Marketers Feel the Need for Speed: The Path to Customer Experience Excellence Begins with Agility on the Web

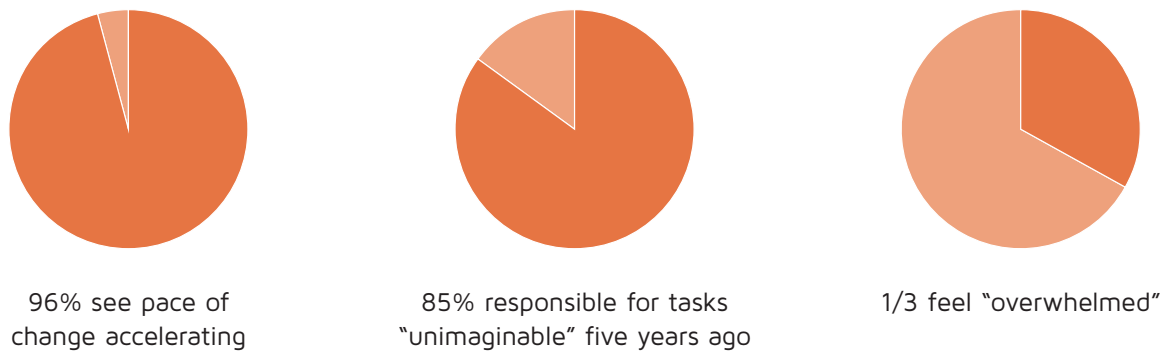By: Tim Walters, Ph.D.

Introduction

In today's digitalized, customer-centric business environment, change is the only constant. There are new technologies, new channels, and new ways for customers to communicate with companies and with each other. All of this, and more, means that change is rapid, radical, and relentless. Companies as varied as Borders, BlackBerry, and Best Buy have fallen from dominance (or disappeared altogether) because they failed to adapt to new conditions, learn new behaviors, and meet quickly evolving customer expectations.

As these few examples show, it is no exaggeration to say that digital disruption poses a life-or-death challenge for many established businesses. Marketers are on the front line of this battle. They must sense, filter, interpret, and understand the signals sent out by increasingly empowered and fickle buyers — and then respond with the relevant experience or offer, in their preferred channel, faster and more precisely than the competition. Marketers can turn to innumerable technologies, tools, and vendor solutions for support with this effort; indeed, there are so many options that the tools themselves can become overwhelming and an operational burden to many enterprises.

In the crucial web channel, marketers will benefit from solutions that can be sourced, learned, and launched easily and quickly, without the need for long procurement cycles, complicated implementations, or over-reliance on IT. Such solutions can enable the responsiveness and iterative experimentation required to meet evolving customer needs and satisfy marketing's need for speed.

Figure 1.

Marketers in the pressure cooker

96% see pace of
change accelerating

85% responsible for tasks
"unimaginable" five years ago

1/3 feel "overwhelmed"

Source: Business Marketing Association and Forrester Research, 2013

Marketers Race to Keep Up with Empowered Buyers

In this customer-centric era, it's inevitable that the biggest burden falls on those charged with "owning" the customer experience. The empowerment of customers by disruptions such as mobile devices, apps, and social platforms has inverted the relationship between buyers and brands. As a measure of the shifts that have already taken place, 32 percent of marketers recently surveyed agreed that within five years, "We will not even know what a marketing campaign will look like in advance," since they will "unfold in real time depending on individuals' needs."[1] Old habits and best practices quickly prove inadequate in a world of always-on access and infinite buyer choice. Marketers must constantly learn new skill sets and rewire established digital strategies.

According to a report by the Business Marketing Association and Forrester Research, marketers are operating in a digital pressure cooker. While 96 percent of the surveyed marketers reported that they see the pace of change accelerating, nine out of 10 said their organizations asked them to take on new responsibilities without additional budget or resources. Nearly as many (85 percent) said they are now responsible for tools or processes that would have been "unimaginable" five years ago. It's no surprise, then, that over one-third of the marketers reported feeling "overwhelmed."[2] (See Figure 1.)

These challenges are not restricted to marketers working in e-commerce or "high touch" consumer-centric businesses. In fact, the pressures are just as acute in industries such as financial services, pharmaceuticals, and utilities. First, this is because customer expectations (in both B2C and B2B contexts) are now formed by the outstanding digital experiences they have as consumers. A bank's web channel, for example, isn't only judged against that of its direct competitors but also against the standards of intuitiveness and personalization set by Amazon and Netflix. Second, regulatory

"Marketers must now constantly learn new skills and rewire established digital strategies"

restrictions may make it harder for firms in verticals such as insurance, healthcare, and pharmaceuticals to respond to customer demands for two-way conversations.[3] Finally, because many B2B firms are relatively less experienced with the web and other digital channels, marketers have to make up more ground, and more quickly, than those in consumer-focused verticals.

Software Tools Can Be a Blessing . . . Or a Burden

To engage empowered customers and deliver on their new responsibilities, marketers look for support from a large, growing, and fast-changing ecosystem of software solutions. Accenture found that 34 percent of chief marketing officers (CMOs) cited "lack of critical technology or tools" as their organization's primary barrier to dealing effectively with digital disruption.[4] Both new and established vendors have moved quickly to fill this gap — indeed, the introduction of new products, and entire new product categories, has become a veritable flood. One inventory of available marketing technology vendors in early 2014 counted 947 companies in 43 different categories. (This list, which does not claim to be comprehensive, had grown from 350 companies only eighteen months earlier.[5])

Numerous studies have shown that CMOs are spending more on technology than chief technology officers are in many organizations. That's an indication of the need for additional and more sophisticated tools to support complex digital marketing efforts. But it also means that marketers can easily be overwhelmed by the work of researching, selecting, and learning to operate new solutions — let alone the time required for IT to implement and integrate the products.

In today's environment, however, time is the most precious commodity. Previous cycles of technology innovation, such as desktop computing and the commercial internet, played out over eight to 10 years. More pragmatic business buyers were well advised to observe the results of early adopters and wait for best practices to emerge. Today, as Peter Thiel has remarked, "Best practices lead to dead ends; the best paths are new and untried."[6] The forces shaping customer behavior — mobility, social platforms, and personalization — are too dynamic and unpredictable for a wait-and-see approach. The first mover not only has a clear advantage; the late mover may struggle to survive. All of this means that organizations need to be sure that the software solutions they use are helping marketers deliver better customer experiences, not hindering them.

Great Customer Experiences Begin on the Web

PwC predicts that by 2020, customers will favor providers that can offer "nearly perfect execution" of "unified omnichannel experiences."[7] Meeting these expectations and offering consistently superior experiences will require substantial transformations across the organization, from tool sets to skill sets, team organizations, and business processes. Today, many organizations justifiably wonder how they can even get started on this arduous journey. For most, the answer is simple: *Begin with the web channel.*

There are many good reasons for marketers to focus on the web, rather than chasing the latest cool touchpoint (e.g., apps for Google Glass) or, worse, trying to pull a fully mature omnichannel rabbit out of a siloed hat. First, for the foreseeable future, web

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content technologies will remain at the heart of the software ecosystem for customer experience management — simply because both depend on creating, managing, and delivering digital assets in support of customer goals. Second, the web is a relatively familiar environment in which teams can try out new engagement strategies, build new skill sets, and optimize the requisite processes. Finally, and most importantly, the web (whether on fixed or mobile screens) remains, by far, the most important digital interaction point.

At the same time, the web channel is becoming ever more complex and dynamic. The number of owned sites has exploded as organizations discover the value of subsites, landing pages, and dedicated sites for specific brands, geographies, customer segments, or campaigns. For the sake of iterative experimentation and optimization, many of these sites are also temporary, or frequently replaced with an entirely new look and content, meaning that marketers need to be able to launch, revise, and remove them without delay or undue IT intervention.[8] In short, there simply is no better channel for enterprises than the web for building the secure foundation and core organizational proficiencies necessary for omnichannel customer experience management.

Conclusion

In the customer-centric era, success will come to those who can truly put the customer — not tools or technologies — at the center of everything they do. Organizations should carefully evaluate how

they can help marketers optimize the core web channel and remove barriers to success, such as:

- time-consuming implementations
- long delays to launch new sites or campaigns
- over-reliance on IT for daily operations
- complex or inadequate integrations with existing applications
- inability to collaborate with agencies and other partners due to firewall or access restrictions

The growing interest in hosted and cloud-based offerings, particularly software as a service (SaaS), reflects the desire for software solutions that can be sourced and launched quickly, thereby granting marketers the speed and flexibility to create the personalized, responsive web experiences that today's buyers demand.

Notes

1   Accenture and the Economist Intelligence Unit surveyed 1,041 C-suite executives in twenty countries. The results are detailed in Accenture's report, "CMOs: Time for Digital Transformation." http://www.accenture.com/us-en/Pages/insight-cmos-time-digital-transformation-risk-left-sidelines.aspx.

2   The Business Marketing Association and Forrester surveyed 117 CMOs and vice presidents of marketing. These and other results are available at http://solutions.forrester.com/bma-survey-findings-ramos.

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3 For a discussion of how some firms in heavily regulated industries are managing to connect with buyers on social channels, see http://www.computerworld.com/article/2494713/internet/highly-regulated-companies-tiptoe-into-social-media.html.

4 See Accenture survey, note 1.

5 See Scott Brinker: http://chiefmartec.com/2014/01/marketing-technology-landscape-supergraphic-2014/.

6 Thiel P. 2014. Zero to One: Notes on Start Ups, or How to Build the Future. New York: Crown Business. See http://zerotoonebook.com/.

7 PwC, "Retailing 2020: Winning in a Polarized World." See http://www.pwc.com/us/en/retail-consumer/publications/retailing-2020.jhtml.

8 For a discussion of the value of iterative experimentation and the role of iteration capital, see Accenture's "Technology Vision 2014" report: http://www.accenture.com/microsites/it-technology-trends-2014/Pages/home.aspx.

About DCG

Digital Clarity Group

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