In line with mobile ordering's rise to stardom: Interview with Prask Sutton, founder of Onvi

You no longer need to be McDonald's or similar to roll out mobile ordering. In fact, it's become the standard across chain and independent restaurants due to COVID.

Maddyness interviewed Prask Sutton, founder and CEO of mobile order and pay solution Onvi. He talks about making things better for a struggling hospitality industry, how he maintains his organisation's 'in it together' mentality, and how data can improve customer experience in restaurants, cafes and hotels.

[Maddyness] Tell us what Onvi does and how it came about in your own words. Did you have expertise and experience in the field you chose? Have you had to pivot at any point?

Onvi is a mobile Order and Pay solution allowing customers to easily place orders and pay for them on their own devices, whether that's for Order to Table, Order to Room (in hotels), Pickup or Delivery.

In the early days of the company, we were trying to create a frictionless way for consumers to engage with brands. We'd use ad hoc Wi-Fi networks to deliver app-like content, without consumers having to download anything, have a specific type of device, or even Internet access. It was an economical and scalable way for brands to engage people with what they already had in their pockets.

We had early success developing Wi-Fi applications for brands such as Capital One, BMW, IMG, Telefónica, Jaguar and Samsung.

The Onvi experience quickly evolved to a cloud-based solution, resulting in us delivering what's now the default Wi-Fi experience at the O2 Arena, the world's busiest music venue.

Things were going well, but we saw there was a specific type of user experience where our engagement numbers were way up. What we'd built was great for audiences engaging with content, but where people were flocking to it were situations where it wasn't about browsing or *nice to haves*, but where there was a clear consumer *need*. The market was telling us placing orders and accepting payments for food and beverage items was where we should be focussing our attention.

The space was ripe for it, with the existing mobile Order & Pay solutions falling far short of the mark.

What have been the biggest professional challenges during lockdown? (and have there been unexpected rays of sunshine?)

Pre-pandemic, we encouraged people to be in the office as much as possible to get that all-important face-to-face time, build rapport and develop a great culture built on team-working. This was so successful for us, creating an 'in it together' mentality with teams across the business working closely to solve

problems and develop fresh thinking. It means we've built a close-knit group who genuinely enjoy each other's company.

While people are successfully working from home in terms of the results they deliver, remote working has been a personal struggle for some. People miss the buzz and banter from being together in real life.

In terms of rays of sunshine, the pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated the take up of mobile ordering. We always knew it was going to happen, which is why we started doing what we do, but the penetration and usage are now probably three to five years ahead of where anyone predicted. We also get such great feedback from clients on how it's helping their businesses during the pandemic.

As a leader, have you successfully managed your (and your team's) mental resilience through lockdown?

As I mentioned, this is our biggest challenge during the lockdown and something we take really seriously. My (virtual) door is always open, and I have made it known to every single person at Onvi they can come to me if they want to talk through anything.

When the first lockdown started, I had weekly scheduled one-to-ones with every member of staff and took the view that over communicating was probably the best way to play it. Over time, most of the scheduled calls have fallen away, but in its place is an environment where our staff know (and do) get in touch with me whenever they want or need to, without hesitating.

At Onvi we offer an excellent healthcare package to our employees which includes services such as counselling and mental health care, so there are also professional places to turn to. The team has also been proactive in arranging virtual get-togethers and various mindfulness sessions.

We have a weekly 'town hall' hangout with the whole company so we can check in on work and priorities, but it usually evolves into more personal banter — which I encourage! We're a very sociable bunch and it's essential to try and maintain some normality.

How can restaurants make use of customer data? Are mobiles an anchor for this?

As mobile becomes a ubiquitous ordering channel, customer data from various streams can be connected like never before.

Operators will prioritise open-platform technology, where data can be shared between partners, to gain a holistic understanding of the customer experience. The CRM system will be able to connect to real-time ordering data, alongside data from Wi-Fi, social media, vouchers, loyalty and customer feedback to help enhance the customer experience in previously unrealised ways.

How come you said no to apps and decided to be web-based instead?

When we started with events and branded content, we knew apps would be a barrier. People have way too many apps on their phones already. Most of which they have probably only used once.

Do people really want the faff of downloading an app for every restaurant, cafe, pub, hotel, leisure attraction that they visit? No, especially if it's a one-off or impulse-driven engagement.

We've invested heavily in our design and technology to ensure we have the most intuitive, reliable and secure software solution on the market without the need for a cumbersome login process or downloading any apps.

If you're asking customers to download an app, there needs to be a good reason; something of realisable value in it for them.

What does future customer experience in restaurants look like?

The new payment habits formed from the pandemic mean that consumers don't just accept mobile ordering as a 'new norm', but actively embrace it. From a tech perspective, we'll see consumers demanding cutting-edge hospitality technology and expecting the same level of digital engagement they see from the retail sector.

One positive from the pandemic is it has bred innovation. Businesses doing well now are those who have ripped up their plans and reinvented themselves. We're seeing enterprise brands and independents develop meal kits and ready meals so they can continue to delight their customers through lockdowns.

Many pubs, already hubs of their communities, have begun selling groceries and household essentials. Innovative caterers and food trucks have teamed up with bars and pubs to offer "substantial meals".

All of this not only provides additional revenue streams, but taps into consumer demand for convenience and unique experiences. These are great initiatives giving these businesses USPs, which will keep them relevant and thriving long beyond COVID.

How has Onvi benefited some of the restaurants you work with? What kind of restaurants does it suit especially?

With the focus shifting towards mobile Order & Pay across the whole hospitality industry — and no longer just big, enterprise operators — we've honed our model, ensuring we also have the perfect solution for SMEs, opening us up to more revenue streams and markets.

A few years ago, unless you were Starbucks or McDonald's, you wouldn't have access to our level of top-quality software, but times are changing and we're at the forefront of that.

With our entire product on a single codebase, we've ensured all our operators, from single sites to global enterprise brands, receive the same quality of service and product. Now all our clients, no matter their scale, can benefit from the increased ATV, improved operational efficiencies and customer insights data that mobile brings.

We're equally as proud of every independent we work with as we are with brands like Crêpeaffaire, Patisserie Valerie and Pho.

And finally, a more personal question! We've started asking everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

From what I read, 4am yoga *is* traditional for many startups. Sorry to disappoint, but no mountaintop meditation as the sun rises for me. Don't get me wrong, I'd love that, and mornings start early as my five-year-old son seems unwilling to sleep much past 5am, but it's usual breakfast with the family, walking our German Shorthaired Pointer and catching up on the news — tech, trade and general; usually in that order.

We live in a very small village in West Sussex, so plenty of fresh, English countryside air, which is a great way to kickstart the brain and it's hard to feel anything but optimistic out here.

Weekdays, there's an early check-in with my co-founder and COO, Jon Clarke, followed by a quick C-Suite catchup, and then it's on to the day. Every day is different, and always packed full of trials and tribulations, highs and lows, but that's the pretty standard startup rollercoaster.

Work days are very long, but one of the upsides of working from home means being around the family more, and I always make time to get my son ready for school in the mornings and for bed in the evenings. Then it's usually more work, supper with my wife when we get to debrief each other on our days, followed by a bit more work and then bed.

Weekends aren't too different, but I manage to get some time in with friends and family around everything else. I was doing a lot of trail running pre-lockdown, as part of my commute, but don't get nearly as many miles in at the

moment. That's my big resolution for 2021: back on the trails for big runs. In or out of Onvi, there are always plenty of mountains to climb.

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