



“But I already gave all my information at the store”

By: René van Diepen

We have all experienced it in one form or another. You buy something, and willingly offer the cashier your personal information convinced of the fact that the business values you and your patronage, and will henceforth accord you the highest level of service by knowing this information. You leave the store pleased and head for home. Fast-forward to the first instance when you need to phone the organisation and the call centre has no idea who you are or any record of your purchase – “stores represent a different business unit, we are the call centre”. The Internet presents another problem. The convenience promised by the web is often mitigated by a lack of sharing of customer data that renders you anonymous to an organisation that you may have purchased from for years. Channel synchronicity, or the lack thereof, is an issue that many firms are wrestling with in this new era of multi-channel organisations.

Thinking for a moment about the task of synchronizing channels, it is not surprising that we face the level of information sharing across channels that we do. Sharing customer information real time across customer touchpoints, requires firms to essentially reinvent their organisation placing the customer at the centre. Not an insignificant task.

A logical question is why bother? Indeed there may be instances where the costs of such an

investment will outweigh the benefits. However there are several facts that argue in favour of exploring the notion. First, expectations are being developed externally. Regardless of whether you or your competitors embrace this type of change, service levels that exist outside your sphere of competition may force your hand. Positive experiences on the Amazon web site create service expectations for citizens e-filing their taxes with Revenue Canada (Canada Customs and Revenue Agency). Secondly, although evolving slowly, channels are proliferating. In addition to standard channels such as face-to-face, fax, mail, phone and Internet, newer communication capabilities such as IVR (interactive voice response), e-mail, chat, wireless device, and web co-browsing also exist. Thus the problem will only continue to become more complex.

Having explored some of the drivers, what are the possible benefits one can expect? From the customer perspective, channel synchronicity implies a seamless relationship regardless of the channel used to contact the organisation. It implies better customer service as information is used to increase the probability of offering the right product, to the right person, at the right price, at the right time. It implies a consistency in the level of service received because information can be better shared internally, and the service standards are made public. And finally it implies an increase in



customer satisfaction from having dealt with an organisation that has customers at the center of everything they do.

From the organisation's perspective, channel synchronicity implies higher levels of employee satisfaction and productivity as they are now empowered to better serve customers by having more and better information at their fingertips. It implies greater efficiency by placing the same information in the hands of all service staff, and cost savings as customers are encouraged to self-serve. With servicing costs across channel being both significantly different, and continuing to change as technology delivers greater efficiencies, it also implies cost avoidance.

A word of warning. Allocate resources such that service levels are equal across channels. Having an outstanding website that displays product well and converts many sales, only to fall down when the fulfillment process ships the product to the wrong address, undoes all the goodwill created by the web site.

A dose of reality. If you haven't synchronized your information sharing across all you are not alone. According to attendees at a Forrester Executive Strategy Forum in 2000, only about half of organisations had synchronized just *two* of their channels.

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