EXPERT OPINION:

Let's get personal with a multi-channel customer experience

While you can order almost anything today from any device at any location, it's not always a simple experience.

Sometimes it can take too long to get to what you're really looking for. And then you need to register, provide payment details, shipping address, then re-enter your credit card details and so on. The importance of an intuitive, easy-to-use ecommerce platform which supports the virtual online store, recognises the customer and provides the right information even faster, almost goes without saying.

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Meanwhile, although customers often start researching their new prospective smartphones online, not every customer wants to complete every purchase or switch price plans online. Indeed, before actually deciding to complete the purchase, many people want to physically try out the device in the retail store at first hand, or maybe talk over the price plans with a call centre agent.

For a customer's perfect multi-channel experience, the service provider should be able to offer, continue or complete the same transaction across any of its retail channels. In practical terms, this means enabling customers to start a transaction using the online virtual store, knowing that they can get the same product at the same price through other channels. They can then choose to pick up the transaction at any of the other sales channels – right at the very point where they left off, painlessly and intuitively.

So what's the hold up in making this a reality?

The problem is the lack of integration between the different channels and the service provider's inability to apply each customer's "subscriber-centric" personalisation in every channel to which the customer moves.

Forget 'Location, Location, Location' – Think 'Integration, Integration, Integration'

Ecommerce solutions usually work as "islands" without any integration of customer data and service offers between the online virtual store and other sales channels, including the service provider's retail outlet and customer care centres. Unless the service provider has a multi-channel solution that shares common tools and platforms and processes with its other business and operational support systems, a customer can start and efficiently complete a transaction online, but the service provider won't then be able to pick it up in another channel.

This can result in a customer fulfillment and logistics nightmare necessitating a manual ordering process, rather than being a smooth automated experience which can push information seamlessly from channel to channel.

Whatever the Channel, the experience should be 'Subscriber-centric'

A multi-channel strategy also demands personalisation and a 360-degree view of the customer. The service provider holds a treasure trove of customer intelligence insights, gleaned from the past activity of its customers. Service providers should use this information to analyse and understand buying behavior and then leverage subscriber-specific information to raise the customer experience to a whole new level.

This includes customisation of services; more personalised and intimate subscriber relationships; greater segmentation and self-selection of products, program and plans; new pricing models, service packages, increasing bandwidth demands based on subscriber usage of third-party content and services, customer desire for personal control and self-selection and so on.

But to nail down a personalised multi-channel retail experience, service providers need to apply and push intelligent personalisation automatically across all of its channels, and influence service delivery in real time. ▶

The building blocks of a multi-channel strategy

While more and more people use online virtual stores to complete their purchases, as well as to report any trouble issues, other channels also appeal to the broader customer base. It is therefore essential that all channels stay coordinated and that the service provider offers:

- An easy-to use simple informative online shopping experience

- A unified presentation of product offers, pricing and information between channels

- The ability for customers to start the purchase in one channel and finish in another without restarting

- Integration between the online sales portal and back-office systems (OSS and BSS) to deliver automated support for the cash-to order process

A multi-channel experience centres on the ability to tie online virtual store and customer support centre processes together with the necessary fulfillment functions. This involves not just an integrated e-commerce and digital commerce platform, but also integration with the network operational and business support systems. While the retail outlet may have an inventory on hand to fulfill most customer requests, a tie in with the back-office fulfillment functions is also necessary to cover times when inventory may not be available, particularly in cases where durable goods from partners are playing a greater role.

It's crucial to have something in common

The online shopping experience starts not surprisingly with the ecommerce platform. It personalises the online shopping and purchasing experience of the self-service portal with capabilities to address the online shopping cart, product catalogue, personalisation and pricing functions. This includes, for example, the ability to support merchandising through discounts, promotions and e-coupons. However, if that ecommerce platform is able to use components shared by the other BSS and OSS systems supporting the service provider's other sales channels, then this is the first step in extending it into the all-important, personalised multi-channel experience.

Examples of shared components include:

- Universal Shopping Cart – Used by customers to select goods and services for

purchase. The key is to retain a registered user's purchase selections (durable goods, user devices and/or network-based services) initiated, for example, online and then be able to finish the purchase process either through communication with the care centre or at the service provider's retail outlet.

- Enterprise Product Catalogue – Centralises the process of defining and managing product and services information through a common definition for all function modules, and can also extend to interfacing OSS and BSS as needed.

- **Personalisation engine** –Allows the definition of product offers and business rules to govern the sale of customer selections based on offer recommendations from existing customer purchasing and profile information. It allows customers to seek out "unique" combinations of service plans, durable goods, user devices and digital content that will satisfy specific needs.

- **Search Engine** –Designed to search within product brochures and the product catalogue to deliver customers accurate choices of the network service, durable goods and digital content available.

- **Sales Engine** – Provides a commerce engine that all sales channels can use, including online, in-store and through the call centre with business processes and customer information flowing consistently across channels. It allows customers to begin a transaction within the online virtual store, and end it anywhere they choose.

Service providers can't ignore the multi-channel experience for much longer. Although it might not be the reality for many customers today, the multi-channel experience is the natural direction towards which customer expectations are moving. And service providers already need to start heading there too, step by step, starting with an integrated ecommerce solution.

The Amdocs Universal Storefront solution, for example, is key in enabling service providers to offer, sell and service their physical, network, and value-added services through one channel, taking into account their personal needs, such as locating the retail store closest to them. It delivers a single shopping cart experience for all services and products while giving service providers a flexible offering catalogue to define the lifecycle of all products and services.

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