

The omni-channel challenge

Customer expectations

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BCP's Richard Marshall looks at the customer expectations wholesalers face in an omni-channel world where the landscape is dominated by the connected customer empowered by the mobile revolution.

Multi-channel versus Omni-channel

I recently came across yet another two buzzwords to add to the proliferation that surround today's trading environment, where mobile communications have transformed the commercial landscape. It's as if no one is quite happy with the words in use – or maybe they are trying to come up with ones which are simply cleverer, catchier or have a clearer meaning - and that made me think that before I go delving into the opportunities and challenges for wholesalers, I should really clarify what is meant by 'multi-channel' and 'omni-channel' and how they differ – or, at least, my understanding – as there seems to be a tendency to confuse the two.

It's actually pretty straightforward. Multi-channel, quite clearly, is about selling through a number of different channels – from stores and depots, through telesales or sales reps, or via websites and mobile apps. Omni-channel is about a holistic view across all those channels – for both customers and suppliers. It's what turns multi-channel into a truly deliverable service.

Wholesale has traditionally taken cues from retail in adopting new technologies, but now, with the pace of the mobile revolution showing no signs of abating, its impact is being felt with the same immediacy right down the supply chain and wholesalers, like retailers, have new opportunities – accompanied, of course, by new challenges.

The opportunities and potential rewards are significant - the opportunity to build closer relations with customers, build greater loyalty and drive increased sales – provided the customer has a positive experience. And there's the rub! Customers have high expectations. Satisfy them and you're flavour of the month - but failure, on the other hand, can have dire consequences.

So what exactly are those customer expectations today?

Availability

First has to be 24/7, 365 availability. For wholesalers that means customers expect more than a regular office hours telesales service and standard depot opening times. They now need to be able to check stock and place orders at a time convenient for them – and it's more than that. It's not just *when* it's convenient for them, it's *wherever* they are: 'anytime – everywhere' or 'anytime – anywhere'.

Consistency



Then there's channel consistency. By that I mean the same experience – the same prices, same offers, same delivery and returns options and so on – however and wherever they order – whether it be through a physical or digital channel. If a retailer or restaurant, for example, is placing an online order – on his phone, tablet, laptop or desktop PC, he needs to have the same facilities and options available on those platforms as he would if ordering via, say, telesales or a sales rep. Over and above that, business to business (B2B) websites and apps need to have the look, feel and functionality as the consumer sites we're all familiar with

for our weekly shop, or when we buy a new outfit or a piece of furniture for the home. It's about the consumerisation of the B2B experience – online ordering with the look and feel of B2C sites.

Seamless cross channel experience

That leads on, of course, to *cross channel* consistency – or a 'seamless cross channel experience', as it's commonly referred to. That means the ability to buy through one channel – perhaps online or through telesales – yet return, should it be necessary, through another – maybe to depot, when next visiting.



Personalised Service



While all this is already a great customer centric approach, customers are now also expecting a *personalised* approach wherever they trade with you. A good telesales operation can give customers information on historic purchases, favourites, customised pricing, personalised promotions and discounts and so on. Now customers are expecting the same when they shop via other channels, with the addition that any offers they receive can be redeemed at *any* touchpoint.

Flexibility and transparency

Enough? No. There's still more. Customers also expect flexibility and choice – in terms of delivery, for example. They want to be able to choose whether to collect their order or to have it delivered. With a delivery they want to choose a time slot which best suits them – even if it incurs a premium. *And* they expect complete transparency. They want to track their order right through the supply process – to know exactly where it is, both before and after it has been despatched.

Reliability

Ultimately, it's also all about reliability – and this can be the killer. Offer everything else and the customer is happy, but fail to deliver as promised, or fall down in some other way and your customer could be lost forever. Reliability is key.

So customer expectations are high in the new omni-channel world, but wholesalers must grasp the opportunity and endeavour to meet these expectations if they are to not only survive but succeed in a new and changing business landscape.



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