and do some testing with them, but hardly anyone does that anymore.”

Rael: “Why not?”

Taxi driver: “Interesting question that, I asked the same thing, some of the store designers claim to be experts and say they just know what the customers want (like the old web designers), others say its too expensive and too time consuming, me — I think they’re just scared. I mean, would you want ‘common people’ telling you your store was really badly designed?”

Rael catches a glimpse of the car park just before it begins to spiral out of this site. As he runs towards it, he trips and feels himself flying forward, suddenly, the taxi driver awakens Rael as the car pulls sharply to a standstill...

Taxi driver: “Sir, sir, we are here, sorry about the braking sir this isn’t my regular car.”

Rael: “Urr, where are we?” (Rael rubs his eyes)

Taxi driver: “Here, we’re here at the drive-through”

Rael reflects on his terrible dream and how he came to be so tired in the first place, those endless arguments with the web coders, graphic designers, delivery managers and marketers, it wasn’t easy being ‘Rael — the internet usability kid’. After obtaining his Burger with the universal efficiency that drive-through fast food restaurants provide their customers, Rael returned to the taxi and ate his burger during the remainder of his journey. The taxi pulled up outside the office where his meeting was to take place and the taxi driver turned to him slowly and said; “Here we are sir, how would you like to pay smart card or phone?”

oooOooo

## Epilogue

Obviously, if a director (or more correctly, vice president) of a successful drive through fast food chain proposed changing to anything like the business format Rael was confronted with, their exit from the board room would be faster than you could take delivery of a cheeseburger, medium fries and choice of drink. Yet, a quick surf round the WWW is all the evidence you need to conclude that many e-tailers believe that such approaches are likely to succeed!

It seems that the paradigm shift discussed earlier was a little too radical for the world; maybe it is also true on the web that you have to give the customers what they want, instead of forcing on them the whims of graphic designers, web coders, e-marketers and other would be visionaries. Maybe this is one of the 'secret ideas' that the clicks and mortar companies have brought within them from the **real** world of retailing; it seems obvious that if any e-venture is to succeed:

a good customer proposition combined with a usable and acceptable site  
is as requisite as a competent business plan and keeping an eye on the bottom line.

This combination of a good customer proposition combined with a usable and acceptable site is what the trendy B2C pundits often refer to as the "user experience", and as such, it is worth examining the two components that comprise this concept. The customer proposition is, of course, the intellectual property that differentiates a business in the market place. It is the very essence of what a business is and no formulas exist for manufacturing one — it is a highly creative process. However, it is reasonable to say that every business has to have at least one good customer proposition, and as commentators like Porter (2001) and Gowans (2000) argue, and the likes of boo.com and letsbuyit.com have demonstrated; the fact that a product or service is offered 'on-line' is generally not enough in itself to constitute a sufficiently differentiated customer proposition. Conversely, clicks and mortar companies have, by definition, proven that they have at least one good proposition. And paradoxically, it is these companies that seem to understand better that some unique aspect of the 'on-line' capability must be leveraged for the benefit of the customer (to deliver a service that is impossible through more traditional channels).

The second component of the user experience is a usable and acceptable web site. During the 40 years or so that we have been designing information systems (IS) it has been a constant struggle to make them usable and acceptable to their users — today 70-80% of all IS (web based or otherwise) still fail to deliver the forecast business benefits, and one of the main reasons cited for this remains the lack of user centring (Eason, 1988 and Chaffey & Hickie, 1999). However, whilst this is a challenging problem, unlike the customer proposition, guidelines (from eg, Shneiderman, 1997 and Norman, 1988 & 1992) do in fact exist to aid e-venturers here, indeed there are even web specific guidelines (from eg, Nielsen, 2000). Moreover, these guidelines are; cheap, quick and easy to access; they are also proven to work (Shneiderman, 1997, Norman, 1988 & 1992 and Nielsen, 2000). Given the critical dependency that e-tailers have on their core IS (their web site) it would seem obvious that they would make good use of such guidelines, yet we find the opposite is more often the case. Again, a quick surf round the WWW is enough evidence to demonstrate that many e-tailers have failed to make use of

this valuable resource. Is this a case of ignorance? Perhaps, but it is also the case that the opinion remains within the virtual worlds of such e-tailers, and those agencies who supply their technology, that users (or customers) should think and operate so differently that these guidelines are redundant, or even counter productive. These opinions originated amongst web pioneers (eg, Shirky, 1999) and despite all of the evidence to the contrary (provided by eg, Nielsen, 2000 and User Interface Engineering, 2000) it seems that these e-venturers are willing to take these opinions with them to the liquidator. Conversely, an examination of easyjet.com or dell.com will demonstrate how (at least some of) the clicks and mortar businesses seem to have brought with them another 'secret idea' — what in the old days used to be called "user-centred design".

In summary, whilst it is probably true that clicks and mortar companies are advantaged in that they:

- have greater business experience and stability,
- an existing logistics infrastructure,
- possibly an established (and trusted) brand with all the loyalty that brings, and
- may be able to benefit from a multi-channel integrated selling approach.

Perhaps one of the reasons for their disproportionate success in the web arena is simply their ability to think and act in a customer oriented manner, their knowledge that at the end of the day it is the customer (or user) who will determine their failure or success.

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