

# How Customer Experience Management Changes the “Suite vs. Separate” Debate

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# Executive Summary

The debate over suite versus best-of-breed solutions has raged since the introduction of enterprise resource planning (ERP) suites in the early 1990s, pitting integration and consistency against functionality and innovation – at least according to the classical terms of the dispute.

The looming need to attract and retain empowered consumers with positive and relevant customer experiences sheds a different light on suite versus best of breed. Consumers crave consistency across the range of their interactions with a company or brand even more than they crave extraordinary but isolated experiences. Delivering this consistency will require firms to integrate existing silos among applications, processes, and teams. In contrast to the old choice between integration and functionality, customer experience management (CEM) calls for integrated functionality in the ecosystem of systems and business processes that support CEM.

When evaluating software solutions for customer experience management, it is not a question of suite or best of breed – these are, after all, no more than names applied by vendors. In the course of a thorough evaluation process, firms should be very attentive to the demand for consistent and coherent customer experiences, and look for the combination of software and services that will help their teams deliver.

# A Timeless Debate Revisited

Suite or best of breed? Integrated solution or separate applications? The debate is as old as software bundles, and it shows no signs of abating. Indeed, it will likely intensify with the increasing automation of business processes and the growing ubiquity of networked and intelligent things, as software becomes an indispensable part of everything from automobiles to household appliances to clothing.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its persistence and intensity, the debate should not exist in the abstract. Each side has its merits and drawbacks, and neither is the “correct” answer in all cases. Aside from the vendors, which have a vested interest in one camp or the other, no one should believe that there is a winning position. Whether a suite of or separate applications offer more value can ultimately be decided only within the context of a software selection process for a particular firm, with particular resources and existing systems, and in support of particular business processes or activities.

One complex business process has recently leapt to the center of attention for most companies. The empowerment of consumers – by forces such as the social web, smart mobile devices, and ubiquitous, always-on connectivity – has forced companies to adopt or develop the tools, skill sets, and processes that will allow them to provide positive, competitive digital experiences. Customer experience management (CEM) is supported by a broad and growing array of software applications. No vendor yet offers a complete solution for CEM, but a few have well-integrated platforms for the core functional areas, including web content management (WCM), targeting and personalization, analytics, campaign management, and mobile enablement.

Suite or separate will therefore again be a serious question for most firms as they acquire the tools and skills necessary for superior customer engagement. However, locating this timeless debate in the context of the emerging requirements for CEM revives and transforms the old debate. Creating and offering consistent and cohesive customer experiences across multiple channels or touchpoints requires processes, workflows, and team organizations that are themselves cohesive and unified. A properly integrated solution for CEM must overcome the old choice between functionality and integration. Instead, it must offer *integrated functionality* for the creation and bundling of content assets, the execution of engagement strategies, the measurement of the impact, and ongoing optimization – all in a limited number of consistent interfaces.

In what follows, we’ll first review the terms of the debate over suite versus best of breed, then explore the requirements for successful CEM and analyze the implications for companies that are evaluating and selecting CEM technologies.

## The case for best of breed

In principle, best of breed delivers exactly what the name says: the best software solution for the task in question. The approach is often seen as user-centric, in the sense that employees in a given department, or those responsible for a specific business process such as email marketing, can use a tool that is designed exclusively for their needs. Vendors that specialize on a single business process can offer deeper, more refined functionality, innovate more quickly, and



release updates and improvements more frequently. Stand-alone applications appeal to the internal IT organization since the project scope is restricted and the implementation is faster. Sure, say the proponents of best of breed, you can buy a device that combines a fax machine, a scanner, a copier, and a desktop phone – but wouldn't you rather have the best of each, and the ability to switch out any one of the functions whenever you like?

## The case for suites

Traditionally, a unified suite of products is thought to compromise some functionality in favor of integrated support for several connected processes and a single user interface. Suites are organization-friendly, in the sense that there is a single vendor relationship and a user experience that is shared across several departments or teams. A consistent architecture and data model appeals to IT, which is also relieved of its duty to create and maintain the integrations between numerous applications. Sure, say the proponents of the suite approach, you can have separate remote controls for the cable box, TV, DVD player, and audio-system amplifier, but wouldn't you prefer to have just one remote for all devices in your home theater?<sup>2</sup>

## The curious terms of the debate

Over the years, the battle over suites versus point solutions has been waged across numerous software categories, including enterprise resource planning (ERP) in the early 1990s, human capital management, retail applications, and, more recently, enterprise social

solutions.<sup>3</sup> Although the arguments for and against each position have hardly changed in 25 years, few people making those arguments seem to have noticed that the debate is fundamentally flawed in several respects, such as:

- **Best of breed is for dogs, not software.** The term “best of breed” is borrowed from conformation shows, in which purebred dogs are judged against a breed standard that dictates the idealized observable qualities for a given breed. The winning animal is, by definition, the best of its breed. Despite the popularity of analyst rankings of enterprise applications, the concept simply doesn't transfer to software, since the “breed standard” criteria for any software ranking must contain many assumptions about how the product will be deployed, used, and managed. At minimum, these assumptions have to be tested and proven during a given firm's software evaluation process. The point is never to simply purchase the best-of-breed software, but to determine what is “best-for-me” software. For this reason, the alternatives are better understood as suite versus *separate*, or integrated versus *point solutions*.
- **Software is not hardware.** Both sides in the debate tend to illustrate the suite-based approach with reference to *physical objects*, such as the combined fax-copier-telephone. When one component breaks or is no longer adequate, it can't be disconnected and weighs



down the rest of the solution. A software-appropriate analogy, however, would be to think of a suite approach as a platform (such as Apple's iOS or Google's Android mobile operating systems) that enables numerous functional applications to be installed and removed with (relative) ease.

- **It's not really a debate.** The most remarkable aspect of this timeless dispute is that it's hard to locate very much real disagreement. Both sides tend to accept that point solutions offer superior functionality and innovation, but at the cost of integration and process support. Suites, on the other hand, are said by both camps to sacrifice cutting edge functionality but offer integrated task flows, along with a consistent architecture and user experience. Finally, both sides present similar arguments about the effect on IT, posing the burden of a suite implementation against the customization required to link point solutions. This isn't a furious conflict between diehard opponents; it's just the statement of a choice: Do you favor functionality or integration?

Once you boil down the rhetoric and peel away the false analogies, the traditional suite-versus-separate debate offers very little that can inform, let alone guide, a company's software acquisition decisions. The battle rages, but it produces a lot of smoke and little light or clarity. The positions in the debate were staked out in the 1990s, when it was reasonable to wonder whether budgeting and benefits, and payroll and payables even belonged in a connected ERP package. But the terms

and have barely evolved to reflect today's faster, less predictable, more dynamic, more interconnected – and increasingly digitized – business environment. The shortcomings of the old debate are particularly evident in light of the emerging requirements for customer experience management.

# The Demand for Positive Customer Experiences

Today, the forces of digital disruption are radically altering how we all access and consume information, communicate and socialize, shop and purchase. Ubiquitous connected devices, social networks, cloud services – these and other innovations have already essentially inverted the relationship between sellers and buyers, as well as between brands and customers. Digital disruption has suddenly granted voice and choice to previously powerless customers and prospects.

Increasingly, companies will succeed and fail according to the quality of the digital experiences that they offer. According to a recent Harris Interactive survey, only 1 percent of U.S. consumers feel that their expectations for good customer service are always met.<sup>4</sup> And when companies fail to live up to expectations, consumers don't hesitate to take action: 89 percent report that they have switched their business to a competitor after a poor experience.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, consumers are so hungry for positive

experiences that 86 percent say that they will *pay extra* to ensure them – and up to 25 percent more.<sup>6</sup> (See Figure 1.)

## Getting a handle on customer experience management

Customer experience is the *totality of a customer's interactions with a company or brand*. From the quality of the towels in a hotel room to the interactions with a bank teller or the arrangement of products on a shelf, customer experience at the broadest level can be influenced by innumerable “analogue” factors. This totality of interactions obviously cannot be managed with a software solution. Indeed, encouraging positive customer experiences across *all* touchpoints depends on a company-wide commitment to customer centricity as a core *business value*.

Customer experience management commonly refers specifically to the strategies, processes, skills,

Figure 1



Source: Harris Interactive survey of U.S. consumers, 2011. Sponsored by Right Now.



technologies, and partnerships that aim to ensure superior *digital* customer experiences.<sup>7</sup> These can range from the obvious (websites, social media, email campaigns), to the hidden (call-center optimization via rich profiles and dynamic prompts), to emerging practices that question where digital ends and “real-world” touchpoints begin. In some of fashion retailer C&A’s stores in Brazil, for example, the clothes hangers display in real time how many Facebook likes a product has received.<sup>8</sup>

When any one of these digital interactions goes awry, you’re in danger of losing the customer or prospect – perhaps forever. For today’s informed and connected consumers, you’re only as good as the last great experience you offered. *Consistency is paramount.* Moreover, for any specific interaction, you’re only as good as its weakest link. *Coherence is imperative.*

Consider a standard mobile banking app, for example. Since it concerns a specific individual’s financial status, it is obviously personalized, not only with their account information but with targeted content and offers. What it presents will be influenced by the customer’s profile (perhaps from a CRM system), responses to previous offers (via campaign management and analytics), and perhaps by the customer’s social media activities (from social listening tools). Updated content will be stored in and delivered from the WCM solution (also ensuring consistency with the web channel). In addition, the design and functionality of the app will be largely dictated by cross-channel user research and persona creation; crunching and analysis of big data sets about potentially millions of customer

interactions; and detection of the capabilities of the customer’s mobile device. Ongoing optimization may involve A/B and multivariate testing tools, more analytics and social listening, and adaptation to new devices or evolving user behaviors.

Even this straightforward app requires the work of many people, departments, processes, and applications. Now imagine in addition the need for that one app to reflect and reinforce innumerable other interactions in order to preserve the consistency of the overall customer experience. Every element must converge and work together.<sup>9</sup> As this example shows, consistent and cohesive experiences are not built and delivered; they are *orchestrated, curated, and constantly optimized.*

# How CEM Changes the Suite-versus-Separate Debate

As the futurist Thornton May recently noted, “We’re 50-plus years into the Information Age and still using Industrial-Age models of work and organization.”<sup>10</sup> The traditional suite-versus-separate debate is an expression of the time when companies were organized like armies and when business processes were modeled on production lines. Workers with one specific skill completed their task and passed the object on to the next team of specialists. No one was responsible for the final product, let alone for the customer relationship as a whole.

In contrast, customer experience management has been compared to artisanal production, where exquisite products are custom built by a team of artisans in response to the needs of a particular customer.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, the craftsmen have specialized skills, but they work together in concert to create not only the object itself but also the sense of customer intimacy. Great customer experiences must reflect the needs and context of the consumer, not the organizational chart of the company.<sup>12</sup>

Effective customer experience management depends on consistency, coherence and convergence across teams and tools. Gaps, silos, discrepancies, and redundancies threaten positive outcomes. Thorough unification and integration are essential. The traditional suite-versus-separate debate envisions numerous distinct processes that might (or might not) benefit from integration. In contrast, CEM calls for an integrated system that avoids separation and isolation. In other words, *the overall CEM ecosystem (processes plus applications and repositories) should, to the greatest extent possible, perform like a single integrated solution.*

In the context of CEM, the suite-versus-separate question becomes: *How, and with what, will you (and your service provider partners) build the integrated CEM solution?* As noted, no single vendor currently offers the all of the applications necessary for CEM.<sup>13</sup> So, is it better to begin with an integrated suite of “core” CEM tools, such as WCM, email and marketing campaign management, analytics, and web personalization? Or should you draw on point solution building blocks? (See Figure 2.) The answer again depends on the particular circumstances of a firm’s evaluation process. But we are now in a position to see that the complete solution for CEM should:

- **Provide the “best” functionality – but at the level of the whole.** The old debate posed the “best” functionality over against the benefits of integration. Customer experience management calls for these to be unified in the form of *integrated functionality*. You can and should still aim for the best, but that is now defined (as it always should be) by what is the best overall solution for CEM in your context, not by the purported superior capabilities of individual elements.
- **Help users adapt to and master new tools and practices.** The transition from one-way broadcasting to customer centricity, conversations, and real-time interactions is a hard one for marketers, who bear most of the workload for creating and monitoring customer experiences. They must adapt to data-driven, left-brain marketing while simultaneously mastering a daunting array of new tools for monitoring, understanding, and responding

to customer desires. Reducing the number of distinct interfaces in the CEM software ecosystem can simplify the transition and accelerate the learning process.

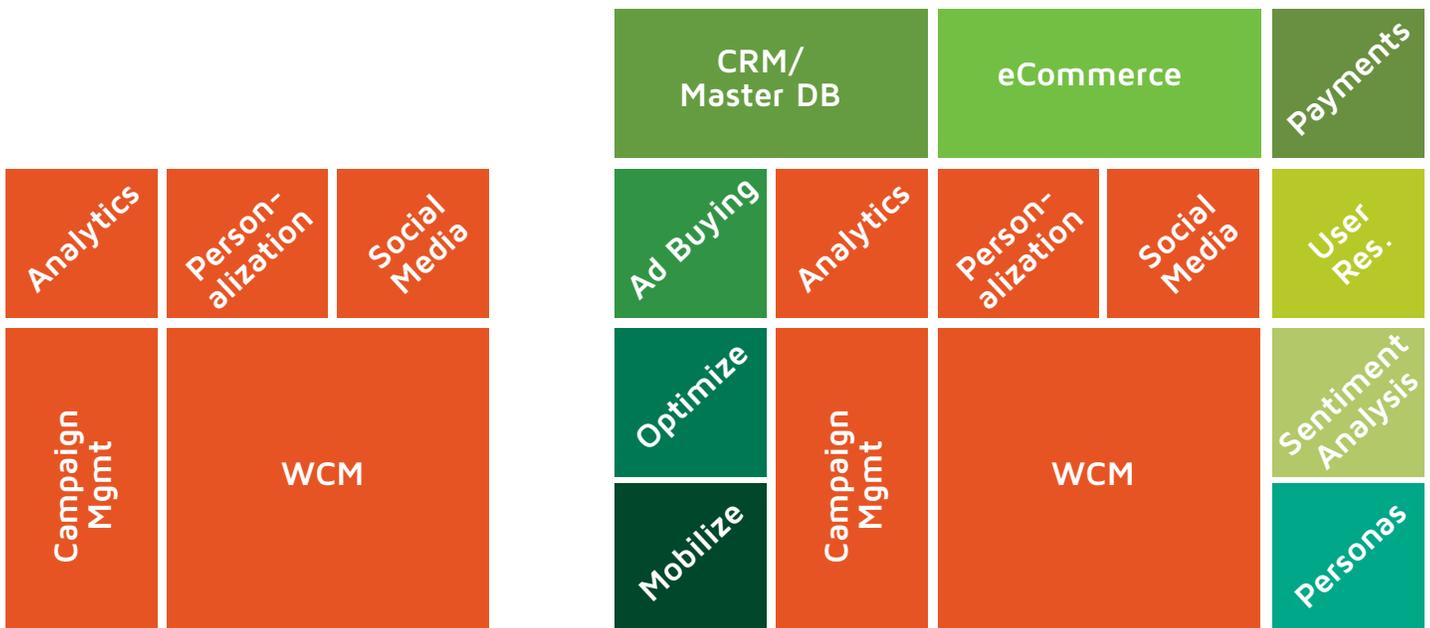
- **Present information and insights in context.** There is never going to be a single user interface for the diverse tasks and processes within customer experience management. (Nor should there be, as the solution expands to integrate more roles.) It is crucial, however, to avoid latencies and oversights by making information, insights, and content assets

available when and where they are needed. Editors, for example, benefit from seeing the performance metrics on product descriptions while reviewing them in the editorial interface. Campaign managers should have access to customer profiles and segmentations as they work, not in a separate repository or Excel spreadsheet.

- **Focus attention on the tasks rather than the tools.** An integrated task flow allows marketers and other users to concentrate on process, rather than thinking about what application they need to switch to for the next stage of the work.

Figure 2

## From a “core” CEM suite to complete solution



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- **Ensure seamless data flows.** Even in the absence of their human designers and operators, complex digital experiences often depend on data flows between multiple applications and repositories. These should work smoothly and without constant IT tuning or oversight.
  - **Overcome silos.** In the course of our research, companies and their service provider partners most often cite “existing silos” as the primary barrier to improving the quality of customer experiences. Silos made sense when various departments had responsibility for distinct parts of the customer journey, such as email marketing, print advertising, website interactions, social media exchanges, sales and fulfillment, or customer support – that is, when the organization dictated the terms of the customer relationship.

Meeting these criteria provides the cohesive and orchestrated *user* experience that enables an organization to deliver the rich and engaging *customer* experience, such as the mobile app described above.

# Conclusion: How Suite Is It?

Consumers demand consistent omni-channel experiences. Companies struggle to meet this demand, due to siloed processes, technologies, and business orientations. Given the speed with which digital innovations continue to empower consumers and disrupt the established relationship between buyers and brands, every firm must begin now to create the CEM ecosystem that will support the creation and delivery of consistently positive experiences.

Suite solutions may offer an advantage to firms embarking on this transition for two reasons. First, a pre-integrated suite of core CEM applications (WCM, campaign management, analytics, etc.) allows organizations to rapidly begin learning new skills, experimenting with segmentations and data-driven marketing, and combining existing teams to support CEM. Second, the company can build on this foundation if and when its requirements call for the business to incorporate other applications and practices.

If the breadth and complexity of customer experience management tip the suite-versus-separate scale in favor of suites in *principle*, there are still two important qualifications:

- **How suite is it?** Calling a group of applications a suite does not make it integrated and cross-functional. Vendors that have acquired numerous functional components by buying other companies frequently take years to combine them into a unified suite that offers, for example, real-time process and

data integration and the display of relevant information or metrics from several functional areas in a given workflow. Such loosely coupled solutions might still be appropriate for some firms, but they do not constitute the core CEM suite discussed here. Note also that some point solutions offer “suite” functionality, such as the ability to display information from analytics and other separate applications in the WCM user interface.

- **How flexible is it?** The speed and unpredictability of shifts in technologies and consumer behaviors mean that all of the technologies, processes, and workflows that enable CEM must be designed and built in such a way that they are flexible and adaptable in the face of rapidly changing conditions. How a suite solution accommodates and incorporates existing or new third-party applications is as important as the integrated functionality it offers. Both suites and point solutions can take advantage of improved approaches, such as REST APIs, to ease the integration between applications.

When evaluating software solutions for customer experience management, it is not a question of suite or best of breed – these are, after all, no more than labels applied by vendors. In the course of a thorough evaluation process, companies must make very sure they understand, articulate, and evaluate against a detailed road map for digital customer experience, and look for the combination of software and services that will help their teams deliver.

# Endnotes

- 1 See “Like Magic” in the October 2013 edition of Wired magazine. The article quotes Bill Buxton, a principal researcher at Microsoft Research, about the proliferation of individual smart devices, with author Cliff Kuang noting: “Even as our devices have become simpler individually, the cumulative complexity of all of them is increasing. Buxton has said that the solution is to ‘stop focusing on the individual objects as islands.’” See: <http://www.wired.com/design/2013/08/design-and-the-digital-world/>.
- 2 Jakob Nielsen has dissected such “remote control anarchy.” See: <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/remote-control-anarchy/>.
- 3 For example, this blog post by BroadVision makes the case for an integrated suite for enterprise social. See: <http://www.broadvision.com/blog/blog/2010/12/02/the-best-of-breed-myth/>. Unsurprisingly, BroadVision sells Clearvale, an integrated suite for enterprise social.
- 4 This survey was conducted by Harris Interactive in 2011 and commissioned by RightNow. Selected findings are available at: <http://www.slideshare.net/RightNow/2011-customer-experience-impact-report>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 For a detailed discussion of the CEM Imperative and the role of service providers partners such as digital agencies and SIs, see Digital Clarity Group’s “Guide to Service Providers for Web Content and Customer Experience Management (2013 North American Edition).” A sample of the report is available at: [www.digitalclaritygroup.com](http://www.digitalclaritygroup.com).
- 8 <http://www.psfk.com/2012/05/facebook-like-hangers.html>.
- 9 The importance of convergence is explained in a recent book by Bob W. Lord and Ray Velez, “Converge: Transforming Business at the Intersection of Marketing and Technology,” Wiley, 2013. See: <http://www.convergebook.com/>.

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- 10 “C-Change: The Impact of Consumerization of IT,” October 2012. Available at: <http://www.aiim.org/Research-and-Publications/Research/AIIM-White-Papers/ELC-C-Change>.
  - 11 See, for example, Markus Starke’s series on artisan marketing at: <http://marcusstarke.com/marketing-orchestration/what-artisans-can-teach-us-about-marketing-part-1>.
  - 12 This formulation is indebted to Ted Schadler’s remark that “great mobile apps are architected from the user experience in, not from the database schema out.” See: “The Rise of the Chief Mobility Officer,” Financial Times, March 5, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4f2d51f6-66f6-11e1-9e53-00144feabdco.html#axzz2hubyTSAH>.
  - 13 In fact, it is safe to say that no vendor will ever offer a truly complete suite because the processes and the tools that support them emerge and change so quickly, and because “completeness” is determined by the needs of a particular organization.



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