

## No channel is an island: Why consistency is key to customer service

By Rob Bamforth, Principal Analyst, Quocirca Ltd

Despite the homogenisation of many high streets and growth of national and international retailers, stores, service levels and customer experiences vary widely.

Whether small shop, independent retailer or chain store, some businesses appear to 'get it' and some simply do not.

In the UK, retail guru Mary Portas has presented TV shows and writes regular columns where she assesses the customer experience offered by a particular store and provides recommendations for change.

If only there was something similar on offer for online retailers.

While online retailing is significant and still growing strongly, especially for some top brands, today the gap between an average online shopping experience and a great online shopping experience is vast.

Over the years, some glaring errors have come from the initial idea that 'internet commerce' was somehow separate from 'real' commerce. For example, a catalogue company famous for its vast range and quick service launched an online shop with only a handful of products and long delivery times. And airlines and electrical goods suppliers failed to link their web page offer prices to the 'real' data in their core systems, resulting in customer frustration, reputational damage and in some cases an official rap on the knuckles. This lack of consistent product presentation was a significant issue then that too often recurs today.

In the early days of web commerce, companies were fortunate that the internet was embryonic, some growth pains were tolerated and that communication between web users was more related to computer networking than social networking. Today, however, a viral frenzy of tweets, pokes, blogs and links ensure that a customer's thumbs down can be distributed widely and instantly.

Since the growth of online and telephone sales channels means many sellers rarely see customers face to face, they have to work even harder at establishing a relevant and valuable relationship with them - service and experience is key.

All retailers are affected by the technology shifts that give potential customers many ways to shop - physical stores, telephone ordering, websites etc - but the issue is more pronounced where the goods or services on offer are becoming commoditised.

This is particularly apparent in the field of telecoms where operators have already tried the 'confusopoly' approach (a term coined by Dilbert cartoonist Scott Adams referring to the myriad tariff options favoured by many utilities) - the multi-service bundling of triple, quad and more-play - and are now having to deal with left-field competitors from California in the form of internet crossovers like Google and Apple. In the telecoms world, margins are tight and falling, services are becoming more complex and support costs are increasing, and infrastructure needs further investment - so how should operators deal with the opportunity and threat of online commerce?

Chiefly by not repeating the mistakes of e-commerce's early days and regarding e-tail as new, separate or different.

Externally, telecoms companies need to integrate their approach to all modes of customer interaction, rather than treating them as separate stovepipes. For some, such as mobile operators with high street stores run as franchises, this might be a little harder to start with, but it is worthwhile.

It should not matter where a customer calls into a shop - any shop - or accesses a website, or calls or emails into a contact centre: the response, whether to a sales enquiry or support request, should be dealt with simply and consistently.

There also needs to be 'persistence' in the relationship between operator and customer, so that the customer is recognised and treated as the individual they are, with service and product offering tailored to their needs.

This should also extend to allowing a customer to use different media as and when they need throughout the sales or support lifecycle. In this way, for example, the sales process could start in store, involve phone calls to clarify details, have the transaction confirmed online for customer pickup at yet another physical premises. This gives customer freedom, but also ensures the operator is aware of the whole process.

This awareness needs to translate into a consistent and coherent internal understanding of the relationship across all internal departments. It is pointless having a great sales website and in-store experience if the first call for support gets answered with a 'who are you?'. Internal departments need to be working with a common view of each customer - not only does this ease the customer experience, it also keeps costs down. For some operators this will be quite a shift, from being product, bearer or network centric to being completely oriented around the customer.

This orientation needs to stretch further too, as existing and potential customers have a vast array of information sources and relationships at their fingertips; news of good and bad experience travels fast across online social networks.

Operators need to recognise the social element of commerce and up their game to ensure they are not only a positive part of the online background buzz and conversations, but that they are somehow sufficiently engaged to be influencing them.

A quick look over their shoulder to Google or Apple will remind them that the left field is not only a very inviting place to play, but it is closer than they think.

Whether online, in the high street, via a contact centre or social network, a good customer experience is key to successful commerce. For more on the changes in the telecoms commerce landscape, download this free Quocirca report.

## About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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