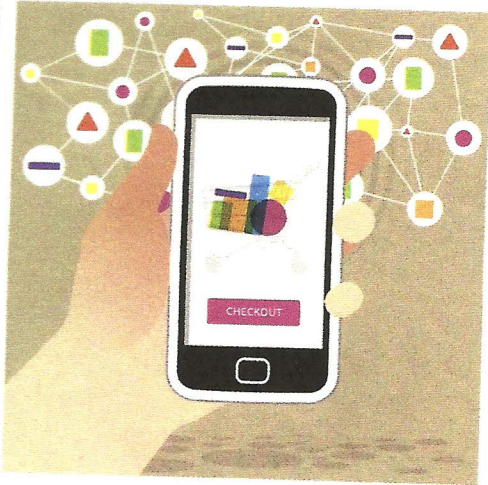


## CONNECTING WITH CUSTOMERS

### Even small businesses are using cutting-edge tools to their advantage.



Target shoppers can clip virtual coupons and share savings with their Facebook friends using Cartwheel, the retailer's custom app. Sephora shoppers can track and redeem rewards, and scan store products to access reviews using the store's Beauty Insider app. But businesses don't have to be behemoths to have their own apps these days.

Patrons at Val Lanes can download a free app that allows them to share a scorecard, book a lane or post comments to the fan wall of the family-owned bowling alley in West Des Moines, Iowa. Customers at Steve's Pizza can place orders, track rewards and access free online games with the South Florida restaurant's app.



"Small businesses are really savvy in that they connect with customers in a way that's useful and personal," says Ekaterina Walter, co-founder of Branderati and co-author of *The Power of Digital Storytelling: How to Use Visuals, Videos, and Social Media to Market Your Brand*. "It's utilitarian marketing, not just focused on the flashy stuff."



Tech companies are making it easier to expand those in-person connections online. Firms like Bizness Apps and AppsGeyser now allow small-business owners without a lot of programming experience or a big budget to create custom apps. (AppsGeyser is a free service that converts web content into an app and \$59 per month buys a mobile app package from Bizness Apps.) Other small-business owners are taking advantage of bonus features offered by companies (including the credit card processing firm Square) that allow them to create customized loyalty programs, instantaneously send email receipts and offer other electronic conveniences that keep digitally savvy customers coming back.



"You have to take every advantage you can to appeal to the younger market, which is a digital market," said Wes Parks, owner of Artisanal Photoworks in Southlake, Texas. "If you're going to do anything in the world of photography, everything's got to be digital and everything's got to be technologically savvy, including the way clients track rewards or get receipts."



And after using apps like Twitter and Instagram to share stories and photos with their friends, today's consumers are also eager to interact with their favorite retailers and neighborhood haunts in the same way, says Sarah Fishleder, whose newly launched WayScout app allows users to create guides offering advice to find everything from an area's best microbreweries to its tastiest gluten-free dishes. In fact, users can even create a guide that tracks a neighborhood's best selection of gluten-free beers.



"People want to find a way to emphasize the vibrancy of communities and tell a story about them," says Fishleder, who predicts an upsurge in apps that allow users to create and contribute unique content. "It's going to be a new way to engage both businesses and consumers."

—Charlene Oldham

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