B2B market fails to leverage opportunities in digital commerce due to unstructured product content

In order to continue meeting customer expectations, a growing number of organisations in the B2B market are moving towards some form of digital commerce. However, few B2B organisations have already optimised their e-commerce platform to such an extent that they have been able to compete with the leading examples from the B2C world. In practice, one crucial step is still skipped too often: structuring the product information. When product ranges could well contain hundreds or even hundreds of thousands of items, a Product Information Management System is essential in simplifying how the information is managed, but also in providing an optimal customer experience.

The current situation in digital commerce

Business clients view the online shopping experience with popular online retailers as the new standard and are only satisfied when they have a similar experience in B2B. At the least, this means displaying accurate, consistent and relevant product information. To that end, it is key to centralise information.

SAP Hybris and CMO Council recently conducted a worldwide survey amongst senior marketers, researching the connection between marketing and e-commerce processes. Only 1%indicated that those processes connected seamlessly. Over half (52%) of marketers indicate that they are currently in transition towards establishing such a connection between all processes and are alreadypartly there. Marketers have high standards for the time they spend on using marketing and e-commerce technology. 71%believe that marketing, e-commerce and IT teams are currently not spending their time efficiently, and may in fact be unable to do so, because they are oftenassigned to separate departments.

Marketers have also been asked about their biggest challenges in using data optimally to achieve customer insights. Their responses resulted in the following list:
- Data is often 'locked away' in organisational silos, out of the reach of marketing departments (21%)
- There is too much data to effectively manage, analyse and use in real-time action (20%)
- The problem is not the data but the organisation: ensuring that people and processes convert data into actionable insights(19%)
- The data is a mess, and filtering raw data to produce useful insights has proven difficult (12%)

B2B e-commerce: from idea to action

In practice, B2B companies still too often treat e-commerce sites as an online catalogue for products and services. Even when there are options to order products online, it is still quite a search for customers to find the right products. As a result, potential customers get discouraged and go elsewhere, while current customers turn back to traditional sales channels, such as phone calls and sales reps. This not only detracts from the customer experience, but also takes up companies' valuable time.

Many companies in the B2B market have plenty of good ideas regarding e-commerce. These include options like automating customer-specific prices and contracts, providing a personalised catalogue or making it possible for clients to request quotes online. For instance, one indispensable functionality in a B2B e-commerce platform is the option to compare products and offer accessories and alternatives based on parameters like product type. Structured data is key in order to successfully implement all of these ideas. It is a crucial step which is often skipped in practice. In the context of

the ever-increasing consolidation in the B2B market, with those huge product ranges becoming even bigger and more varied, structuring information has become more important than ever. All these various products have individual specifications which need to be clearly communicated to customers for the best digital experience. The customer's need for information will only continue to increase in the upcoming years. In order to anticipate an effective response beforehand, now is the time to actually convert ideas into action. But where to start?

Complexity of product content

The product content associated with B2B products can be very complex –not just a long list of technical featuresand specifications, but also datasheets, manuals, etc. Most of the e-commerce systems are easily capable of storing these characteristics as such, but are unable to do so using a uniform and structured approach. In addition, these systems do not reveal poor quality, or show whether data is complete. In other words, the various product types that the B2B marketworks with have not be taken into consideration. Companies that link their ERP systems directly to their e-commerce system also have to deal with this problem. The envisioned solution does not work, because customers are able to access back-office information in an e-commerce environment, but still do not have the information they need to actually place an order. If you truly want to make the customer happy, then it is time for the B2B market to invest in a solid foundation, preparing the way for the next ten steps.

Challenge: move data from people's minds into the PCM system

In the B2B market, the main challenge for managing product information is the many different categories, types and combinations of products. The data that companies have is primarily technical in nature and sufficient for distribution and logistics, and for sales representatives to sell products. However, it is not sufficient to just offer access to the data through a digital channel. The customer wants to be able to search as accurately and easy through the digital data as they can on any other consumer site.

Users expect the best search results, neatly displayed in a list, and preferably with suggestions for related products. That is why as much relevant product content as possible needs to be stored and available online. All of that information needs to be collected from the minds of employees and loose files and be stored in a structured PIM system. These systems are specifically designed to structure, manage and save this type of information.

Automation for easy management

The huge amount of product information and its complexity do not only make it difficult for B2B organisations to provide access online –a lot of time is also lost in managing that information. Information is often scattered across different departments, usually managed and updated manually. IT, sales and marketing departments rarely work together efficiently at this point. The IT department is often operationally involved in product enhancement, since the business users (e.g. in marketing and sales) do not have the right tools for that. In addition, marketing and sales departments invest considerable time in constantly enriching that information by hand. When organisations automate processes and opt for an all-in-one solution instead of separate, independent systems, they can reduce their time-to-market considerably. This will move IT and the business closer together. With that step, the focus will shift from systems to marketing and the business.

A Product Content Management system not only ensures that information is available, but also that it is managed in the right way. As a result, organisations will be more capable of measuring, optimising and monitoring the quality of data. Centralised, structured information storage makes it possible for you to avoid managing redundant information about similar products separately. To give an example: think of safety shoes offered in various sizes, which have many similar characteristics. As an administrator, you want to implement the changes or additions to the product features only once, not a hundred times for each individual shoe. Category-based updates are based on classification: products are arranged e.g. based on corresponding characteristics or specifications. If the product range grows, the redundant content will increase rapidly if the data is no longer managed properly.

Invest in a B2B digital commerce strategy

Channels for digital commerce are not used when insufficient product information is available or when it is not structured. A PCM system can help you serve your customers better. The first step now is optimising product content, but after that you can truly inspire people with your digital commerce. B2B e-commerce is a strategy, not a quick win. That is why you should make sure not to skip steps at the start, and avoid investing in halfway solutions. The information within your organisation is worth its weight in gold; all you have to do is cash in now.