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Managing the B2B Customer Experience:

Do Enough to Make an Impact  
or Don't Bother Doing It at All

The overall customer experience is critical to growth and competitive differentiation for business-to-business (B2B) companies. Yet, fewer than one quarter of companies excel in delivering experiences that customers notice and deliver significant value. However, the select group that does it "right", enjoys higher-than-average revenue growth. And they generate robust investment returns on their customer experience initiatives. With sound strategies and solid execution abilities, these leaders show other B2B companies how to grow revenues through customer experience excellence.

## Just a Fad? Or driver of sustainable growth?

B2B companies are finally recognizing what their business-to-business (B2C) peers have long understood, according to Accenture's 2015 B2B Customer Experience survey. Customer experiences matter—a lot.

- 86 percent of B2B executives consider the customer experiences provided during sales and service interactions to be very important, and 41 percent put the customer experience at the top of their list of strategic priorities.<sup>1</sup>
- 79 percent are convinced that a differentiated sales and service customer experience has a direct effect on business results, and 78 percent believe it provides a competitive advantage.

Leaders in industrial equipment, consumer goods, and logistics and transportation businesses have made the greatest strides in improving their customers' end-to-end interactions. But executives in all industries included in Accenture's research recognize customer experiences' long-term potential. More than 90 percent indicated

their intention to maintain or increase their spending on customer experience initiatives in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) believe that customer experience-related considerations will play an even larger role in their overall corporate strategy in the next two years.

What is fueling B2B companies' growing interest and investments in customer experience? Digital advances, primarily. Easy digital access to information, products and channels has made the traditional buying path—in which customers moved from discovery to consideration to evaluation to purchase—all but obsolete. Companies need a new customer model for today's Nonstop Customer. Business customers continuously evaluate the products, services and brand promises that surround them. In response, B2B businesses are adopting digital technologies to enable them to offer the seamless, cross-channel interactions that business customers have come to expect as individual consumers (although they are much more complex in B2B). Those technologies are necessary enablers of satisfying customer experiences. But, as many B2B companies are learning, they are not sufficient.



## Winning the race to mediocrity?

As B2B companies attempt to expand their customer experience capabilities, many are wondering if their investments are worth it. It's a fair question. Only 23 percent of B2B companies achieve strong returns.<sup>3</sup> At the opposite end of the spectrum, 20 percent generate low or even negative returns on their customer experience investments. One of the more common reasons they perform poorly is they either don't have the right people or their people don't have the right skills to deliver the right kind of customer experiences. These companies are learning the hard way that mastery of customer experiences can't be faked.

That leaves the majority (57 percent) of B2B companies in the middle, idling in customer experience mediocrity, but most didn't set out to win the race to mediocrity. Most of these companies have prioritized customer experiences. And they've developed some strategy and execution capabilities. Yet, they struggle. On average, this group generates just 58 percent of customer experience leaders' return on investments (ROI). Accenture's analysis reveals three groups:

- Execution Heroes have great skills when it comes to implementing initiatives to boost performance. What they lack is a sound strategy for creating sustainable, satisfying customer experiences.
- Strategy Standouts not only know the types of experiences they want their customers to have, but also understand the effect these experiences could have on their financial performance. They lack the resources or skills, however, to bring the vision to life.
- Average Achievers are just that. They have some, but not all, of the strategic priorities and/or operational abilities needed to execute that strategy. They fail to set themselves apart in meaningful ways.

## Sustaining—and monetizing—distinctive customer experiences

The few B2B companies that consistently and significantly outperform their peers in the customer experience arena have both strong strategies and execution capabilities. They approach the end-to-end customer experience differently. They achieve, maintain and monetize their mastery of customer experiences by adhering to three counterintuitive principles.

### Principle 1:

#### Start from the back to get to the front

Many B2B companies still consider service to be a final and separate phase of the customer lifecycle. That thinking no longer applies. Customer service is a particularly important element of a customer experience strategy, and service channels are as—if not more—important than sales channels to business growth. Leaders get this. They don't just improve their service offerings. They position service as:

**The gateway to the outcome economy.** Many B2B companies are moving from selling products or services to selling solutions that solve customers' problems. Leaders go even further. They skip solution-selling to focus on delivering outcomes that make their customers' lives better. DuPont®, for example, is increasingly focused on selling the promise of improved crop yields.<sup>4</sup> DuPont and others know that they can achieve better economic outcomes by helping their customers achieve better economic outcomes. Service is a key part of the new "outcome model" and an increasingly important method of monetizing the customer experience.

**A channel for proactive engagement.** Leaders don't set themselves apart by fixing things once they break. They focus on proactive maintenance and preventing problems in the first place.

Industrial supply company W.W. Grainger, Inc. improved experiences by connecting its field force to customer service with digital technologies. At the same time, it invested in the hiring and training of 600 territory field reps to better serve the company's small and medium business customers.<sup>5,6</sup>

**The new sales.** Service has historically been considered the final stage of customer relationships and isolated from sales. No longer. In the world of winning customer experiences, product and service are one-and-the-same, combined to drive outcome-based growth. BMW AG is blurring the lines with its introduction of product geniuses in its dealerships. These individuals are not tasked with selling cars, but with demonstrating high-tech features. They are, in effect, customer advisors on hand to help prospective buyers discover a lifestyle experience.<sup>7</sup>

## Principle 2: Over-invest in traditional capabilities

Generating strong returns from customer experience investments requires a commitment to delivering great end-to-end customer experiences across multiple channels. Despite digital's effect on customers' behaviors, preferences and expectations, B2B companies can't ignore the non-digital enablers of customer engagement.

Leaders understand that traditional, offline channels are as critical as ever. They invest twice as much as their peers in traditional post-sales capabilities such as contact centers, field service processes and tools, service talent development, and even legacy CRM systems. Those investments pay off. Nearly all leaders (97 percent) believe they have the right people, tools and resources to achieve their customer experience objectives. Their financial results confirm they're right.

## Principle 3: Over-invest in digital capabilities

Companies that achieve the greatest return on their customer experience investments have the highest confidence in digital's impact on customer experience delivery. For example, 63 percent of leaders believe their digital investments will positively affect customer interactions over the next two years. Only 38 percent of average performers and 25 percent of low performers agree.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, nearly twice as many leaders as average performers believe their digital investments will translate into competitive advantage.

Leaders demonstrate their belief in digital's value by investing more—and more broadly—in a technology-enabled customer experience. Two-thirds of their customer experience budgets are devoted to digital enablement. Additionally, more than half of customer experience leaders prioritize their spending in seven capability areas. These include eCommerce, customer self-service, digital sales and service integration, cloud-based sales, digital marketing, collaboration tools and mobile enablement. In contrast, only a third of average performers prioritize their digital spending in two areas—eCommerce and cloud-based sales. Not surprisingly, none of the poor performers prioritized any of their digital investments.

While digital investments must be bold, they must also be strategic. And they can't be made in isolation. Digital experiences augment physical experiences in powerful ways. Consider the case of Best Buy Co., Inc. As eCommerce took off, many industry watchers considered the retailer's physical stores to be a liability. But Best Buy didn't agree. It invested in digital sales and service. But it also positioned its stores as launch pads for its national "Geek Squad" service offerings. In so doing, it used its physical infrastructure as a natural—and profitable—extension of the online customer experience.<sup>9</sup>

## Play to win the race to growth

Customer experience leaders provide valuable lessons for other B2B companies looking to make the necessary strategic and executional changes to play to win and generate growth. They are less interested in improving experiences to reduce costs or simply keep up with their peers. Instead, they focus on capturing new revenues with products, services and business models that customers notice and value. They don't take a scattershot approach to investing or allocating resources. Instead, they identify, understand and continually improve their strengths and pick their spots carefully. They capitalize on opportunities at the intersection of re-imagined services and extended, digitally-enabled channels. Finally, they don't wait to be disrupted. They use customer experiences to produce disruption—and sustainable growth—on their terms.

## References

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- <sup>9</sup> Jason Plastow, "Best Buy Competitive Advantage," Storify, undated. Retrieved September 9, 2015 from <https://storify.com/jasonplastow/best-buy-competitive-advantage>

## Contact the authors

Robert Wollan

Senior managing director, Accenture Strategy,  
Sales & Customer Services global lead  
[robert.e.wollan@accenture.com](mailto:robert.e.wollan@accenture.com)

Kevin Quiring

Managing director, Accenture Strategy,  
Sales & Customer Services North America lead  
[kevin.n.quiring@accenture.com](mailto:kevin.n.quiring@accenture.com)

Olivier Schunck

Principal director, Accenture Strategy,  
Sales & Customer Services  
[solivier.schunck@accenture.com](mailto:solivier.schunck@accenture.com)

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