Creative Dining & Shopping in the 1.5 m world

One of the things that make Amsterdam a great city to live and work in is the amazing mixing of business with residential spaces. Any person living or working in the city is a short walk away from an amazing restaurant or a boutique to buy a nice present for their family member.

Amsterdam is also a very crowded city with limited space, narrow sidewalks, and tiny restaurants and showrooms. This is especially true for smaller entrepreneurs that cannot afford a large space, and yet sell some of the best locally made products, whether it's food or fashion.

The Challenge

Coronavirus has meant that until a medical intervention is discovered and distributed equitably, the society, at large, has to come to terms with maintaining a 1.5m distance with everyone else as the new normal. In a small and dense city like Amsterdam, this has huge challenges — in shopping — you cannot browse the aisles without coming into contact with others. At restaurants — you cannot easily just walk-in and find a table for you and your partner — this was a difficult task at popular restaurants and cafes even before the virus struck.

The Proposal

My proposal calls for the city to get creative by implementing a solution based around technology that is also accessible to people that are not comfortable with using apps, such as people with disabilities or people that are not tech-savvy.

The city should deploy smart displays at various locations around the city that would provide a list of the businesses in the street along with how crowded they are currently. This should be build on top of a 'Virtual Amsterdam' platform that is an electronic map of the city's streets and businesses.

These displays are not very different from the various electronic displays that are currently in use throughout the city, but should be used for informational and crowd control purposes rather than for advertising.

The 'busy-ness' data could be sourced using footfall counting sensors that do not collect any data as they don't need an app or any kind of login, and thus, don't even need to be very accurate. The city could make them available to businesses and install them at various places on the streets just like current technology for measuring vehicular and bicycle traffic.

Being a smart-city, the technology platform will be the place where business owners could provide some more information about their business viz. their tagline (cuisine for restaurants) and perhaps even a short description of what they sell. This could then be displayed alongside the current wait time to enter and other information such as the telephone number and website. Most of this data is already available to the KvK.

So, no apps?

The proposal does not eliminate the need for apps. Rather, this is a way to build a city-managed platform that is open to everyone (and not just big tech companies) and that also helps the city in bringing tourism back to life.

Apps will be even more important for the successful implementation of the 1.5m society. Residents can download just one app, certified by the city, that would help them connect directly with businesses.

Using an app, residents would be able to leverage this platform by planning their visits around lesser busy times, and also spend less time finding what they want, and thus help in reducing crowding.

In the longer term, the city could expand the platform by including waitlist management for restaurants and shops, and also enable payments such that contact time between restaurants and customers is minimized; customers can safely pay electronically at the time of pickup or when they finish dining.

An app could also help residents connect with the vulnerable neighbors to minimize their trips and help by picking up things along the way.

Benefits

For businesses, the platform reduces the cost and complexity to go digital. At present, there are challenges for businesses to build their website, market it, and make sure that it is secure. With Amsterdam's own digital platform, businesses can work with a level playing field that is not driven by advertising.

For tourists, the smart boards and the app would help make Amsterdam more appealing and discoverable.

For residents, the app is the way to help everyone by reducing crowding. This way, residents can also connect with and support their favorite businesses. The app could be expanded to also not just help businesses but also improve social connections. Imagine, businesses being able to maximize customer happiness by sharing resources like terrace space.

For the city, the platform helps in leveling the playing field and helping businesses become more digital.

Who am I

I have been a resident of Amsterdam for 10 years. I have my favorite shops for various things and I'd like them to succeed. Also, I have been developing apps for a lot of years. While I cannot build this on my own, I think this is the right direction to invest in for this amazing city, and I would be able to lend my experience with building apps and platforms to whoever would like to collaborate on this.