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# Brand *watch*

eStar solution consultant Emma Rapadas shares a 360-degree view of your business.

**R**EDUCING FRICTION IN the buying journey is the end goal for both customers and brands. The brand's motivations are fairly obvious: the smoother the experience, the faster the customer gets to the POS. As an added bonus, the better the experience, the more accessible the customer's wallet becomes. The customer's motivations are similarly selfish: they want to shop on their terms – where, when, and however they choose. And the better the experience they have, the more accessible their wallets.

As customer needs evolved, technology and solutions have similarly evolved to address these needs and to enable brands to offer even better services and experiences. The result is a plethora of systems within the ever-expanding brand technology environment: ERP to keep track of everything, POS for the stores (with a mobile POS thrown in for good measure), customer service solutions to handle other sales and contact channels, CRM to keep track of the customer, transactional websites for selling online (and a transactional mobile app just because) ... The list goes on.

With each new solution introduced in the ecosystem, addressing complexity became the name of the game. Data came from different systems; and customer interaction came from different channels – the store, the call centre, and online through the website or through social media. Keeping track of which system to use when and getting information from disparate systems to actually be useful – and usable – became increasingly hard.

Enter omnichannel strategies. In a move to simplify processes and consolidate information, brands started thinking about having their solutions work together rather than in parallel. By integrating and orchestrating the movement of, and access to, information into familiar end-user solutions, brands enabled customers to engage in different channels at the same time, improving customer experience by leaps and bounds on many interaction points.

There are still, however, many challenges to the omnichannel directive. Relying on integrations and orchestrations to make disparate systems work together brings its own complexity around management, timeliness, accuracy, and consistency of information available to customers and the brand's end users. In an age when a majority of purchase decisions are made in the moment, real-time access to quality information is critical to winning.

Unified commerce solutions aim to address the gaps in and complexities of the omnichannel solutions and provide even better information and more seamless experiences. True unified commerce solutions are single platforms that service the brand's key sales channels in-store, online, and other channels including customer service centres. They are the one central system to provide:

- Access to rich product information – including eCommerce and social media content in traditional in-store settings – to inform purchase decisions;
- A 360-degree view of the customer relevant to the point of interaction;

- An up-to-date global view of inventory within the distribution network for accurate stock information and fulfilment optimisation;
- A consistent customer experience based off of content and offers that come from a single source; and
- The ability to complete transactions wherever and whenever is convenient for customers.

For customers, true unified commerce combines the rich content and user experience of online shopping with the robust offerings of traditional in-store POS and operator-initiated sales transactions, allowing them to move between sales channels fluidly. For the brand, it is a transformation of customer journeys, and the improved ability to support these new journeys effectively for optimal brand experience. Gone will be the days when the brand is forced to provide disparate experiences in-store and online due to the inability of one system to support or enable a requirement: the unified commerce solution will be the central hub powering the brand's key sales channels.

True unified commerce solutions are built on modern technology architecture and resilient infrastructure, able to scale and adapt to changing customer and brand requirements easily. It is important to note that, as with any solution, true unified commerce solutions should fit into the brand's strategy, and not the other way around. It is not the end, but rather, the means to the end, which is providing and enabling frictionless buying journeys. ■