

Review: No cash, cards, just mobile pay for a week

November 11 2014, by Anick Jesdanun



In this photo taken Friday, Oct. 17, 2014, Eddy Cue, Apple Senior Vice President of Internet Software and Services, demonstrates the new Apple Pay mobile payment system at a Whole Foods store in Cupertino, Calif. More than 200,000 payment locations in the U.S. are equipped to accept so-called contactless payments, including Apple Pay. Smaller merchants tend to be among the several millions that don't have the required equipment yet. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg, File)

Attempt at your own risk: For an entire week, I left all my cash and

credit cards at home to see how well wallet-free mobile services work in the real world.

Apple Pay has gotten a lot of attention in recent weeks, but there are lots of other mobile-payment systems. Google Wallet uses a similar wireless technology called NFC, or near-field communication. Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts have apps that generate bar codes for their stores. A phone case called LoopPay mimics the signals produced by card swipes so you can pay with your phone just about anywhere [credit cards](#) are accepted—at least in theory.

The good news: I didn't get arrested for failing to pay my debts. But on two occasions, friends had to buy me drinks. Another night I had to borrow \$43 in cash. And I prepaid for drinks at one bar because I couldn't leave a card to keep the tab open.

I know many people aren't going to leave all cash and cards behind, even once these payment systems take off. I did it to challenge myself to find places that accept them.

The week began on Sunday, Nov. 2, the day of the New York City Marathon. Apart from subway rides, my expenses were included with my \$227 registration fee. But when it came time to celebrate, drinks at the local bars I went to required cash or plastic. Fortunately, I was able to use the "I just ran a marathon" excuse on friends. Fast forward to the end of the week, when I used the last ride on my transit card and had to walk 2.5 miles home from a "Sesame Street" exhibit. By that time, I was already wearing jeans to work because I couldn't use coins for laundry.

Here, I go over some of the things I discovered.

Many smaller merchants probably have the right equipment, but don't know it.

MasterCard's Nearby app has a database of locations where customers have successfully made NFC payments, such as with Apple Pay, Google Wallet and Softcard. Included are a few dozen retail chains that have signed up with Apple Pay. But I was surprised to find many locally run restaurants, nail salons, doctor's offices and other smaller businesses, too.



In this Jan. 17, 2012 file photo, a person tries a smartphone loaded with Google Wallet at the National Retail Federation in New York. Apple Pay has gotten a lot of attention in recent weeks, but there are lots of other mobile-payment systems. Google Wallet uses a similar wireless technology called NFC, or near-field communication. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

However, when I went to those businesses—a diner, a Thai restaurant, a deli, a wine shop and coffee shop—employees knew nothing about NFC. MasterCard says many equipment makers and payment processors still have to get the word out to merchants. With some equipment, it's not obvious NFC payments are accepted until you tap the phone.

So even though lots of smaller merchants are expected to get NFC-capable equipment within the next year because of security-driven upgrades to credit and debit cards, they'll need to be made aware of this feature. And they'll have to train their workers on how to use it.

Things will get smoother.

When I started testing mobile payments two years ago, I had a frustrating time getting the Dunkin' Donuts app to work. But in the past month or so, it has worked flawlessly. The same is true with Starbucks' app. It's clear employees at both chains have gotten used to mobile payments and how to scan the bar codes on the apps.

Likewise, when I used Apple Pay at McDonald's on the day of its debut, I had to try a few times as the employee looked befuddled. Just two weeks later, the woman at the register was able to guide me on where to place my phone. She told me she's seen a couple of people do it.

Even without formal training, customers and merchants will get more comfortable over time as they see others work out the kinks.



This product image provided by LoopPay shows the LoopPay CardCase. The case mimics the signals produced by card swipes so you can pay with your phone just about anywhere credit cards are accepted _ at least in theory. (AP Photo/LoopPay)

I need to lower my expectations.

In my experience, these systems don't always work on the first try. With LoopPay, for instance, I'm supposed to hold the back of my phone case near the retailer's magnetic card reader and then hit a button on the case. But after multiple failed attempts at a restaurant, I had to borrow money. So when LoopPay did work on the first try at my dentist, I was elated—though it meant I was out \$2,500 in a flash.

I also realize it's going to be tough to get mobile payments working

everywhere. It's one thing to leave cash or cards on a tray for waitstaff. It's another to have to get up from the table to verify a transaction with a fingerprint or demonstrate how to hold the device. OpenTable and Harbortouch have apps to enable Apple Pay at the table, but they work only with a few restaurants.

Plastic or ...?

Although mobile payments aren't easier than whipping out plastic in many circumstances, I am glad to have Apple Pay for cab fare. My phone is generally out anyway, and I don't have to worry about dropping an ID or keys as I pull out my wallet. It's also nice to leave behind store-specific cards, such as Starbucks', to thin out my wallet.

I do plan on continuing to use [mobile payments](#), but I'll bring [cash](#) and cards along, too—just in case.

And that reminds me: I still need to pay my friend back now that I have money again.

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