

## Managing the Connected Consumer: Exploring Technology and Relationship Management in Retail

The face of marketing is changing rapidly. Technology has become fully embedded in to the entire consumer decision making process, and thus marketing and technology have become inseparable. Although it may appear that the phenomenon of Facebook and the iPhone have come from what seems like nowhere, this new era of consumer engagement has evolved over some time. The shift from a manufacturing economy in industrialised Britain to a service economy in the 1990's has given way for the digital economy which has delivered more power to the consumer. A more pragmatic and demanding consumer has taken centre stage where people can shop anytime and anywhere via mobile technology with information at their fingertips. However, consumers are becoming harder to please as they want a connected, high-speed, personalized shopping experience and expect retailers to be technology savvy in order to accommodate these needs.

### The Connected Consumer

To demonstrate the correlation between technology and the consumer we will observe each stage of the product decision making process which occurs when a consumer is making a purchase.

At each stage there are things a retailer can do to connect with the consumer using technology so they can enhance the shopping experience. As you will see, a retailer's digital brand which utilises technology will ultimately build that competitive loyalty and brand recognition needed in the digital economy.

### Stage 1 Recognition:

Eye-catching digital media is changing the way companies are grabbing our attention, and is mainly used by retailers through out-of-home advertising and online. This is the point in the decision making process where the consumer recognises that they desire a product. The use of mobile technology is rife in advertising and features such as QR barcodes mean that consumers can scan the code on their phone and gain information in a matter of seconds. Consumers now connect with products via this technology, which heightens the recognition.

### Stage 2 Search Information:

With information now at their fingers tips, customers are connected 24/7 and are able to search the information they need wherever they are via mobile technology. Some argue that the challenging economy has not only damaged the pocket of the consumer, but their trust as well. Therefore seeing what other consumers think is essential in their own decision making process. Keeping up-to-date with what people are saying about you and your product should therefore be an essential marketing activity. A retailer can have a website which is vibrant yet easy to navigate and provide ease of access to information. The online experience of a product is vital.

## Stage 3 Evaluate Alternatives:

Customers will also evaluate alternatives online when they are searching for information about a company and its products. As disposable incomes are reducing due to soaring fuel and food costs the evaluation process is the main characteristic of the increasingly pragmatic consumer. They will research you and the competition, usually online. Blogging and social networking are technological phenomenon that offers organisations opportunities for increased engagement with customers, on a mass scale and at little to no cost.

## Purchase Decision:

Here, the website takes centre stage. One click ordering which creates ease of purchase can streamline a sale and create the high-speed, connected experience consumers demand.

## Product Evaluation:

Smart retailers will keep up to date with what customers are saying about them online; both the good and bad reviews. Customers who go home and inform the online community of what they think of a product via blogging and forums is now the norm. This can do wonders for sales as other shoppers look for product reviews during the "Search Information" phase. Good customer relationship management (CRM) is also crucial at this point as contact can be maintained after purchase via email, social media and text. News, offers and events can be streamlined straight to the consumer and create loyalty and repeat purchases.

## Dynamics NAV Solutions for Retailers

Brands which embrace the digital space and technology have much better relationships with consumers. This has been echoed not only by large consultancy firms and top industry specialists, but the consumers themselves. For retailers this means that product availability, good customer service and competitive pricing are not enough to maintain customer loyalty. Therefore, by keeping up-to-date with the latest technological trends and embracing them is an essential feature of a competitive business model.

Besides managing your online and external presence, retailers can have software applications in-house which can also help manage the demanding connected consumer. An Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system such as Microsoft Dynamics NAV seamlessly integrates business functions such as stock control, finance and customer management electronically. Features of Dynamics NAV can improve efficiency and can aid retailers in delivering the 'connected' customer experience which is demanded in the digital economy.

- \* It can manage customer records and sales histories so an up-to-date CRM database can be held for sales and marketing purposes.
- \* It can manage inventory electronically and therefore improve responsiveness both online and in the stock room of a store. Trends can also be spotted and decision making can therefore be streamlined.

- \* Financial processes can be managed across multiple locations, currencies and companies. This means that reports from a foreign manufacturer or for international sales can be integrated.
- \* Customer calls and queries can be organised and logged.

The pragmatic, demanding and connected consumer can be willing, keen and able to buy from you. They are ready to buy armed with all the information they need to make that important final buying decision. So provided that they have acquired accurate, descriptive and enticing information and have found your website easy to navigate through their smart phones and iPads and even their home computers, then your chances of staying ahead of the competition are raised even higher.

**For more information about the features of Microsoft Dynamics NAV, please visit <http://www.adeptsoftware.co.uk>**