DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

An interview with

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15 Startups to Watch and What Their Value Proposition Can Teach Your Business

Every year, digital innovation maintains its amazing momentum. New technology trends emerge that captivate our attention. Existing breakthroughs that we've watched grow and develop finally tip into market proliferation. In just the last year alone, we've witnessed huge strides in augmented and virtual reality, artificial intelligence, robotics, and transportation. All of these new areas of innovation are blurring the line between science fiction and reality. Yet, they're just some of the trends changing everything in our work and life.

So, who are the companies changing the world right now? Honestly, the answer is more than we can include in one list. There are incredible companies all over the world paving the way for revolutions and evolutions in every industry. I assembled a short list of "15 Startups to Watch," but there are so many more that deserve attention.

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The moment Elon Musk introduced the concept of Hyperloop - a new high-speed transportation initiative where passengers and goods are propelled in capsules through tubes via linear induction motors and air compressors - entrepreneurs and investors jumped on board. For now, two companies to watch are Hyperloop-One and Hyperloop Technologies (HTT). Hyperloop-One demonstrated an open air test in the Nevada desert recently. At the same time, HTT revealed the creation of a new composite that is purportedly 10x stronger than steel and 5x lighter than aluminum. Both companies are very young, but determined to deliver operational transportation systems as soon as 2020.

Imagine having access to all of the hottest startups and products before the rest of the world knew about them, including the major investors. That's Product Hunt. It's a Reddit-like community of hyperactive users who all work in new tech in some shape or form. They submit their latest discoveries or creations and let the community take it from there. Every day, visitors "up-vote" new products, startups, apps, podcasts, books and websites to collaboratively define what's most popular that day. Because the community is so high-energy and committed, they help shape tech trends much in the same way Reddit helps push internet memes. If you want to learn more about the startup world, it's also a great place to simply hang out. For example, many entrepreneurs, investors, authors and well-known tech personalities host AMAs (ask me anything) to engage in dynamic conversations.

In an era of social media, the entire ecosystem for content, from product to consumption to community, has been upended. While many different social networks offer platforms for users to share their ideas, creativity and content, few facilitate the monetization of that work. Patreon hopes to solve that problem by offering creators a platform to earn recurring venue. It operates a bit like Kickstarter where creators, musicians, poets, painters, photographers, et al., design a home page and create subscription packages to earn support. In times where artistry's value is compromised by disruptive models, Patreon is a refreshing way to empower artists to build and monetize engaged communities.

This is yet another one of those "Uber of…" startups but wow if it doesn't really nail one of life's everyday challenges. Because of apps like Uber and Tinder, I believe that consumers are becoming accidental narcissists. They're taught to expect things (products, services, information, people) to come to them on demand. Filld is basically an on-demand app for gasoline. Need fuel while you're at work or home and don't have time to hit the station? Then open up the app, select your location, choose your fuel type and leave your cap open. The service will arrive within a specific window and take care of the rest. Depending on where you live, there are other options too, including WeFuel and Purple.

This one I'm sure is going to sound strange, but give it a minute. If you've ever communicated with someone who lives an active digital lifestyle, GIFs[a] are a normal way of sharing thoughts and reactions without having to explain them in your own words. More so, GIFs make the moment that much more exceptional. Giphy is a search engine for GIFs to help you find the right one for the right moment quickly. But that's not the only reason why it's on this list. It's a platform for bringing people who communicate via GIFs together. It's everyone from everyday media to bloggers to digital storytellers to me and you. More so, it's a community for GIF creators and fans. This stands to become something much more and perhaps an aggregator for other mainstream social networks.

[a] GIF is an image format that allows creation of short video clips and animations

Apple's most innovative app of the year in 2015, Workflow, is a very creative solution to complex or semi-complex tasks. Workflow offers a visual, drag and drop way of connecting apps and actions together to automate things you do on your device. If you're familiar with "If This Then That (aka IFTTT), it's a DIY way of automating the things you often do that require multiple steps. You can then turn those processes into an app so you can launch it directly. There's also a gallery of complex or popular workflows for you to use and further customize.

Postmates can be described as either the Uber for your favorite local businesses or the UPS for on-demand delivery logistics. It's actually both. If you want something delivered from a supporting local store, use the app. At the same time, Postmates offers an API and platform for local retailers, from small businesses to Starbucks and Wholefoods, to allow you to order your goods and have Postmates fulfill the order.

Sano Intelligence is building a wearable sensor that measures metabolic activity. Founder Ashwin Pushpala set out to build a device that continuously monitors blood glucose level in what's described as a completely painless manner. The challenge with glucose monitoring is that diabetics have to test glucose levels by pricking their finger for a drop of blood several times per day. Then they insert a strip into a machine to get a read out. In an Uber-ized, GIF-driven world - where half of Silicon Valley either wears an Apple or Android watch - clearly there are other ways to do this. Specifically, Sano is developing a small patch that continuously monitors your bloodstream. Essentially it's monitoring for abnormalities and then alerts you and your doctor accordingly when attention is needed.

When Twitter co-founder Ev Williams left, he did so with a new but familiar plan that was the opposite approach to brevity. Rather than hold people to 140 characters, he created a platform for long-form sharing called Medium. For those who don't remember, Ev and company built one of the earliest blogging platform, Blogger, which was later acquired by Google. This time around, Medium set out to provide a media platform for thoughtful content creators and a social network to bring people, shared interests and conversation together around content. The platform aimed to democratize media and publishing for everyone (which was, essentially, the original promise of blogs and social media). But with its clean and elegant design, the simplicity it offered in creating and publishing content, and a strong network of thoughtful and prolific users, Medium is a media platform and a democratized media outlet at the same time. It's lured some of the most influential people in every industry to share their thoughts, experiences, views, reactions, et al., to important moments, events and news. Medium has also thrived by creating a variety of popular channels that feature hand-selected content from its staff of editorial curators.

The paradox of choice can be time consuming and even overwhelming. Spending time searching out products or options and then reading countless reviews to narrow decisions is taxing at the very least. Co-founded by Garret Camp (co-founder of Uber) and former Zynga executive Robin Chan, Operator is a pioneering entrant to the emerging concierge category. Operator balances human capital and AI to create "operators" as a service for everyday consumers. Operator looks and feels like a messaging app but it's essentially a personalized shopping service. You simply say what it is you need and an operator begins to work on it for you. Essentially it combines the functionality of a task rabbit, virtual assistant, chat bot and personal shopper to help you find or do what you're in the market for. Chan shared the premise for Operator to Techinsider recently, saying "We always dreamed of this as a routing layer or switchboard for goods and services."

French startup Snips is an app that organizes your meeting locations, reservations and recent visits so you can find everywhere you need to be in one simple place. Once you install the app, Snips goes through pretty much everything on your phone to learn all it can about you. And it continues to do so the more you use it. The goal is to allow Snips' AI engine to seamlessly connect the dots between what you want to do and how to do it. In its initial incarnation, the app aims to help you while you're on the move. You can instantly find any location you need, from meeting addresses and reservations, to a friend's house or local restaurant/bar. Automatically, Snips will show you every way you can get to your destination. Over time, Snips will learn how you move through your city and suggest where you might be heading next. The app also keeps a timeline of where you've been. Note, the company is very serious about personal data and privacy and insists you and only you are in control.

I've been watching AR darling MagicLeap for a couple of years now. They're not alone in the game nor are they the only one to watch in this space. Meta is also making incredible leaps in an augmented and real world. And by incredible, I mean groundbreaking. Based in my home city of Redwood City, Meta has developed an innovative headset that promotes a 90-degree field of view with the type of design and usability attention to detail that you might expect to see from Apple. But it's more than a headset (tethered to a PC). It's a complete ecosystem that also allows for developers to build applications that enable complete immersion. For example, rather than interacting with a large monitor, the entire headset field of view becomes the screen. You can also maneuver through the applications using natural gestures rather than having to learn new behaviors. More so, the platform recognizes those gestures to not only navigate objects but also grab, move and manipulate them. This is 'Minority Report' but in real or augmented life. Developers are building apps now for almost every industry you can imagine, ranging from manufacturing, design, engineering, medicine, modeling and education.

No customer will ever claim that they "loved calling customer service!". Unfortunately, many of us have reluctant relationships with companies we do business with. Think about your wireless or cable provider or any airline for that matter. The thought of having to call them to complain, get support or cancel the service creates an incredible and unnecessary amount of anxiety in all of us. Until companies figure out that customers are important and that call centers are not cost centers (they're investments), there's a startup that's ready to help you. Meet @Service. Using the app, consumers tell @Service the problem that they're having, provide details/documents, their goals, and the app then reaches out to the business on your behalf. They make no guarantees, they take on "reasonable" cases, but they do save you the hassle of spending your valuable time, energy and emotions having to deal with broken systems and inhumane contact centers.

Ha. If you're thinking what I'm thinking when you hear the name, it's not that at all! Burner is a new startup that lets people create new "burner" phone numbers for voice, SMS, and MMS communications. While this isn't new, burner phones were often linked to dubious dealings, but this is about helping people control privacy and conversations in ephemeral engagements/scenarios. For instance, Burner is gaining big traction among buyers and sellers on ebay, Craigslist and Airbnb hosts who'd rather not give out their personal numbers. Oh, it's useful for Tinder and other dating apps too (you scoundrels!) Here's where the service gets even more interesting. Like all good platform plays, Burner introduced plug-ins for Slack and Dropbox so that small businesses or entrepreneurs can use them for online customer support and feedback lines. What does that look like? For example, with Evernote, users can create an auto-reply bot so if an Airbnb guest texts "what's the wi-fi?," it can respond automatically. Users can connect their number with Dropbox to auto-save voicemails and messages with pictures, route and reply to text messages, and sync with Google and back-up your texts and contacts to a spreadsheet even when you burn the number.

Visiting a doctor is never an appealing prospect, but Heal can take some of the pain out of it, Heal is an app that allows people to find doctors and specialists who do house calls on-demand. The ambitious new service already has a network of 100 (and growing) doctors in Los Angeles County, Orange County, San Francisco and Silicon Valley who offer house calls at a flat rate of $99 per patient. Most Anthem and Blue Shield PPO members are typically charged the same co-pay as when they go into their doctor's office. This type of approachability has the power to change the practice of medicine from one of being arduous and something that you have to do when you're really sick, to that of being preventative and even proactive. Imagine people willingly getting their health checked to bolster their fitness regime. Imagine people who get that flu shot just because it was easy. It's apps like this that start to change behavior in ways that benefit the user…and the app.

Travel startups go back to the days of Web 1.0. And just when you think that you've seen it all in travel sites and apps, here comes Lola. Lola is part of a new breed of intelligent agent-powered services that combines artificial intelligence and human power to provide personalized, concierge-like level of personalized travel. Think Kayak, travel agent, and personal assistant all wrapped together with an elegant UI. In fact, the co-founder of Lola is the co-founder of Kayak. While AI will over time learn and then predict behaviors in travel so that information can be accessed quickly (flight changes, for instance), the app is also enabling agents to focus on providing exceptional customer service. In an interview with VentureBeat, co-founder English vocalized a recurring theme with many of today's startups…service. "What we're doing now with Lola is we're not bringing back the old school travel agent," he explained "We're trying to reinvent the travel agency."

What do you think of this list? What did we miss? Let us know by contacting us at: brian@briansolis.com

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In this edition, Brian shares his perspective on 15 startups to watch this year.

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