

LINING UP YOUR DUCKS

How to make unified retail work.

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WITH digital technology changing almost all aspects of our lives, it can come as no surprise that traditional retailing, too, is being turned on its head. The familiar model that funnels customers along a linear path to buying is giving way to an exciting new paradigm of placing the individual at the centre of a unified field of purchasing touchpoints.

So-called omni-channel, or unified retailing, promises a seamless experience across a host of coordinated options for customer-retailer interactions including online, in-store, social, mobile, kiosk and call-centre. You might buy online and pick-up in store or access an “endless aisle” of goods from an in-store kiosk and have your purchase delivered to your doorstep directly from the manufacturer or wholesaler.

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For customers, the possibilities are empowering, even exhilarating. But for retailers, while offering exceptional efficiencies and startlingly more inventive ways of selling, they can also present plenty of challenges and opportunities for stumbling.

The key to delivering on unified retail’s promise is to align front-end, customer-facing aspects with all the back-end, behind-the-scenes business processes. The better front and back are integrated, the better unified retail will succeed. Here are some of the key points to consider in making the unified model work for your business.

Prepare for the plunge: planning and forecasting

If you jump in at the deep end, you’re more likely to sink than swim. Successful unified retail requires careful planning and smart forecasting. A good start is listening to social media to help determine consumer trends, expectations and choices. Knowing where consumers are heading puts you on the path to understanding required products, volumes and categories based on channels, regions and categories. Leveraging artificial intelligence tools for better business intelligence gets you to your destination. With unified, retailers more than ever need to have a grasp on what and how much goes where and when.

Additional planning considerations touch on physical plant and staffing. What should your retail spaces look like under a model offering online purchasing and drop shipping? How much space should you be devoting to in-store stock and inventory? How do you arrange operations to support, for example, in-store pick up or online ordering from in-store kiosks? As for your people, do they have the mindset and skills to support unified at all levels? Are they comfortable and competent overseeing and fulfilling sales from multiple touchpoints? Where do you find people who are? How do you train existing staff to acquire the necessary skills?



A unified retail approach for a better customer experience.

Optimize Your Processes: Buying and Moving

Meeting customer expectations for a unified retail approach requires evolved buying and selling processes that support such key components as drop shipping and endless aisles. Typically, the attention given to these processes will have the greatest impact on a unified retail initiative's failure or success.

Information

Generating and disseminating information accurately and consistently is essential. Moving goods from distributors or manufacturers to end customers across all channels and touchpoints depends critically on making reliable retail data available. Information on products, inventory, the customer, the order and the price must move along the delivery chain without variation or confusion. On the buying side, product details and such digital assets as images, specs and videos must be managed, distributed and published harmoniously. Whatever the touchpoint, geography or time, customers should encounter information that is consistent and mutually reinforcing. Content across all channels should always be, so to speak, on the same page.

Management

Management is a second key component. Since, with unified retail, orders can come from anywhere and at any time, managing orders to ensure prompt, efficient, glitch-free fulfilment presents particular challenges, especially when multiple and/or volatile products (e.g. perishable groceries) are involved. Processing orders from whatever the touchpoint, determining product location, delivering a product from the most efficient source (it costs to bring it in from a far-off warehouse when it exists at a nearby store) are all involved. In fact, managing orders for prompt fulfilment touches on everything from logistics to inventory, planning to sales, product information management to pricing and supplier purchase order management to invoice management.

Management of warehouses and inventories also comes into play. Omni-channel selling is not simply a complement to traditional in-store sales. Different volumes are involved, requiring different product allocations and replenishments and different means of delivery and fulfillment. For unified retail to thrive, inventory and warehouse management must be optimized by leveraging the most advanced digital tools and systems available.

Partnership

One last key to successful buying and moving in a unified retail environment stands out: choosing the right partners. Do the distributors, wholesaler and manufacturers you partner with now—and, more importantly, plan to partner with in future—understand the needs and workings of unified retail? Do they have the flexibility, for example, to accommodate the varying product volume needs that necessarily attend the new model? Are they able and willing to integrate their operational solutions with yours to provide efficient B2B eCommerce transactions or to support seamless sales and fulfillment? Can they provide visibility on logistics and inventory? These are among the questions you need to ask in making partnership decisions.

Deliver the Promise: Marketing and Selling

In the end, it comes down to effective marketing and selling. But with unified, the past is no sure guide. Marketing and selling have got to be re-thought and pursued on new terms.

Unified Customer

As customers take the lead in determining how to interact with retailers and brands, retailers are facing rising expectations on price,



UNIFIED INTEGRATION... IN JUST SIX MONTHS

The New Brunswick Liquor Corporation, operating as Alcool NB Liquor (ANBL), holds responsibility for the purchase, importation, distribution, and retail activity for all beverage alcohol in province of New Brunswick. Following the legalization of Cannabis, ANBL received the mandate to be sole seller in the province, including online and in-store purchases under its subsidiary Cannabis NB.

With access to a newly formed line of business, ANBL wanted to understand their consumers' expectations and behaviors in order to provide optimal service. In addition, it faced challenges related to the need for strict compliance with regulations for the commercialization of cannabis, which requires it to provide detailed educational information about cannabis products and their effects, as part of a strong social responsibility mission. As a result, the retailer's need for an integrated unified approach was greatly accelerated.

For this reason, ANBL turned to its implementation partner to help it achieve its goals of developing a content-rich platform and a robust commerce experience. And, within six months, its partner had assisted ANBL in selecting Microsoft Dynamics 365 for Finance and Operations, and natively integrating with Episerver Digital Experience Cloud, for its cannabis retail solution under the subsidiary Cannabis NB.

The implementation partner helped ANBL build and implement the solution in less than 6 months, and now fully supports the province's cannabis online and retail sales operations, including product and catalog management; payment and checkout; comprehensive educational content, and operations management for 20 physical stores.

choice, convenience, speed and service. Increasingly, delivering the goods means bringing a single unified view of the customer to interactions across all the touchpoints--in-store, online, by telephone or by mobile device. With consistency across channels, new possibilities arise for deploying personalized and segmented offers and services that drive satisfaction and loyalty. CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems, personalization engines, marketing automation tools and loyalty programs all have a role to play.

Searchandizing

Merchandizing in the emerging new era of unified is quickly moving far beyond the old considerations of where and how products can be shown to advantage on in-store shelves. The action is increasingly centring on online searching and searchability, particularly in association with the use of mobile and voice recognition. Understanding customer needs and behaviours as well as the language they typically use is essential to ensuring search results meet search requests optimally. Retailers need to deploy AI tools and solutions that can negotiate a host of different criteria and objectives, both for the customer and for themselves.

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The New Store

The new store cannot be the same as the old store. Integrating its mission and operation with the larger unified retail experience is the new imperative. As only one in an array of possible points of contact with customers, it must increasingly act in concert with other touchpoints. Today's stores are, for example, complementing experiences initiated on other channels or, conversely, initiating experiences other channels will see to completion.

To meet the evolving service expectations of technologically-savvy and equipped consumers, stores must themselves integrate the right advanced tools for understanding needs, optimizing selection and enhancing product information. Deploying tools such as modern mobile POS (point-of-sales) devices to end line-ups and enhance in-store experiences is also a must. As is using technology to drive inventory management efficiencies essential to drop shipping success.

The new store may not even need to exist as a physical, or at least conventional, point-of-sale. Conceive of it existing almost anywhere in a number of different forms. It can be a social platform or marketplace in the ether. It can be a pop-up at an event. It can be an automated kiosk in a mall.

Our Endpoint

Unified retail requires a unified purpose and approach. Only when implemented at every step of the retail business value chain can it deliver on providing seamless buying experiences, empowering customers and driving operational efficiencies. 

For more information concerning the ways ThinkMax can help your business achieve Unified Retail success, visit www.thinkmax.com/unifiedretail.