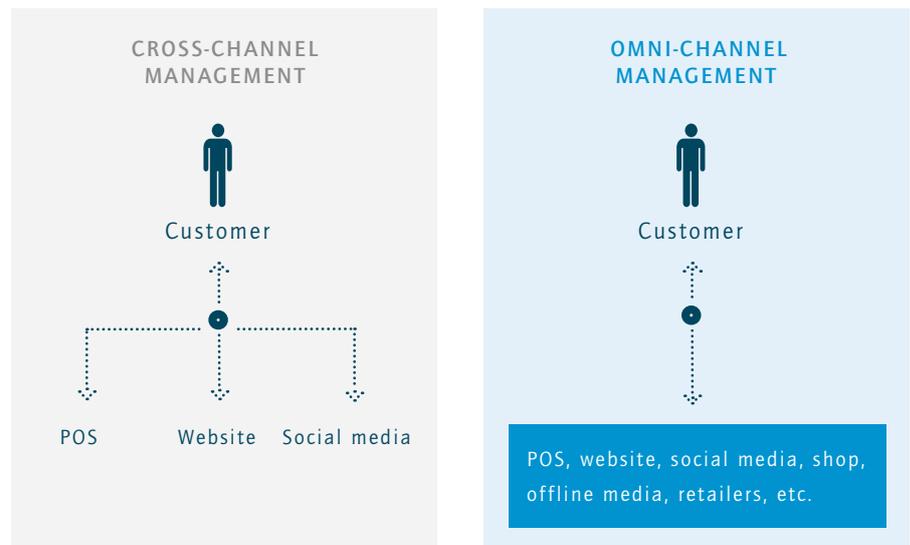


CUSTOMER JOURNEY WITHOUT OBSTACLES



As is generally known, many roads lead to Rome – and to customers too. Today, the customer journey is a complex process; many touchpoints guide the digitally networked buyer during the decision-making process. Holistic coordination is needed so that all channels can be optimally used in the course of integrated overall communication – or in other words: *omni-channel management*.

The objective is for the customer to no longer perceive changes between the individual channels at all.



Today, the customer journey is considered the starting point for all questions concerning digitization of customer interaction. In this context, omni-channel management is considered to be state of the art. But how do we actually understand this term? How is omni-channel different from multi-channel and cross-channel management?

To put it plainly, the fact that products today are presented and sold across diverse channels is 'old hat'. Multi-channel strategies have long been established in the corporate landscape; they were learned by the customer. "Multi-channel" describes parallel distribution across several channels that are largely self-sufficient. There is usually no interaction between the channels; in this model, it is not possible for the customer to perform the process across channels from the information phase to the purchasing phase. So he or she is usually bound to the path they initially choose. In multi-channel management, the accumulation of individual elements does not provide any added value for the provider of products or services.

Identical Information Across All Channels

Cross-channel management represents a significant further development when compared to multi-channel management. Companies also usually serve several sales channels in parallel with cross-channel methods. The critical difference in comparison to multi-channel approaches is that the customer can change information and sales channels during his or her customer journey. Because cross-channel strategies always present identical information about products, whether the platform is the website, brochures or catalogs, or a salesperson in a store. During the purchasing process, the buyer can easily switch between different information and communication paths.

This can be illustrated with an example: An advertisement in a magazine generates the customer's interest in a product. As a result, he turns to the Internet to inform himself about the object of his choice and to compare it with other products. As a locally connected person, he finally visits the retailer he trusts and buys the item there. In cross-channel management,

the challenge for the provider is to ensure consistent information about the products across all channels. Central coordination of product information is essential for achieving this. However, sales channels often continue to remain separate, both technically and organizationally.

Seamless Transitions Between Channels

Omni-channel management represents the additional, currently most advanced development step in this series of sales strategies. Optimal use of all sales channels is at the core of omni-channel management. Similar to cross-channel management, communication and the purchasing process take place across channels. All data management with regard to the products or services and the customer are controlled using a central system. In this way, the buyer has access to all product information – independent of which channel he or she is currently using. This is why it is also called “no-line” commerce or seamless commerce. The customer can seamlessly switch from one channel to another without crossing a dividing line. Because customer data is also synchronized, a personal account is usually required.

No-line commerce is certainly the objective of sales channeling: Online and offline channels are combined into one continuous, limitless purchasing experience for the customer. The level of information and purchasing processes are synchronized in real time on all channels. The buyer feels like shopping is one single process that takes place independent of the platform used. Sophisticated CRM systems that run in the background make it possible to synchronize data, compress information and gain understanding from this information that can be used to optimize sales processes.

Smart devices and mobile devices play a critical role. For example, a customer can place an item in the online shopping cart on his laptop; at the same time, this process is registered in the shopping app on his smartphone. He can then complete the purchase using his tablet, desktop computer, or smartphone. An analysis of the individual customer journey can help anticipate the customer’s purchasing process in the future.

Merging Marketing and Sales

In practice, omni-channel management requires more than simply breaking up conventional sales and commission structures. It also requires that marketing and sales merge. Customer convenience always takes center stage in this process. The objective is to present all information about products and services as well as about the customer and his or her behavior, on every possible sales channel at the right time.

Companies from all industries should open themselves to the insight that the customer can only be controlled to a limited degree when he or she is selecting their path to a product. In the future, growth will only be achieved sustainably if all sales channels are designed to be equally simple and transparent and include identical information. Omni-channel management requires in-depth analysis and evaluation of the customer journey to achieve sequenced synchronization of the sales channels – through to uniform incentives for the sales team. ■

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Omni-channel management requires sound analysis and evaluation of the customer journey. Identical information across all sales channels must be ensured.