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Omnichannel *overhaul*

eStar chief client officer, Richard Berridge discusses the integration of physical and digital retail.

OMNICHANNEL IS ONE of those rapidly maturing concepts – most retailers know what it means, many have a rough plan to achieve some components, some are on the journey, but very few have reached omnichannel utopia.

Prior to the omnichannel discussion becoming more mainstream, the talk was all about multichannel. It simply means selling through multiple channels (store, online, app, social, phone), whereas omnichannel is the provision of a seamless brand experience as customers shift back and forth between the channels through their buying journey.

Experience Integration

Customers don't emotionally engage with a channel, they engage with your business, ethos, and brand. So if it's the same logo above the door, as it is in the website header, they expect the same experience. This is experience integration.

So what does this mean when applied? Ask yourself, can your customers;

- Deal with instore staff to order items that are unavailable in the store for home delivery or future click & collect?
- Purchase online and then return or exchange the item in any physical store?
- Make a click & collect order through the website for any item across the entire network for collection at any store?
- Have their website history/preferences available to instore staff to assist with instore product recommendations?
- Add items to their website wishlist from home and then complete the purchase in store?
- Access availability across your entire network when shopping online rather than just a Distribution Centre subset?
- When you start to analyse your prominent customer journeys and interactions through each of the touchpoints, the abundance of opportunities for amazing Experience Integration will become clear.

Getting Started

There are three primary pillars that support any successful omnichannel strategy; Data, System Integration, Business Alignment.

Data

Omnichannel starts with good data management. As a first step, customer data, product data, and order data should all have a clearly defined single source of truth. This means you can sell anything, anywhere, to anyone and the information is consistent.

But a central source of truth alone is not enough. The data also needs to be accessible through all channels to support a seamless customer journey.

For example; customers should be able to view their instore purchases, along with their online purchases in their order history; sales staff should be able to make recommendations based on the customer's order history and wishlist; rich product information such as product videos should be available instore to share with customers.

System Integration

Closely related to data accessibility is System Integration or System Unification. System Integration is communication between two distinct systems, whereas System Unification is where a single system performs multiple functions, for example eCommerce and POS.

Regardless of approach the aim is to provide functionality that allows customers or sales staff to interact with the data in a consistent way. Eg. the POS system functionality that allows the sales person to perform a refund or exchange for an online order.

Business Alignment

Even with sound data management, and well-integrated systems an omnichannel strategy will fail if the human element is not managed. It is not uncommon to see instore teams lacking support for instore fulfilment, endless aisle, or click & collect because the KPIs, targets, and incentive structures are not congruent with an omnichannel strategy.

Senior leadership teams need to set KPIs, targets, and incentives that are in the best interests of the business as a whole rather than in the interests of the store or digital. Until the business is aligned there will be reluctance from store managers to invest store labour into furthering digital sales.

The Prize

Clearly the omnichannel journey is not easy, so what's the prize?

The creation of a truly seamless experience will allow your customers to commence their buying journey through any channel and then shift between channels as they desire without friction. This means the power and measure of your eCommerce website becomes much more than just online conversion. It becomes a major driver of instore sales. Likewise, your physical stores can be leveraged to stimulate online sales by supporting click & collect, instore fulfilment, endless aisle, and post-sale support.

Experience Integration is becoming more and more of a customer expectation and retailers who continue to provide disjointed experience can expect customers to vote with their wallet.

So whether you are right at the start of your omnichannel journey, or utopia is already in sight – keep going, and ensure your brand's omnichannel experience is central to your retail strategy. ■

