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Instacart: Insta-success or Insta-failure? The Fight for Survival[[1]](#endnote-1)

Fariss Terry Mousa and Sarah Dodson wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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If anyone could relate to the struggles of entrepreneurship, it seemed that Apoorva Mehta could. Born in India and raised in Canada, Mehta had a background in engineering from the University of Waterloo. His resume included engineering work at BlackBerry Limited, Qualcomm Technologies Inc., and, more recently, Apple Inc., where he had helped develop the company’s fulfillment distribution system. While he had experienced successes throughout his career, the 33-year-old had struggled to stay challenged at these companies, and he decided to venture into the world of entrepreneurship. After working through 20 failed start-ups, Mehta finally found success in 2012 with the start-up company Maplebear Inc. (Instacart).[[2]](#endnote-2)

Mehta conceived the concept for Instacart when he stepped back and asked himself what problem he could solve that he truly cared about, and the painful process of grocery shopping came to mind. As the rest of the world had innovated toward convenience and adapted to advancements in technology, the grocery industry in the United States had remained stagnant. At the time, the movement toward online grocery shopping was slowly taking form. For Mehta, it was the right time to develop an application that connected consumers to their preferred grocery stores and paired them with personal shoppers who picked and delivered their groceries. Boasting fast delivery of orders and partnerships with multiple grocery store chains, Instacart steadily realized year-over-year growth and remained a strong competitor in the US grocery delivery market, often holding a majority of the market share.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As Instacart realized success in a steadily growing online grocery industry, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in March 2020 and dramatically boosted the growth of the industry. Many companies struggled to handle the massive industry growth resulting from the pandemic, and Instacart suddenly faced challenges to its position as a competitive leader from both a price and customer service perspective. At the same time, it was also attempting to mitigate issues that had caused its brand image to suffer. As the pandemic created a new normal for societal shopping habits, would Instacart be able to overcome its challenges and retain its competitive advantage as a leader in the online US grocery industry?

Industry Profile and Economics

A desire for convenience and flexibility had led to recent shifts in consumer tastes and preferences, and along with the price and quality of grocery items supported the demand for online grocery shopping in the United States.[[4]](#endnote-4) The proportion of grocery shoppers who shopped online at least once a year had grown from 3.9 per cent in 2007 to 23.4 per cent in 2017.[[5]](#endnote-5) In 2018, US online grocery sales totalled US$23.9 billion,[[6]](#endnote-6) only 1.6 per cent of total grocery sales. However, that was a 70 per cent increase from 2017, which had seen $17.0 billion in sales. Between 2016 and 2018, the online grocery sales market had doubled. US market trends supported year-over-year growth, contributed to a 15 per cent increase in 2019, and indicated continued stable growth moving forward.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Following the impact of COVID-19 in early 2020, consumers’ preference for online grocery delivery overtook the expected stable growth that had been forecasted for the industry, shattering it. Sales in the US grocery delivery industry skyrocketed. During the pandemic, consumers strongly desired to ensure the safety of their homes and to have the hassle-free experience of online grocery shopping. The pandemic dramatically affected US grocery delivery services such as Instacart, which in the first two weeks of April 2020 alone suddenly faced a demand that equalled a 450 per cent increase in sales compared to December 2019. This increased demand was not likely to weaken in the near future; online grocery sales were expected to grow 40 per cent in 2020.[[8]](#endnote-8) As the pandemic faded, the US industry was still projected to be worth as much as $100 billion, about 20 per cent of all grocery spending, by 2025.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Key Competitors

Instacart’s key competitors within the grocery delivery market were Shipt, Amazon.com Inc. (Amazon)’s Amazon Fresh, Walmart Inc. (Walmart), Fresh Direct LLC (FreshDirect), and Postmates Inc. (Postmates). Webvan had been one of the first companies to attempt online grocery delivery but quickly failed and went out of business.

In January 2019, Instacart led the US grocery delivery market in revenue, holding 68.6 per cent of the share, while Shipt followed with 22.4 per cent and AmazonFresh trailed with 9.0 per cent.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Shipt

Shipt was a web platform and app-based grocery delivery service owned by the Target Corporation (Target) that allowed consumers to order groceries and other essentials and have them delivered to their doors. Shipt provided the convenience of same-day delivery and partnered with a variety of stores (e.g., LIDL, Costco, Piggly Wiggly, Safeway) to provide consumers with choice. Unlike other grocery delivery services, Shipt required consumers to purchase monthly or annual memberships before they could place orders. A consumer would need to make at least one order per month for the membership price to be worthwhile.[[11]](#endnote-11) However, this had recently changed, so that a customer no longer needed to be a member to order. A customer could either pay a $10 dollar delivery fee for each order they placed or use Shipt Passes to waive the cost of the delivery.

Amazon Fresh

E-commerce giant Amazon, based in Seattle, Washington, had expanded over the years with multiple subsidiaries. Amazon was often considered one of the largest competitors a company would have to face, and this was no different for Instacart. One Amazon subsidiary that posed a major threat to Instacart was Amazon Fresh, a web platform and app-based grocery delivery service offered in major cities around the United States and specific cities worldwide. The Amazon Fresh service was originally available for $14.99 per month in addition to an Amazon Prime membership fee. However, in late 2019, The company made Amazon Fresh available to US Prime members for free. Amazon acquired Whole Foods Market Inc. (Whole Foods) and offered a wide product selection at reasonable prices that were either in line with or lower than those at Whole Foods or other higher-end grocery stores. Order delivery was consistently on time. Unlike its competitors, Amazon Fresh fulfilled orders from a warehouse rather than a local store; alcoholic beverages were not offered with this grocery delivery service. All items ordered were packed in large cardboard boxes and, when necessary, insulated bags. This could be a negative point for some consumers due to the environmental footprint involved in using the service.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Walmart

Walmart was a US multinational retail corporation that offered discount savings in a variety of areas for the average consumer. Founded in 1962 by Sam Walton, Walmart was the world’s largest company by revenue, at $548 billion as of 2019.[[13]](#endnote-13) Boasting multiple operating divisions, Walmart was organized into four different divisions: Walmart US, Walmart International, Sam’s Club, and Global e-commerce. One of the top competitors to Amazon, Walmart also boasted same-day delivery or free two-day shipping on orders placed on its app. With at least 11,500 stores in 27 countries and e-commerce in 10 countries, Walmart was a key competitor for Instacart. It provided a simple, free app that allowed customers to shop conveniently, using their electronic devices, and to either have items delivered to them or pick them up in a store.[[14]](#endnote-14) Customers were also able to order their groceries through the app and either schedule a time to pick them up at their local stores or, depending upon their location, have them delivered to their homes. Walmart displayed and offered item prices as they were displayed on store shelves, with no additional mark-ups. Walmart had invested in a strong information technology system that allowed customers to see, in real time, what was in stock and that suggested substitutions if an item was out of stock. Additionally, Walmart’s personal grocery shoppers used electronic scanners that directed them to suitable replacements if items were not available when they were picking an order. Walmart had a solid training platform that all employees went through prior to starting their jobs, and the culture and expectations for top-quality performance were laid out from the start.[[15]](#endnote-15)

FreshDirect

FreshDirect was a web platform and app-based grocery delivery service headquartered in New York. Founded in 1999, it was the newest online fresh food retailer among its competitors, and it offered services in five states in the north-eastern United States, including in major metropolitan areas like New York City, Philadelphia, and, more recently, Washington DC. FreshDirect provided its service for free but charged notable delivery fees on all orders. Consumers were able to purchase DeliveryPass memberships that allowed them to receive unlimited free deliveries for the time of their memberships. Express same-day delivery was also an option but was limited to a select assortment of products and only in certain locations. Unlike its competitors, FreshDirect operated and filled orders from its fulfillment centres as opposed to brick-and-mortar stores or warehouses. Orders were packed in boxes and then delivered to consumers by refrigerated trucks. Like Instacart, FreshDirect had experienced delays in order delivery time and item availability that were related to the pandemic.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Postmates

Postmates was a delivery app that allowed consumers to order items from mobile devices and have them delivered to their doors. Founded in San Francisco in 2011, the app was designed to act like a “remote control for your city” by allowing consumers to order food, groceries, and other services directly to their doors.[[17]](#endnote-17) Unlike Instacart, Postmates aimed to provide consumers with the ability to purchase anything they might desire and have it delivered straight to their doors. It had been known to deliver groceries, food, pharmaceutical items, liquor, electronics, and other items. Postmates’s delivery fees were known to be slightly more expensive than those of most delivery apps; it added “variable percentage-based service fees” that were applied to the purchase price of the items on top of delivery fees that could range from $0.99−$3.99 for partner merchants and $5.99−$9.99 for all other merchants. Like many other competitors, it waived these fees if a consumer was willing to pay a monthly membership fee. Other perks included with memberships were things such as exclusive offers, giveaways, and peak-hour deliveries with no delivery hikes.[[18]](#endnote-18) Like Instacart, Postmates operated a very simple, easy-to-use platform for Android and iOS devices.

Webvan: Not the First Time We Try Grocery Delivery

Webvan was an online grocery delivery business that filed for bankruptcy in June 2001 after only three years in business. Headquartered in Foster City, California, the small company of 3,500 employees delivered grocery products to customers’ homes within a 30-minute window chosen by the customer, typically one day after each order was placed.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Webvan’s business model was focused on high-quality products, low prices, and the convenience of allowing customers to shop for groceries from the comfort of their homes.

Within the first few months after its launch, Webvan raised $375 million in its November 1999 initial public offering. [[20]](#endnote-20) Quickly after raising these funds, Webvan utilized the money to further expand into new territories while simultaneously building over 26 distribution centres, investing in highly automated information systems, and purchasing a fleet of trucks for deliveries. Webvan’s founder, Louis Borders, had founded the Borders bookstore chain and become familiar with handling book deliveries through online orders, but he had minimal knowledge of the grocery industry. Delivering fresh food was vastly different from delivering books, and Borders struggled to adapt to a different market base.[[21]](#endnote-21) Webvan continued to push forward with expansions and mergers in the hope of becoming a leading force in online distribution for all industry areas, not just grocery. However, almost as quickly as it had appeared, Webvan disappeared after three short years.

Instacart: History, Business model, Growth, and Challenges

Fast forward from the Webvan failure in 2001 to the year 2012: Mehta had pushed through a magnitude of dead-end start-up businesses before finally finding one that took hold. Two of the 20 businesses Mehta had tried to start prior to Instacart were an advertising network for social gaming companies and a social network system for lawyers. After grappling with these failures over the years, Mehta had reached a point where he considered quitting entrepreneurship. He made one last analysis of the reasons his ideas were failing, and it finally occurred to him that they were not solving problems. At this point, the idea for Instacart took shape: one of the most notable problems Mehta had experienced was finding the time to go to the grocery store, particularly when he was working long hours at Amazon. Mehta created his own app for Instacart and tested the app through his own purchases until it was ready for market.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Mehta started the slow process of searching for investors, which involved many attempts that proved to be unsuccessful. Finally, an investor who had previously turned him down received a case of beer Mehta had sent from his app after their earlier meeting. It was based on that act that the investor reconsidered Mehta’s idea, and other investors began to join in. Mehta launched Instacart in 2012 in San Francisco. After only two years, the company had gained $40 million and had confirmed the success of its business model in its first market. Instacart then expanded to 17 different locations within the United States and Canada. In March 2017, Instacart raised $400 million in funding at a valuation of $3.4 billion. By February 2018, the company had raised an additional $200 million and increased its value by $2 billion. In 2018, Instacart formed multiple partnerships with companies including Hy-Vee Inc., The Fresh Market Inc., and Walmart Canada, all while touting itself as a retailer’s “best friend.”[[23]](#endnote-23) After raising an additional $600 million in funding, the company was valued at $7.9 billion in 2018. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, there was an increase in the number of people staying home, due to lockdowns, and the grocery delivery service’s popularity grew exponentially—as did Instacart’s valuation. As of June 2020, Instacart’s valuation hit $13.7 billion, a level that investors had not expected to see until 2025.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Instacart had a solid, proven simple business model, and this was likely a key element in the company’s success. Instacart shoppers provided same-day grocery delivery service, delivering groceries to the consumers’ doorsteps using an app that was compatible on both Android and iOS devices. Consumers used the app to place their orders for the grocery items they desired, and once their orders were placed, personal shoppers visited local grocery stores and retrieved the items on the lists. The items were then delivered the same day, as ordered, to consumers’ doorsteps. Instacart even offered one-hour delivery times for certain areas. It was a fast, simple process that utilized partnerships with local grocery stores, such as Whole Foods, Safeway Inc., Costco Wholesale Corporation, and Trader Joe’s.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Aside from these differentiators related to service, speed, and convenience, Instacart’s partnerships with local grocery stores provided additional revenue for the stores while also making use of an excellent e-commerce channel. The company’s value proposition was centred on its top-rated, simple-to-use ordering platform and its exceptional customer service. Instacart had one other method for creating value for its customers: transparent pricing, which enabled comparisons between one grocery store and another. The app would clearly note if specific products were priced higher at one store than at another—or if they were priced higher at multiple stores—in order to provide customers the comfort of having some control over the cost of the items they were purchasing.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Revenues for Instacart were generated in the following ways: first, through a mark-up on store prices for items; second, through a delivery fee charged for items ordered; third, through placement charges, which were fees charged to stores for placing ads or having a certain location in the app; and, finally, through yearly membership fees, which were not actually required but that paid for themselves through discounted delivery fees for those customers who chose to purchase an annual membership.[[27]](#endnote-27) In terms of costs related to the customer, it was expected that customers would give a gratuity.

Despite its success, Instacart was not without its troubles.

As the company was learning how to deal with changes in demand and in the economy, COVID-19 swept the world, changing how business would be done for a while. The pandemic challenged Instacart’s performance around customer service and brought to light some unfortunate weak business practices. To meet the high demand during the pandemic, Instacart had hired over 100,000 new workers and planned to hire an additional 200,000. However, retaining these shoppers proved difficult, as many worked only part-time for low pay and tips and, as they were considered contract workers, were not eligible to receive benefits. As the pandemic created chaos within the population, Instacart faced yet another challenge from its workers: strikes. Workers demanded that Instacart provide them with hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, and essential worker wage increases to protect them during the pandemic. They also asked that hazard pay of $5 be added to every order.[[28]](#endnote-28) As Instacart handled the negative media attention regarding its unhappy workforce, another issue arose from the large hiring spree. The high turnover was creating inconsistencies in the quality of the output from the shoppers, and this negatively affected customers’ experience and drove down customer satisfaction. On top of that, Instacart’s easy-to-use platform was frustrating shoppers, as items customers wanted were out of stock, and no substitution suggestions were provided to help the shoppers replace these items. Shoppers were left to think for themselves. To add complexity to an evolving customer service nightmare, consumers complained that personal shoppers had found ways to work around the system and steal their groceries by charging the consumers without delivering to them.[[29]](#endnote-29)Consumers took to social media platforms such as Twitter to voice their dissatisfaction with the company’s poor service and to complain about slow delivery times that were far from the expected “same-day” delivery. Suddenly, the positive growth Instacart was realizing started turning into a customer-relationship disaster.[[30]](#endnote-30) Instacart had to focus its efforts on reducing brand negativity and rebuilding customer relationships and trust while also planning for the possibility that the growth it was experiencing was just temporary. In an effort to rebuild customer relationships and reduce brand negativity, Instacart built up its customer service department from 1,200 to 18,000 care representatives and improved its app to make it simpler and more user-friendly.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Considered one of the most expensive options for home delivery, with its price mark-ups, monthly fees, and delivery charges, would Instacart be able to survive a downturn in US market growth and keep its competitive advantage? Could Instacart react appropriately and quickly enough to save its brand from becoming one of many boom-and-bust start-up companies? Would Instacart be a recipe for Insta-success or Insta-failure?

Endnotes

1. This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of Instacart or any of its employees. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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