

Considerations for the Omnichannel Experience

As technology becomes more integrated into our daily lives, the lines between our experiences online and what we do in real life are increasingly blurred. I'll bet you probably have many connected devices—laptop, mobile phone, tablet, watch, lightbulb (yes, lightbulb)—all within an arm's reach right now.

By the time you finish reading this post, there will be more than 4,800 new devices connected to the internet. Ten years from now, the figure will mushroom to 152,000 a minute. That's why researchers such as IDC estimate that there will be 80 billion devices connected by 2025.



What does this mean for your customers?

With so many ways customers can reach out to your brand, companies must have a fully integrated way to deliver excellent customer experiences. You've probably heard that all before, right? The term "omnichannel" has been a favorite buzzword for years now, but is even more crucial after the COVID pandemic drove us to our devices for everyday tasks. Groceries, dining, healthcare? There's an app for that.

This shift from multi-channel to omnichannel has been called a profound change. And while all omnichannel experiences use multiple channels, not all multi-channel experiences are omnichannel.

It is all about the depth of integration and how all of your channels work together to deliver a seamless experience to your customer right? Maybe. Perhaps a little recalibration is needed.

Are all channels really created equal?

As your company invests in people and technology to create that cohesive integrated channel strategy, one critical consideration is that your customers are loyal to your brand, not a particular channel. Your customers care about experiences, about solutions, about ease and simplicity. They commonly use multiple sources to aid in the customer journey. It's important to listen to them, understand your audience and what matters to them. Then deliver the experience seamlessly.



Given that, it's important to understand the economics of each channel to your business. Building out and integrating multiple channels can be expensive. Rather than embracing all things omnichannel, start with having a deep understanding of your core customer segments. What are their priorities? How do they prefer to communicate with your company?

What omnichannel is is a multifaceted way for customers to interact with companies, often through whatever medium suits them best.

What omnichannel isn't is a magic bullet, a simple implementation, or a solution to the same woes that have plagued traditional contact centers for decades.

Prepare your agents

Mobile and self-service options mean customers have more ways than ever to get the service they're seeking, and much of this is automated. Yet when customers do need to connect to a real person, such as a customer service phone agent, it's not unusual to hit a dead end.

That's because traditional contact center training is often rushed or slowed to meet the lowest common denominator in a physical classroom, rather than self-paced to maximize both speed and knowledge transfer. As a result of this training deficiency, customers often bring tough questions to agents who just aren't equipped to handle deeper issues.

As one service leader at a large retailer told Harvard Business Review, "Our people are woefully ill-equipped to handle today's customers and their issues. We're not running a contact center here. It's more like a factory of sadness."



The HBR article, Kick-Ass Customer Service, goes on: "Compounding the issue, as companies have focused on new self-service technologies, they've underinvested in frontline service talent. They still hire, onboard, develop, and manage their service reps in much the same way they always have. While the self-service experience has improved dramatically in recent years, the live service interaction has barely changed in decades, creating a gap between customers' expectations and actual experience. Tales of poor service provoke outrage on social media and go viral despite companies' best efforts to contain them."

Most staff at contact centers are recruited for their telephone skills. In reality, if contact center staff are expected to respond to a variety of channels, they need to be comfortable multi-tasking, as well as have proficiency in each channel. Displaying empathy and understanding in a chat message is much different than a voice call. Source agents who are adaptable, and can easily learn the inflections across different channels.

Integrate your systems

Most contact centers are working with legacy systems originally intended to support one channel: voice. Yet smart technology options are available to pull customer communication onto a screen for easy reference by call agents.

When agents have the resources necessary to support customers, they're more likely to feel empowered and able to deliver an outstanding experience.

Now what?

Accept the fact that your company's omnichannel experience will not be evenly distributed.

While developing an omnichannel experience takes into account each platform and device that your customers will use to interact with your brand, the critical factor in success will be how you leverage this knowledge. Each of these channels should inform your strategy—across sales, marketing, product and customer service—to deliver exceptional experiences to your customers.

Leaders need to think through these types of challenges in planning and honing their omnichannel strategy. The companies that already suffer from lack of customer connection, such as poor performance in key customer interaction channels, will struggle to win as they fragment customer communications by adding more channels and complexity. More channels doesn't automatically mean a winning omnichannel strategy.

However, the companies that will remain relevant will offer strong value propositions and use integrated channels that make the most economic sense to the business to unify the customer experience better than the competition. When a customer perceives that they are connecting with a single brand across any channel, they'll become stronger brand advocates.



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