

Business profile

Alexander Graf

Entrepreneur, e-commerce expert, co-founder and CEO of Spryker Systems

On Amazon & Goats



Alexander Graf (*1980) is one of Germany's leading e-commerce experts and a digital entrepreneur of more than a decade's standing. His widely-read blog [Kassenzone](#) ("The Check-Out Area") has kicked off many a debate among commerce professionals about the relevance and prospects of business models in the age of Amazon – preferably working with a goat on analogies. Since 2014, Alexander has been CEO of Spryker Systems, a company he set up with the Berlin early-stage investor Project A Ventures to offer agile shop technology.

Alexander's track record as an entrepreneur is impressive: he has built up or consulted on over a dozen new online shopping business models, setting up

and developing the eTribes consultancy to a highly successful network for innovative e-commerce services and respected experts. It was this eTribes landscape where the core team of the Otto Group

start-up Collins (known for the About You platform) has its origins, for instance. A popular conference speaker, Alexander has also authored a range of specialist publications, most notably the definitive *The E-Commerce Book*, one of the most successful works of its topic in Germany (and available in English). Alexander's academic background lies in business studies and information technology; with a focus on innovation and marketing at Kiel University and the Autonomous University of Madrid.

In the future, what will people do in the city's High Streets? And what will they not do there anymore?

Thus far, town and city centres have been spaces for in-store retailers to present their products, inspire shoppers, and make sales. Yet Amazon, Zalando, and even newcomers such as About You are already far better at doing all of this online. So if stores are to stop the slide into becoming little more than pick-up shops for online consumers, they need to change. Many online retailers are opening stores, but as marketing rather than sales channels. People will always want to go into town. The question is what to offer them in stores beyond large showrooms.


Amazon has already changed retail dramatically: what else is in store?

Amazon thinks holistically. Shoppers are, for example, already using it as a product search engine; many have made it their primary supplier. In the same way that Google is most people's gateway to the internet, Amazon is becoming the gateway to shopping. This means that Amazon can set and shape standards online – everything from prices to the role of intelligent services, and the effect of this power is now hitting the business models of retailers and manufacturers with full force. New customer-loyalty schemes such as Amazon Prime and the Dash button show unmistakably just how thickly Amazon is weaving its web around consumers – and how attractive and individually targeted other offers will need to be in order to draw buyers back out of this cocoon.

What is the role of data in all of this? Is it even possible for anyone to compete with Amazon & Co?

While Amazon does indeed have huge quantities of data at its disposal, analysing and translating data into new services or marketing is actually not particularly difficult: it will soon become a standard business process. After the first generation of software, which managed and rationalised data, a new generation of applications is entering tech-driven organisations. This generation is making data into the basis of business intelligence and allows continuous evolution. Software will become the core of every business model and as important as the people who create and work with it.

How long before “GAFA” companies will be taken over by a new generation themselves?

 It's probably all going to happen more quickly than we can imagine. Only recently, the US telecoms group Verizon bought one-time contender Yahoo – adding it to another shrunken colossus, AOL. A decade back, Google rocketed past Yahoo and off into the distance driven by consistent use of data intelligence. So while we never know what will happen with GAFA companies, what we do know is that the status quo is always volatile.

Which developments in tech are you currently most excited by?

In e-commerce, I'm watching virtual reality and voice recognition: I cannot imagine a future in which we have to pick up a tablet computer to order a product. I'm also reading a lot about artificial intelligence at the moment and am becoming increasingly fascinated by it.

Where do you see exciting new strategies within German commerce companies?

Wherever the overarching strategic imperative is to Do First – i.e. wherever top management has understood that strategies in digital business can only be created by real-world testing. If we go back to the Greek root of the word – stratós, or “army” – then strategy in commerce today is not about commanding your forces to engage an enemy, but about sending them out to reconnoitre the battlefield as thoroughly as possible.

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