

# Inside Channel Integration Tech

## How Channel Integration Technology is Improving Customer Experiences

**C**hannel integration technology is critical in making sure that customer experience remains a constant regardless of how a customer is communicating with a brand. Whether it's a B2B or B2C application, bringing all the data and lines of communication with a customer into one system is a big trend, and savvy organizations are figuring out the best ways to bring it all together.

### INSIDE CHANNEL INTEGRATION

Omni-channel platform solutions are built around (or directly into) customer relationship management software help bring together customer info from channels including online and over the phone. Solutions from Accenture, SAP, Oracle, Salesforce, PeopleSoft, AMC technology and Microsoft CRM, to name just a few, all address these sorts of needs in different ways.

"It's really about agent efficiency and customer experience. We've all called a call center and you're

asked to enter in your information, then you're transferred to someone else and they ask for the same information over and over again. You get frustrated," says AMC Technology director, strategic alliances Aimee Stinson.

Channel integration technology can help eliminate that problem, making life easier for your organization and for customers. When implemented properly, the end result is a system that brings all customer information together, so representatives know who they're dealing with and how best to serve them with information including purchase history, contact records and other key data points all in one location.

"The customer feels like you know them—which is especially important if they're a long-standing customer. This technology allows agents to know who they are dealing with, online or on the phone. They know what products you've purchased, they can identify opportunities to upsell products that a customer may be interested in," Stinson says.



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Representatives can also see when a customer may be frustrated if, for example, they have reached out to a company three times over the course of a week dealing with the same issue.

"This technology allows customer-facing staff to handle these types of customers differently and to get them the help they are looking for more quickly," Stinson says.

It takes more effort to generate a new customer than it does to keep an existing customer, she says, and that is what these tech solutions are all about—making sure the customer's experience is the best it can be, keeping the customers you have and having them spread the word about how good your customer service is.

"It's about reducing frustration and handling their calls efficiently," Stinson says.

With cloud-based computing, more organizations are transitioning to this kind of solution, she says. Some companies are making the decision between upgrading their current systems or moving to a hosted model instead, or integrating new elements into existing infrastructure.

"It lends itself well the architecture of the technology, because we don't need to have that homogenous infrastructure. So if there is a smaller group of 10 people that want to see if they like Salesforce, they can still use our application," Stinson says.

## B2B TRENDS

A recent study on how best to approach integrating channels through tech solutions from Forrester Consulting commissioned by Accenture and hybris, an SAP company, titled "Building The B2B Omni-Channel Commerce Platform Of The Future," shows that B2B buyer expectations are driving sellers to deliver experiences that operate seamlessly across channels.

The report indicates that B2B consumers are looking for B2C-like omni-channel capabilities from vendors, but that creating a truly integrated effective omni-channel platform isn't easy. However, among those companies that have taken the plunge and switched to an effective omni-channel commerce platform, the benefits are big, and falling behind customer expectations in omni-channel technology can leave brands in a hole they may have trouble digging out of.

The key to beginning the process and creating an effective omni-channel commerce platform is making sure that technology budgets and organizational and process changes are in alignment, according to the report. Finding a balance in bringing in new technology and the right people to operate it is critical in order to make sure that existing systems don't

## MANAGING CHANGE

When implementing new technology solutions and creating an omni-channel platform, Accenture and hybris found that it's best to create an organizational flow that lines up with customer behavior, because if those two areas don't align, it can be a recipe for problems.

The B2B companies polled in their recent "Building The B2B Omni-Channel Commerce Platform Of The Future" report said that conflict between different channel organizations, limited staff skills and employee or management resistance were the biggest challenges to getting their omni-channel strategy off the ground.

Enhancing business processes to enable omni-channel experiences is also an important step to take when implementing these solutions. Forrester found that 42 percent of B2B companies reported that sharing customer data and analytics between channels and locations was a big challenge to fully implementing omni-channel strategies.

Finally, technical challenges can also cause snags when implementing these kinds of omni-channel platform solutions. Forrester data shows that 44 percent of B2B firms find that integrating with back-office systems has been the biggest obstacle in getting an omni-channel strategy off the ground.

Tech solutions such as AMC's Contact Canvas gives users the ability to integrate with those various existing components.

"If you are using disparate systems or multiple CRM or telephony platforms, you can still use Contact Canvas. So one organization may be using a combination of Cisco and Salesforce, while another may use SAP and Aspect, they can still mix and match components and use this solution," Stinson says.

"We have seen several customers throughout the years switch telephony platforms, or acquire other organizations and they still want to leverage their investment in Contact Canvas and they're able to deliver a unified agent experience through one product," she says.

drag down progress in this area.

B2B buyers are now expecting an easy to use solution for making purchases across all channels. Nearly 75 percent of B2B buyer respondents told Forrester that the ability to quickly search for product information across channels is important or very important when making online work-related purchases, while sixty-eight percent said that it is important or very important to be able to view all their activities across all channels.

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"I think that customers expect that their experience isn't going to diminish based on the channel that they're using, and they expect customer service reps to have the full 360-degree view. They need to be able to know if a customer just emailed and tweeted at the company in real time. Customers expect the customer service reps to know all of that," Stinson says.

"With that in mind, organizations are going to be driven to start looking at all of the other channels so that the agent experience is the same and the customer experience is the same," she says.

## BIG EXPECTATIONS

B2B buyers also expect integrated channel fulfillment initiatives, according to Accenture and hybris' data: Almost three-quarters of respondents believe that it is important or very important for B2B companies to offer the ability to buy something from a branch and have it shipped to them directly, while 61 percent believe it is important for suppliers to deliver items the same day they are ordered.

A total of 40 percent of respondents said the ability to reserve or buy online and pick up from a branch is now expected. It's also important to note that Forrester's research found buyers who are more used to omni-channel strategies are likely to be more active, loyal and higher-spending customers.

Once consumers get a taste of optimized omni-channel solutions, they like what they see. The "Building The B2B Omni-Channel Commerce Platform Of The Future" report also indicates that 75 percent of B2B buyers would buy again from the same supplier because of that supplier's omni-channel capabilities.

In addition to looking for omni-channel capabilities, buyers are also looking for merchants to stand out from the competition by providing them with

top-notch customer service, low prices and a wide selection of products to choose from, according to Forrester.

B2B companies have figured out the need to deliver a seamless omni-channel commerce environment for customers, according to the data. Over 80 percent of B2B companies polled believe that an omni-channel strategy is critical to a company's long-term success by driving more sales and profit, and a total of 85 percent of those who responded to Forrester's poll percent believe that technology investment decisions will be centered on their omni-channel strategy.

## THE FUTURE IS NOW

Eighty percent or more of online B2B sellers are planning to invest in, implement, or upgrade their ecommerce platform within the next six months, according to Forrester, because systems and platforms that are currently in place are not up to par to support today's omni-channel requirements. B2B companies are also looking to invest in order management system technology solutions to enhance how customers fulfill their orders, as well as use data and analytics to help break down channel silos and provide personalized experiences and product recommendations.

## WHAT'S REQUIRED

Today's connected customers are demanding the tools and technologies that are needed to meet their needs, which means that new tech solutions in this area will need to integrate smoothly with existing systems. According to Forrester's data, more than 40 percent of B2B buyers said that back-end integration with financing, accounting, order management systems or enterprise resource planning systems were attributes they were looking for in tech suppliers.

"The technology evolves faster than the organizations that are out there and willing to see if it will work for them. I think eventually we'll see all of that catch up," Stinson says.

Strong search functions are also now an expected feature in omni-channel systems. Accenture and hybris' report shows that 60 percent of B2B buyers named enhanced search as one of their top three features, and nearly half (48 percent) of B2B sellers ranked enhanced search as a top technology priority.

Enhanced personalization is also important, as half of the B2B buyers Forrester surveyed identified improved personalization as being a key feature for potential suppliers, while 42 percent of B2B online sellers saw the need for improved personalization as

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## KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Channel integration technology developers recognize that keeping solutions user-friendly is important to organizations.

"You always want to keep things pretty simple for agents. We work with a lot of different verticals—from traditional call centers to organizations that have workers with deeper knowledge and experience than traditional call centers where there's a lot of turnover," Stinson says.

"You want to keep it pretty simple for organizations that are training new agents on a constant basis. It should be intuitive," she says.

The implementation process for these types of multichannel integration solutions has become very simple compared to where it was in the past.

"We try to streamline that process and get people up and running quickly. In the past, suppliers worked on a consulting model, whereas now it's more of a self-service world," Stinson says.

End-users or their consulting partner can now do the install themselves with relative ease and get the system running on all cylinders.

"I think the technology has evolved so that the integration points are not as complex. We're trying to make them less complex than they used to be so that it doesn't require a lot of consulting services for basic scenarios. There are still customers that have very specific custom requirements where we have to work with them a little bit more because they want a custom screen pop or something like that. But the trend is to get them up and running as quickly as possible," Stinson says.

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a top priority when looking for tech solutions.

B2B buyers also want omni-channel platforms to have the ability to support multiple options for payment options. A total of 69 percent of B2B buyers prefer to use instant online forms of payment such as credit cards or payment systems over purchase orders, invoices and eProcurement portals, according to Forrester.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The bottom line is that a majority of B2B companies are going to be upgrading tech solutions in this area in the near future, and that creating an e-commerce platform that can handle customer demand is critical.

Moving forward, successful platforms will need to support a multiple channels, while providing the

ability to personalize experiences for different users (such as bilingual capabilities) and offer reports and analytics to measure effectiveness.

Accenture and hybris found that reporting and analytics of transactions, customer interactions, and the effectiveness of marketing campaigns can give B2B organizations the ability to personalize customers' shopping experiences and to tailor their messaging to different target segments.

"From a business perspective it's great, because this technology reduces the number of errors that agents make when manually entering notes into a system. The system generates a lot of those things automatically and helps guide the agents through the customer interaction, as well, so businesses are able to track their metrics a little more efficiently and accurately," Stinson says.

Forrester's research shows that three-quarters of B2B sellers agreed that their e-commerce platform needs to smoothly integrate with back-end finance, accounting, OMS or ERP systems, as well as integrate with call center systems, fulfillment systems and popular social media platforms.

## MOVING FORWARD

Cloud-based solutions are the next big wave of channel integration systems that organizations will be focusing in on in the future.

"Moving into the cloud is going to be something that everyone is looking at, and weighing out those costs versus benefits. We have a lot of customers that are working in a mixed model mode, where part of the solution is on-premise and part of it is in the cloud. I think we'll see more of that, and a lot of customers are looking at multichannel again. Most organizations have to support their customers through social, through email, through live chat and telephony. Telephony and email are still, by far, the most popular. When they really need to get something done, people are still picking up the phone, they're not emailing," Stinson says.

"I believe [live online] chat will also become more and more popular. Again, it's all about the customer experience. I think you'll see a lot of organizations looking at self-serve models—how much can we automate and how much scripting can we get out there so that people can find what they need without even having an agent," Stinson says. **!**



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