

Tulip Retail Toronto venture empowers store associates in an omnichannel world

In today's retail world, consumers often arrive in a store knowing more about a product or service than the associate they're talking to does. This knowledge gap leaves store associates scrambling to provide shoppers with the information and advice they want — and creates an unfulfilling shopping experience.

Toronto-based start-up Tulip Retail aims to change all that. Tulip's suite of tablet- and mobile-based software applications helps store staff keep pace with today's well-informed consumers. The company was launched in 2013 by Chief Executive Officer Ali Asaria, who leveraged both the technology and the developer talent from his first start-up, Canadian online retailer Well.ca. Today Tulip employs 20 people in Toronto and Waterloo.

"We believe the best thing retailers can do in the current environment is invest in their front-line staff," says Asaria. "Tulip wants to give the best online tools to those front-line store associates and help them deliver an outstanding customer experience."

Tulip's tool allows store staff to instantly access a wealth of product and customer information directly from a tablet or smartphone. Depending on each retailer's needs, the tool houses a number of modules that access product information, customer information, a knowledge base and can include a mobile POS.

An SDK (software development kit) allows retailers to develop additional custom applications that extend the functionality of their staff's tablets or customize the functionality and user experience of their solution. Store associates can check product features, prices and availability during their conversation with customers. They can use the tablets to show the customer product videos, compare prices with other retailers, complete the sale and even arrange for pick-up or home delivery.

"We want to bring the online shopping experience to the store," says Asaria, "from the ability to compare features and prices to deciding how you want to receive your purchase. By putting that information into each store associate's hands, retailers can completely transform the in-store experience." Breaking into the retail market is notoriously tough. Asaria, however, has found retailers to be quite interested in Tulip's products. "It's always a good sign when you go in and everyone around the table is leaning forward to get a better look," he says.

In just a little over a year, Tulip has built strong relationships with several Canadian retailers and has engaged many of them to discuss product deployments. Asaria is especially proud of Tulip's major deployment in every Wi-Fi-enabled Toys "R" Us store in Canada. "We have found that Tulip really comes into its own with high-margin purchases that require a lot of product information and more complex decision making. In the case of Toys "R" Us, we find our tools are especially helpful when customers are looking at baby strollers and similar products," he says. "That's an area where customers often have a lot of questions and are looking for advice. Sporting goods and fashion apparel are similar, in that they're retail segments where customers often visit stores to get advice from sales associates and to hold in their hands future purchases."

Tulip's aim, says Asaria, is to make sure front-line staff can answer all the customer's questions to build trust and keep them in the store — rather than going back home to do more research and price comparisons. "If you can keep them in the store, you have a better chance of conversion," he says. The tool goes beyond improving customer interaction. Data from the tablets is fed back to the company for analysis, enabling retailers to see what their staff does with the tablets — and more importantly, what actions help close the sale.

"Our tool helps retailers identify their best salespeople and understand how they're successful," says Asaria. "That knowledge can then be spread to the rest of the front line."

Retailers concerned about taking on a major new technology investment can rest easy: Tulip's tools don't require a big back-office spend. "Retailers are very risk-averse, so all of our processes are designed to mitigate risk," says Asaria. "I tell customers, 'I need six stores and three connections to your back-office systems.' In six weeks Tulip can put tablets in their stores and begin discovering what's useful and meaningful for their customers."

Already buoyed by its work with Toys "R" Us and recent deployments with Frank & Oak and GameStop, Tulip has its sights set on continued growth with major retailers. The company is opening a New York office, establishing a dedicated sales team and taking its products to trade shows. "We have a compelling story to tell that resonates with every retailer - shopping has fundamentally changed, and what we do next to the store experience will determine retailing success for years to come," says Asaria. "We think we've got a good future ahead of us."



Via Informatics Toronto-based start-up takes the data analytics revolution to the streets

Data analytics continues to revolutionize retail and other industries around the world — but Mossab Basir, co-founder of Toronto-based start-up Via Informatics, thinks many organizations are being left behind.

“The online world has tons of data available to it. Companies know who’s coming to their sites, where they’re from, how often they visit and how long they stay — and much, much more, allowing them to better understand their customers,” says Basir. “But when you look at the offline world, at the bricks-and-mortar shops where 90 percent of commerce still happens, that world has little to no data. That’s a problem — and an opportunity.”

In the real — offline — world, retailers and others still rely on traditional data-gathering methods, such as postal-code exit surveys, license-plate surveys in parking lots and ‘lawnchair analytics’ with car-counting students. “And my favourite, the ‘creepy van parked at intersections, counting traffic’” jokes Basir.

These efforts do provide companies with some useful information — but the insights gained pale in comparison to what’s possible online. Enter Via Informatics. “What we’ve done is take the data expectations that were built in the online world and figured out how to do it in the real world, by creating a crowd-sourced location analytics platform,” says Basir. Via Informatics uncovers what Basir calls “invisible data,” and uses that data to help make sense of the consuming, driving, walking, running, watching, eating and buying that goes on in the real world.

“We started with anonymous, bulk positioning cellphone data,” says Basir, “and we’ve added geostamped social media data, Wi-Fi hotspot data, and various energy and Bluetooth sensor data that’s available.” The company’s analytics engine currently collects and processes over 50 million location events from cellular, social and Wi-Fi networks per day, or 675 ‘pings’ per second. And this is only the start: the company is looking at adding new data sources all the time, from wearable tech to POS systems to mobile apps and browsers. The more layers they can add, Basir says, the better the picture that emerges.

Via Informatics’ LocationGenius® business-intelligence platform uses this data to deliver insights for all kinds of entities, from a coffee shop to a shopping mall, a neighbourhood to a city. Basir takes a typical trade area as an example:

“A shopping mall will look at license plates and postal codes to help gauge where their customers come from, and its tenants will use that information to determine what to stock, how to merchandise, and how to target promotions,” he says. “What we can do is use our engine to help companies look beyond traditional data to determine who their real customers are. And this can have profound implications for retailers.”

A retailer may discover that its customers come from unexpected parts of the city, for example. This can help the company refine its marketing efforts — and make changes to what it stocks to better appeal to its actual customer base. “We’re not trying to replace traditional data-gathering methods,” says Basir. “We want to provide companies with a lens they simply don’t have today.”

Via Informatics was established late 2012, and it formally incorporated in the spring of 2013. Its eight-person team operates out of offices in downtown Toronto and in Waterloo. The company currently works with retailers, real estate firms and public sector organizations.

Basir says that organizations with an online presence who have seen what data can achieve are keenly aware of the how their offline data falls short, and are eager to see how Via Informatics can help close the gap. “They appreciate the size of our data set. They get answers to their questions, and our solutions lead them to ask better questions. We’ve evolved in response, too: I’d say 40 percent of our [data] queries today began as customer questions,” says Basir.

Buyers also appreciate the scalability of Via Informatics’ solution — and the savings involved. “Traditional methods of data gathering are costly,” remarks Basir. “A license plate survey can cost 10 to 15 thousand. Our solution costs a fraction of that and delivers equal — if not better — data.”

Looking forward, Basir says keeping up with growth is the main challenge. Digesting the huge volumes of data can be tough, and the systems required to do so are complex and expensive. Convincing traditional and highly skeptical retailers to try Via Informatics’ solutions can be difficult — the company often provides a free data “teaser” to retailers to help overcome their intrinsic resistance to change. And seeing is believing. “Once retailers and other organizations see what we can provide to them, they start to understand how it can transform how they do business,” says Basir.

A very powerful example, we find, is a coffee shop being able to uncover that if they opened up one hour earlier on weekdays, they could address hundreds of people walking by before they typically open.

