

Leveraging Multichannel Operations to Deliver a Better Buying Experience

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In today's retail environment, customers want to shop at their own convenience, which is why most retailers today are evaluating their multichannel strategy. While cross-channel selling is a great way to increase reach and be accessible to more buyers, without the proper tools and insights, a multichannel business can be time-consuming and drain a retailer's already limited resources. That said, a successful multichannel operation is the key to unlocking sustainable growth for retailers today – and it starts with a few guiding principles.

1. Ensure that every shopper's experience is consistent across all channels. According to Retail Systems Research, consistency is the most valued capability among retailers who sell across multiple channels. Customers will relate to your brand, not to the channel on which they find it. So whether they are shopping at your retail store, via a mobile app, web store, kiosk, or other venue, it is critical that their experiences are consistent across the board. Buyers assume that they will be able to access the same products at the same prices in stores and online. They expect that any service person they talk to can edit their order, and that the product will be available via either channel when they're ready to buy. If these conditions are not met, it damages your brand image. If they are, your reputation improves **and** you're far more likely to get the sale.

2. Know your customers. No matter how the customer interacts with you, be sure that each sales channel and customer service point can access customer data, including contact information and cross-channel order history. Knowing your customers prefer-

ences personalizes the interaction, makes them feel important, enables faster service and enriches the entire buying experience.

3. Say yes as often as you can to build loyalty. People don't like to be told "no," especially from a business with which they are considering spending money. So look at your business and think about what a customer may ask for and prepare in advance to say "yes" to every request. At a minimum, these questions must be answered in the affirmative.

- > Do you know the status of my order? Yes!
- > Is that product available? Yes!
- > Can you ship that to my house? Yes!
- > Can I pick that up in the store? Yes!
- > I bought this online: can I return it at the store? Yes!
- > Do you know what I ordered last time? Yes!

Transforming buying experiences requires access to data. It must be collected, stored and shared in a way that the right people have access to it at the right time. Data has historically been stored in individual systems that support a single channel. This structure is no longer an option as providing a great experience in one channel but a poor one in another may actually damage your brand more than it helps it.

These infrastructure changes may sound unrealistic, especially if you don't have a huge IT budget. But these capabilities are not out of reach, even for the smallest sellers. Services like nChannel's multichannel management platform provide a framework that centralizes customer and order data and orchestrates many of the key sales processes

needed to meet customer demands.

- > A web-based portal to view consolidated sales data from multiple sales channels so every employee can service customers and respond to inquiries quickly and accurately
- > Item management to push consistent item data (product attributes, pricing, etc.) to every channel also enables central management for pricing and promotions across multiple channels
- > Inventory synchronization to ensure that all channels have current and accurate inventory counts
- > Inventory management to enable purchases from one channel and fulfillment through another (i.e. in-store pickups)
- > Supplier integration to improve inventory visibility and enable drop shipments to customers
- > Order management to quickly route and split orders to fulfill them as quickly (and cost-effectively) as possible

To compete effectively today, retailers must deliver a better buying experience across all channels, to ensure customers can easily find you, shop when it's convenient – and, ultimately, be enticed to keep coming back. ■

Steve Weber is president & CEO of nChannel, a leading provider of multichannel management software that simplifies selling for retailers of all sizes. With more than two decades of software industry experience, and 13 years in the retail space, he is also the former vice president of eMarketplace Outsourcing Services for Sterling Commerce, a division of IBM. More recently, he was named Microsoft Partner of the Year for Dynamics Retail and awarded Microsoft Retail Independent Software Vendor (ISV) of the year.