Here’s How Uber’s Co-Founder Is Going to Take on Amazon and eBay

Garrett Camp's new app, Operator, takes aim at e-commerce giants like Amazon and eBay

by Brad Stone
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Garrett Camp made a fortune helping people navigate the digital world, then a far larger fortune helping them navigate the physical one. The Canadian-born Camp co-founded StumbleUpon, the early online links hub, in 2002, sold it to eBay for $75 million in 2007, and bought it back for 40 percent less in 2009. That same year, it occurred to him that many taxi drivers tooling around in search of their next fares had smartphones in their pockets and could be easily summoned by an app that made use of GPS data. The idea became Uber, and co-founder Camp is now worth an estimated $5.3 billion. As Uber’s chairman, he doesn’t have an operational role at the company, so he had enough time last year to found the tech industry incubator Expa, spread lavishly across a top floor of a downtown San Francisco office tower.

Now Camp is ready to introduce what he calls his next big idea: Operator, a company that aims to synthesize navigation of the digital and physical worlds. Its app uses a combination of algorithms and human assistants to
connect consumers with retail workers who can help them shop. For example, if a potential customer wants to replace a particular pair of shoes, she can snap a photo of the old ones and upload it to the app, which routes the request to a relevant store that’s also using the app. There, a salesperson can respond with info, prices, or photos of merchandise. The customer can then buy her replacement shoes through the app and arrange delivery, Camp says. “Our goal is to help people find the right product within the right store and to do it interactively,” he says. “It’s like Siri, but with a person on the other end.”

Operator lets consumers send requests for items and swap messages with participating merchants. They can browse available wares from stores on a discovery page that looks more like a conventional e-commerce site. To help stores understand each person’s taste, user profiles will display an individual’s stated product preferences and past purchases. And, like Uber, everyone rates his experiences. A “Buy it now” button lets customers complete transactions directly on the app. So far, Operator isn’t charging fees. Camp wouldn’t say how he plans to make money on it.

Operator brings Camp into the crowded world of e-commerce, a field dominated by such giants as Amazon.com, eBay, and Walmart.com. The challenges are immense: To gain traction, Operator must get enough customers and merchants using its apps in a dizzying array of competitive product categories, from furniture to shoes. Because the company is also hiring its own operators to field some customer requests, it will have much higher expenses than a typical startup in the low-margin retail business. Camp says human expertise and taste will give him an advantage that algorithms can’t match when dealing with clothes and home décor, which are tough to categorize comprehensively and display online. He’s also betting that retail workers will have ample downtime to field requests from his app. Operator isn’t ready to name any retail partners, however, and stores may be less enthusiastic.

Camp conceived of Operator in 2013 with co-founder Robin Chan during a research trip to Asia. Camp and Chan, a former Zynga executive and early investor in Xiaomi, saw a ton of Chinese consumers making retail purchases using messaging apps.
They also talked about the absence of telephone operators in the smartphone era. “We wondered, Why can’t you press an app and there’s a network of human beings that help you?” says Chan, now Operator’s chief executive officer.

The co-founders say their service will go live in New York and San Francisco later this spring but wouldn’t say how many operators they’ll have on hand. They say they have a few ideas about how to make money down the line. “If there’s real transaction volume going through this, we will find ways to build a business on it,” says Josh Elman of Greylock Partners, which, along with Camp’s Expa, led a $10 million round of funding for Operator.

One of the biggest challenges may be making sure shoppers can get their purchases delivered. So far, Camp and Chan plan to rely on individual stores to work that out with customers. One obvious possibility is for Operator to rely on Uber drivers for delivery. “There are many options and scenarios where the companies can cooperate,” says Chan, who, in keeping with Silicon Valley’s post-Uber bravado, calls Operator a $100 billion idea. Camp is less outwardly bullish. “I can never predict these things. I couldn’t predict the success of Uber,” he says. “Let’s put it this way: It looks more like Uber than a traditional social media site.”