

Increased focus on user experience is key in B2B market

In order to stay competitive in this digital world, B2B organisations are constantly looking for ways to stand out in the crowd and create a competitive advantage. Providing the optimal customer experience plays a crucial role here. Walker Consultants estimates that the customer experience will be far more significant to business strategy than product and price by 2020. In our previous article '[B2B market fails to leverage opportunities in digital commerce due to unstructured product content](#)', we have already shown that centralising information is the first step on the road to successful B2B e-commerce. This time, we will take an in-depth look at optimising the customer experience. Which steps do you need to take immediately in order to keep up with the growing customer expectations, or to even exceed them to not be left behind?

Optimum service

The customer experience consists of the result of all interactions that a customer has with the supplier, regardless which phase of the purchasing process you are in. This concept is old news to sellers in the B2C market. When the customer makes an online purchase, they expect to be able to track the status of the order continuously, to contact someone quickly through their preferred channel if there are any problems, and to have access to sufficient information online to be able to make a decision. In each stage of the process, the B2C customer expects optimal service and information; when that is not the case, they communicate their displeasure (preferably publicly) through social media. So far, the B2B market has managed to follow these developments in the consumer market reasonably easily. However, in order to stay relevant in the future, it is time for these organisations to take a good, hard look at their own operations.

Digital content is key in B2B market

One of the biggest changes in recent years is the fact that digital has shifted to top priority in the corporate procurement process. This applies not only to the actual purchase, but also to gathering information and identifying the right product. Back in 2015, Forrester surveys showed that 74% of B2B buyers research half of their business purchases online, and 30% will conclude their business purchases online. The annual B2B Buyer's Survey 2017 from Demand Gen Report also shows that content plays a crucial role in the B2B purchase process. A significant 75% of B2B executives say that the suppliers' content played a key role in selecting the winning supplier. In addition, 89% indicated that the winning supplier provided content which made it easier to show ROI or to set up a business case.

From a traditional perspective, the B2B market is used to starting with touchpoints based on outbound activities, such as email and telemarketing. Today's purchasers of, say, construction materials or printers first want to check reviews online and consult social media before contacting the sales department. Purchasers would rather trust the knowledge they have gained for themselves than rely on a sales representative. How they interact with an organisation after that is also continuing to shift in the B2B playing field. At the moment, the top three interaction methods are: email, phone and in person. In 2020, these channels will probably have been replaced by an online community, social media and the corporate website. In addition, those media channels are not just changing; more channels are being added all the time. This means that information needs to be made available in more places, but also that it is fed into the organisation from more places. Each (digital) interaction means valuable data for the organisation. Centralising it is therefore an important step in systematically improving the customer experience.

From making an effort to self-service

B2B customers are still currently expected to make an effort in the process of making a purchase. That would be a positive thing, if we were talking about a self-service portal that provides added value to the customer in every step of the purchasing process. However, the B2B market has not quite reached that phase. In many cases, no one really knows the full context of the customer's situation, because the information is not connected. Master data is spread across various systems within the organisation, without the information being linked. This means that the customer is personally responsible for making connections between information. For instance, the customer must enter their order number to access their latest status, and enter their customer number in another portal to ask a question about their invoice history. Organisations lack a comprehensive understanding of the customer, and the customer is unable to get an overview.

Central customer profile with SAP Hybris

Building a customer profile by centralising or linking data is a crucial step in improving the user experience. The customer's contact information, complaints, questions, tickets and order history: all the interactions must be documented. This requires the proper tooling. As a B2B e-commerce system, SAP Hybris makes centralising and connecting data possible with one single solution. This single system can be used to access and manage all the information a B2B organisation needs. This will help B2B organisations to make the transformation from a traditional service organisation to a self-service provider. By doing so, you will eliminate personal contact with the customer, but rather provide customers with the flexibility they have grown accustomed to from the B2C channel.

Anticipating the future

The B2B Marketing Trend Report from the Platform for Innovation in Marketing (PIM) and Spotler shows that content marketing comes first (57%), followed closely by the customer experience (35%) as the key priority for organisations in 2017. E-commerce and digitisation tied for fourth place (20%). Improving the customer experience is not just about digital factors, of course, but especially in the B2B market, there is still much to gain to avoid eating dust as your competitors pull ahead. Service and customer experience play an increasingly important role in choosing a supplier; B2B organisations that ignore the trend will face serious risks to their brand reputation in the near future.

The next step in B2B e-commerce

Since customer profiles are incomplete, customers are primarily sent generic information, for instance in emails. The content was not selected specifically for the customer, making it debatable whether these messages are even going to be read. A good step would be to draw up customer profiles based on a specific group of customers and zoom in on the individual customer from that point. Selecting a specific B2B e-commerce system to actually see who your customer is will not only improve the experience on the customer side, but will also provide you with additional insights. By connecting customer interactions, you will be able to see trends in your customer's behaviour. Which products are they looking at? What are they requesting quotes for? How have their experiences been? This information will help you approach the customer at the right time with the right products.

Finally, improving the user experience in 2017 also means that companies can no longer ignore communication channels such as video, chat and Instant Messaging such as WhatsApp. However, before the B2B market can start adding these additional communication channels, the customer information first needs to be structured in an accessible way. B2C is currently way ahead of the game, but B2B organisations still may be able to bridge that gap. For those companies that are actually in pursuit of satisfied customers, as well as claiming a unique position in the B2B market, it is vital to invest in user experience. It is time to cast off the mantle of mediocrity and stand out in the crowd.