

Chapter 18



OBSESSIVE PRODUCTIVITY

(ORIGINALLY CURATED 2014)



What's the Trend?

Thanks to our reduced attention spans and always-on technology, many people are developing a built-in necessity to be productive in every moment, a tendency that is rapidly evolving into an obsession that underpins every brand interaction or other experience they have.

Several years ago an anthropologist named Wednesday Martin stumbled across a secret only rich Manhattan-based moms were supposed to know. In researching her book *Primates of Park Avenue*, she learned of an inside trick these moms were passing along to each other to optimize their upcoming trips with kids to Walt Disney World.

These moms were all raving about a service that would pair rich families with a disabled tour guide, who could pose as a member of their family to help them cut lines and avoid waiting. These “black-market tour guides” as one article called them, were the ultimate status symbol. As Martin shared in an interview, “when you’re doing it, you’re affirming that you are one of the privileged insiders who has and shared this information.”

It was a perfect example of a trend I first noticed and wrote about in 2014—our growing obsession with constantly being productive. At any given time, a quick search of top trending articles on any online business publication will typically include at least one article on how to get more done by learning from the productivity secrets of the world’s most creative/successful/rich/busy people. The tips range from the obvious (spend less time on Facebook!) to the difficult-but-aspirational (Inbox Zero!).

The more we see and hear about this combination of emerging tools and expert techniques, the more urgency there is to make sure we don’t accidentally waste a single moment. The new heroes of the business world have become those entrepreneurs who have embraced the outsourced lifestyle, reclaimed their time, and now live on an island, implementing their four-hour workweeks.

For the rest of the world, this ambition translates into smaller but equally important lifestyle choices. This chapter focuses on several of them, starting with a new breed of devoted curators who are bringing back our allegiances to the individual who delivers our news—a loyalty that seemed dead after the decline of the evening new broadcasters.

Let’s focus on two of the most popular of these curators.

Curators of the Mind

Dave Pell has been called the “Internet’s managing editor” and has built a loyal subscriber base for his daily email, curating the 10 most fascinating items of the day from the “swirling nightmare of information quicksand” that is the web. Praised for his wit and originality, author and writer Maria Konnikova endorses his site as a “consistently informative and entertaining guide to some of the best stories on the web, with a healthy mix of news you should know, want to know, and prefer to pretend you didn’t read.”

Another site with a similarly loyal fan base is Brain Pickings by Maria Popova. Her site promises to offer an “inventory of cross-disciplinary interestingness, spanning art, science, design, history, philosophy, and more.” The weekly updates she writes are meaningful, multifaceted—and

long. Both she and Dave Pell are curating and commenting on media in a form that is intentionally different than a hastily posted tweet.

Great curation takes time—and when you build trust from an audience in the hours you take to create value from a curation, then you can offer value while saving people time in the process. It is this combination that fits perfectly into a world of media consumers who are obsessive about their productivity.

On the surface, it may seem like a contradiction that people with this obsession would spend time reading a lengthy piece of content (as most of these curated updates tend to be). Yet the truth is, productivity is not about reading as little as possible. There is far more value in spending a good 20 minutes reading something which has been specifically curated to cut out all the noise—so your time spent reading isn't wasted.

App-timizing Your Time

It is this desire to avoid having any time wasted that lies at the heart of this trend. As a result, it's not surprising to see rapid growth in all kinds of innovative new apps, services, and startups focused on finding new ways to help us value our time by automating things we used to waste time doing ourselves.

Dozens of food services brands from Starbucks to Domino's Pizza let customers use apps to order meals on their mobile devices and either pick up food or have it delivered. Grocery brands from Fresh Direct in the United States to Sainsbury in the United Kingdom offer online grocery shopping with either home delivery or "click and collect," where customers can simply pick up groceries from the curb, never setting foot outside their cars.

Plenty of startups outside the world of food are also offering new ways for us to optimize our time by taking on tasks that most of us hate doing ourselves.

WinIt, for example, allows you to more quickly and easily dispute and potentially win dismissal of your New York City parking tickets via a smart mobile app. The LucyPhone app offers a service that takes over once you connect to a company's call center, and then provides an

automated call back when it's your turn to speak with an agent. The site boasts that it has cumulatively saved its users over 80 years of time so far.

In financial services, this trend towards apps saving customers time while banking has become so common that apps for banks are taken for granted today, considered as commonplace and expected as ATMs. The most popular non-gaming apps today are almost exclusively focused on productivity, and almost all the innovation in banking and financial services apps is entirely aimed at the same thing.

Internet of (Productive) Things

Back in 2014, I also wrote about a product called the Narrative camera, which was designed for “life logging,” the idea of having a camera on for an entire day to capture all of your daily activities and actually realize the long-standing human desire for a photographic memory.

For some people, that product may have seemed like the ultimate digital life invasion gone too far, but in the past year plenty of other products tailored for a more mainstream audience were introduced – all promising to optimize your time by automating the mundane.

Digital life optimizer products were introduced to allow everything from automatically scanning barcodes in the kitchen to add to a shopping list (Hiku) to an industry-redefining smart bottle that uses a unique system of pods to deliver vitamins and flavors to water (Lifefuels). Dozens of styles of noise-canceling headphones come into the market each season, all promising to offer a respite from the noisy distracting world and aid productivity. In the health and wellness space, hundreds of sensors and wearables are now on the market to track everything from our quality and quantity of sleep to the optimal posture when sitting in a chair at the office—all to help us be more productive.

As this intersection of wearable devices and smart products continues to grow, the range of products will allow anyone to further explore and feed their obsession with productivity in an even more automated way.

Zero UI

One consistent priority for any design team is to reduce the amount of friction involved in using any interface. Usually, this involves trying hard to achieve a Zen simplicity that balances utility with intuitive design. In 2015, a new movement, ambitiously known as Zero UI, started to take shape. Zero UI is a philosophy of design that is based on the prediction that artificial intelligence (AI), smart bots, and voice commands will soon make the idea of what we typically think of as an interface irrelevant.

When you can talk to a computer as easily as to a person, who needs an interface anyway?

Some of the biggest brands in technology, including Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Apple all have large investments in trying to realize the real potential of AI and Zero UI first. Microsoft's version is called Cortana, Apple has Siri, and Amazon has Alexa, the voice behind the company's newly launched, always-listening device the Echo. Even Facebook launched early tests in 2015 with M, a digital personal assistant built into its messaging app.

Microsoft Research NExT general manager Lily Cheng describes the potential for all this innovation with an interesting prediction: "Our online conversations will increasingly be mediated by conversation assistants who will help us laugh and be more productive. This will lead us to question and blur the way we think about our computers, phones, and our memories and relationships."

The idea of Zero UI is also impacting designs from those with smaller ambitions than bringing AI to the world. Digit, for example, is an app that you can connect to your bank account to transfer money quickly and in a more automated way. ClassDojo is an app that allows teachers to easily send instant messages to parents. Peter is an "AI-based business lawyer" that offers simple legal tasks through automated messages (like reminders of tax numbers and managing signoffs).

Each of these tools are experimenting with the idea of integrating into the tools you use every day (like email) instead of giving you yet another app to download. It's a sign of the post-app world, where interfaces are a thing of the past, and the mission is to make us more productive than ever.

Why It Matters

As technology gets smarter at predicting exactly what we need and startups focus their innovations on saving us time and energy, more consumers expect this type of productivity and look for it everywhere. This desire has transformed productivity from a nice-to-have aspiration to a full-blown obsession.

In 2016, we will see more technology catering to this obsession and brands updating or changing the way that they interact and engage with consumers to find more ways to optimize their experiences and respect consumers' need for productivity. Speed itself will also become a serious competitive advantage for some brands, making them worthy of charging a premium for consumers whose number-one concern is exactly how much time they will be able to save in any moment, or how useful they can make that time by taking care of multiple things at once.

Who Should Use This Trend?

If you can consider the processes that are inherent parts of your business, you can start to realize which brands are ripe for utilizing this trend as well. Ecommerce brands that drive people through an online experience in order to buy can use this trend to optimize their process. Teams working to develop products or packaging can consider how every step of the consumer experience is impacted by time and what they can do to optimize that.

How to Use This Trend

- ✓ **Fix your inefficiencies** - As consumers become more conscious of every aspect of their interactions with brands, their patience for any sort of delay or inefficient interface gets lower and lower. The result is that customers can be won or lost in microseconds, as they sometimes make decisions, based on the smallest of details, to abandon interactions or

not to reward businesses with their time or money.

- ✓ **Promise and deliver speed** - When productivity is the ultimate goal for consumers, speed becomes the ultimate competitive advantage. What this means is that the brands who will find new ways to save their customers time will be the preferred choices for all kinds of products and services. The Amazon Prime standard of one-click service is now the standard by which other brands are measured, which means you either need to deliver on this extreme expectation for productivity, or offer a compelling reason why slowing down may be necessary or desirable.