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80% of urgent needs require a magic button

Research captures 486 retail tech moments and the meaning of "now"

Words by Kari Dean McCarthy
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Instant information, instant credit, instant connection, instant stuff on my doorstep.

Like interactivity, mobile, and "smart" technologies before it, "instant access" is becoming a consumer expectation, and it's expected to be worth billions.

"It's a mobile-driven shift, and everyone from retail to media is carving out a slice: HBO Now, Amazon Prime Now, Google Now, to name a few," said dscout research advisor Jaymie Wahlen.

Wahlen recently led a [study](#) to discover what might happen when people can instantly purchase and receive almost anything in the very moment they most need it. Over four days, dscout collected 486 of those moments.

Researching hypothetical situations is, of course, complicated.

The dscout research team started with a "mental prop" -- a "magic button" to help participants recognize and express when they had an urgent but unfulfillable want or need. Participants imagined the Record button on their mobile phone video camera was a magic button that could instantly purchase and deliver any product or service not otherwise unavailable to them in that moment.

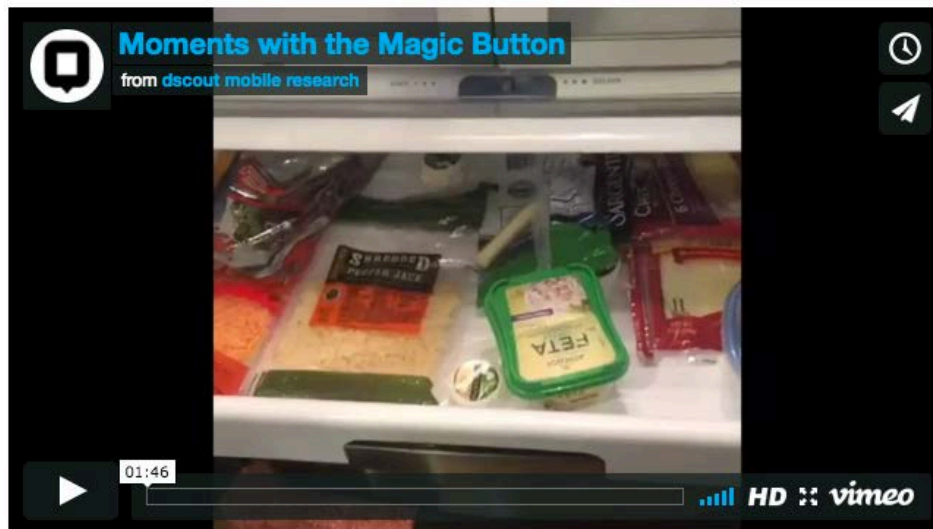
Researching behaviors in unidentified, unexpected, real-time situations is even more complicated.

Typical tools of the research trade -- interviews and observation -- fall short in those scenarios. Researchers can't be everywhere, all the time, and even if they were, they would probably get in the way. And participant recall? Rarely comprehensive or accurate. Thus the researchers

relied on the mobile phone's near omnipresence in participants' lives.

"It turns out that when you don't confine your participants to a lab, with only their memory to work with, they'll show you some fascinating parts of their day-to-day life," said Wahlen.

To keep research results relevant, Wahlen said, the "magic" powers of the button were limited to items actually for sale, somewhere, and which participants could pay for with their own bank account. Need an *Advil* while stuck at your kids' oboe concert? No problem. Need an *anvil* in your backyard, stat? Um, sure ... you could get that, too. But, no orders for Chris Hemsworth or clones. No flight to Westeros nor Bugatti to take your kids to school.



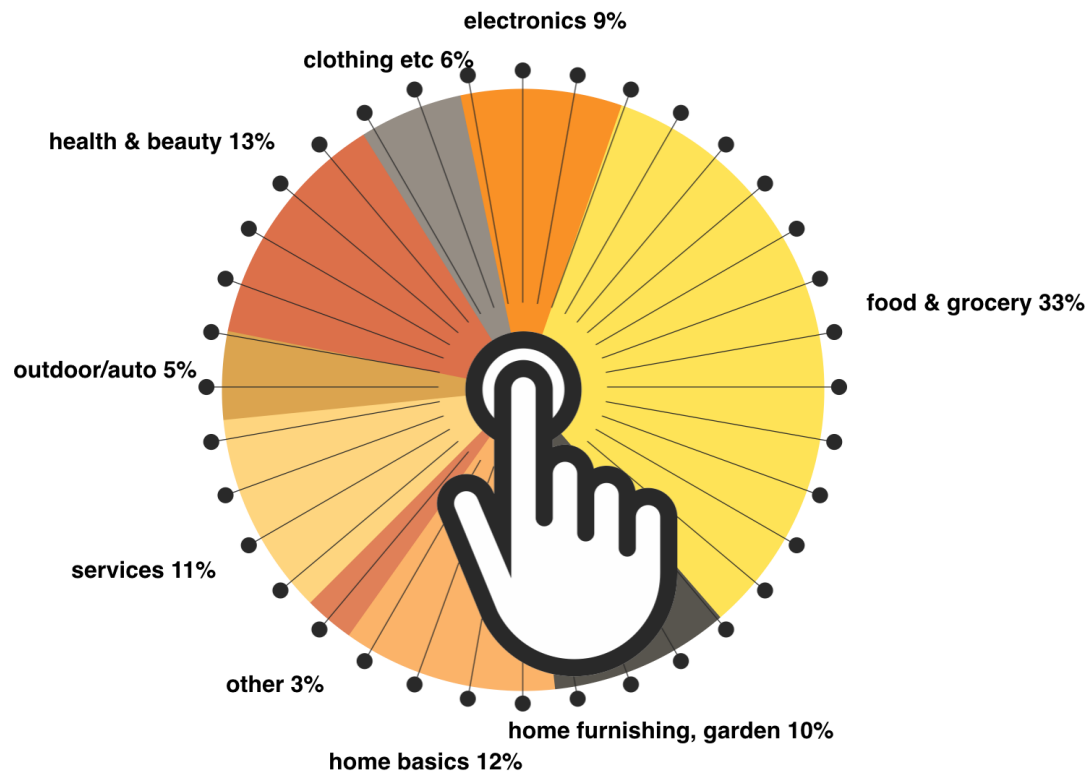
Magic Button scenarios from a scout perspective

Is an Anvil a Need? Or a Nice-to-Have?

dscout's study results showed 486 "magic button moments" submitted for an array of products and services, from diapers and a new driveway, to a nanny and Hamilton tickets.

"One woman had an urgent need for an anvil. That's kind of a long story," Wahlen joked.

Groceries, health and beauty, home supplies, and services topped the list of "need it now" categories.

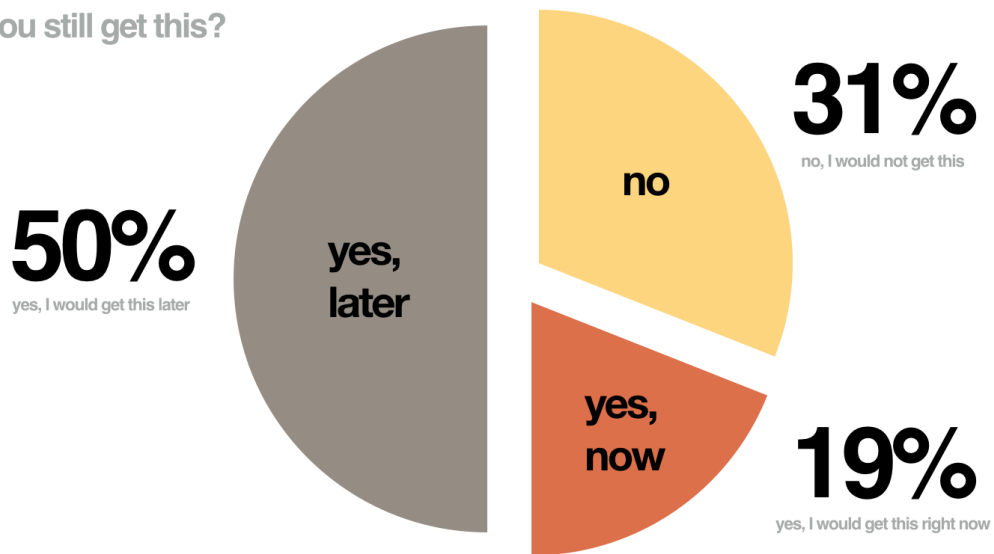


People reported that despite the lack of the magic button, they would purchase 20% of items they wished for ASAP. After all, when you need toilet paper right now, you will *still need* toilet paper once you can actually get to the store. The need is real and irreplaceable.

On the flipside, 80% of products and services needed would not be purchased any time soon because: no button. Plans for a delayed purchase plan, or a total lack of purchase intent, included: the need was short-lived, it was deemed not truly a need after all, the need was found to be easily remedied another way, or the specific purchase required more thought.

When now means now

Without the magic button,
would you still get this?



Breaking down the 80%:

About 50% of magic button moments were expected to lead to a purchase at some point in the future. Those items represented a longer-term need. (e.g., Toilet paper is running low, but not entirely gone. It would be nice to get the purchase taken care of now, and eventually you will.)

About 30% of the magic button moments would not lead to a purchase at all. For these products and services, participant said they would probably not make the purchase because the magic button concept had been integral to the purchase consideration (ex: Your house needs to be cleaned, and you'd sure like it done now. But absent a housecleaner ringing your doorbell right now, you'll just clean it yourself.)

"These are the impulse purchases for the world beyond the physical retail store. This gives us a window into how many more things people would be buying if the friction were reduced to zero," said dscout founder Michael Winnick.

Research results also showed two-thirds of those moments were experienced at home, though that may not be surprising; had a participant been out-and-about in their time of need, then instantly obtaining the item they needed may have required a stop at the store, not a magic button.

Who Would Make The Magic Button?

After a full week of pressing a magic button, each participant was asked to suggest who its maker might be. And, almost everyone said it would be Amazon.

People referred to general benefits like Amazon's supply chain and diverse inventory, but also the magical promise of drones, self-driving cars and other futuristic examples.

"A few participants pointed to its 'Dash' reordering button as a baby step toward the magic button concept," Wahlen said. "Ultimately people expressed confidence in Amazon's investment in innovation."

The "Now" economy"-- or as 1871 ceo Howard Tullman termed it, [the "Right Now" economy](#)" is one in which Amazon has shown a keen interest. Commenting on the results of the dscout study, Tullman offered his own assessment:

"I'm very excited about the Dash button--more than 100 brands have signed up. Once it's in place, it's almost impossible for competitors to displace it--especially for commodities, which we reorder virtually every week. It's much more than a baby step."

Amazon seems to have achieved an image as both a tech company and a retailer; no physical retailer has yet made that leap. After Amazon, even tech companies without a retail component were perceived as more likely than traditional retailers to offer a magic button: Google, Facebook Apple were mentioned more frequently than Walmart and Target.

That said, Walmart is more active than people may appreciate yet, according to Tullman.

"One area (not) really addressed is 'click and collect,' Tullman said. "More than 50% of Walmart's online orders are being picked up by the customer at the store after ordering, and Walmart's e-commerce is growing faster than Amazon's right now."

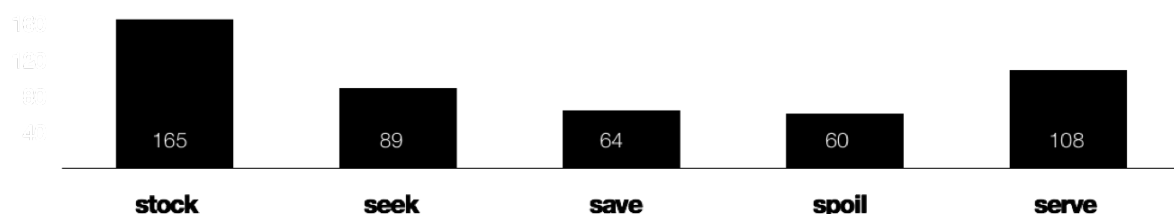
It appears that from a consumer perspective, however, the future of shopping may be in the hands of tech leaders more than those of retailers or even payment companies.

"We don't even see Visa or Mastercard there," said Michael Winnick. "It makes me reassess the value of things like the Dash button. It's like branded R&D. It captures the imagination of people around where retail is going."

The Five Types of "Now" Moments

Across the 486 moments, dscout researchers noted recurring themes around the perceived urgency of a need, and whether it was fleeting. Ultimately, they identified five modes according to purchase motivation: Stock, Seek, Save, Spoil, and Serve. [A download of more detailed results can be requested here](#), and [you can watch Wahlen leading the web clinic here](#).

Here's a brief overview:



Stock moments

We are not out of toilet paper yet, but we are down to just one roll.

- Not perceived as urgent or fleeting, but as a routine inconvenience on the participant's daily

to-do list.

- Players: PeaPod, FreshDirect, Instacart, Amazon Dash, Subscribe & Save

"A 'magic button' would add the right things, in the right amounts, at the right time," said Wahlen. "We see services jockeying to keep people stocked with recurring purchases in grocery, home products and health."

Seek moments

My old dog has special dietary needs, and I need to find exactly the right food.

- Not perceived as urgent or fleeting, but as a time-consuming or challenging purchase journey. Each purchase was expected to happen eventually, when there was time to tackle it.
- Players: Trunk Club, Bonobos, Stitch Fix, Operator.

"The market for seek is saturated with apparel services. Competitors join daily, but only 10% of the Seek moments we saw were related to apparel or jewelry; 34% of them in home furnishings and garden, and 24% in technology," Wahlen explained.

Save moments

It's 2am, my kid needs cough medicine, and the bottle is empty.

- Perceived as urgent and recurrent, and immediate access is problematic.
- Players: Amazon Prime Now

"These moments helped people recognized they'd have the same need again and so they should make the purchase anyway. More than half of people said they'd get the item later," Wahlen said.

Serve moments

"I was going to rake the leaves this afternoon, but I'm stuck at my kid's soccer practice."

- Perceived as immediate but not urgent needs; highly desirably but not essential. The impulse to buy is fleeting, then people decide they'll do it themselves.
- Players: Uber, Blue Apron, PostMates, Alfred, Taskrabbit, Thumbtack

"Delivering the service immediately is not as crucial as removing barriers to secure the purchase immediately--85% of Serve moments won't happen without a magic button," Wahlen added.

Spoil moments

"I'm watching the ball game and really want a Coke, but I'll miss the game if I go to the store."

- Perceived as a relatively simple, easy-to-find item that's needed immediately to enhance the moment, but the effort of procuring the item would ruin the moment.
- Players: GrubHub, Uber Eats, Drizly

"In spoil moments, 62% of the time people would not make the purchase without the button. The magic button enhances the moment by getting people exactly the product they want, and without it, they're left with an unmet desire," Wahlen said.

The Importance of Knowing Now

As more brands dip a toe into the on-demand pool, "immediacy" is becoming a business norm. Brand owners aware of this new space -- the *Now* space -- are faced with identifying the motivations behind the expectations packed into this tiny word. We can't deliver on an expectation that we don't fully understand. But we must; delivering on immediacy is one of today's big market shifts --and it will be tomorrow's, too.

It's always been a challenge to define *needs*. Today they face the same challenge to define *now*. And "now" is a need that consumers themselves cannot yet easily articulate. It is an idea that is at once obvious and shrouded in emotional and experiential complexity.

Are all "now" moments the same? The humans experiencing them, after all, are not. Those who get creative in how they gain insight into these evolving behaviors, who respond with empathy, and lead with risk-taking innovation--will build the strongest relationship with the people they serve.

And the time to begin building that understanding, empathy and relationship is, of course, *right now*.



Kari Dean McCarthy

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