

# PUTTING CUSTOMERS BEFORE CHANNELS

The number of communication channels to reach the consumer has proliferated in recent years and has opened up a world of opportunities for marketers – but is too much emphasis being thrown onto a channel-driven approach to data marketing, when a customer-driven approach is really what’s required, asks **Antony Begley?**

**F**or many years most UK businesses (and those marketing on their behalf) have predominantly operated efficiently and comfortably in either traditional or new media channels but rarely in both, despite what they would have you believe.

Over the last year or two, however, we have seen a massive shift towards true, complex multi – or cross-channel marketing. This has been driven of course by a rapid proliferation of available channels, but also by the realisation that consumers have become increasingly sophisticated and no longer source, research or buy products or services through a single channel.

It’s not an unusual scenario, for example, for consumers to hear about a product through a catalogue, research the options online, visit a high street store to touch and feel it, then make the purchase through a call centre.

You’ve done it yourself. Your family and friends do it every day. So why is it taking marketers so long to accept this state of

affairs and orchestrate their activity accordingly?

Many marketers have now come round to the notion that to fully exploit these opportunities, they must engage with their customers and their prospects in a joined up, integrated way across multiple channels and often simultaneously, invariably requiring the creation of some form of single customer view.

And with these exciting opportunities come challenges, many of them very complex indeed, which perhaps explains why some marketers are taking their time to toe the line.

One particularly interesting challenge which comes as a result of this proliferation of channels, and the topic of this article, is the increasing tendency of many marketers to make channel-centric decisions, rather than customer-centric ones.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the customer is the oldest rule in the book, so are marketers losing sight of that, beguiled as they are by the growing number of ever quicker / cheaper / more measurable digital channels?

## RETAINING FOCUS

Rob Salmon, Managing Director at meta-morphix, certainly agrees that marketers are at risk of taking their eye off the ball.

“Let’s be absolutely clear here,” he says, “new channels don’t make any difference whatsoever to what marketers are trying to achieve at the end of the day. They are just new channels, new ways of communicating

with customers and prospects but the same principles that govern all forms of direct marketing still apply.

“But there is definitely a risk of marketers losing sight of that and getting too caught up shiny new channels, or channels they feel more comfortable with, rather than seeing the world through the eyes of the consumer.”

And this cardinal sin is not as rare as you might think in today’s social media and email-obsessed world and is increasingly complicated to avoid when marketing takes place across a wide number of traditional and digital channels.

Marketers can end up executing high quality campaigns in a single channel without fully contemplating how the campaign fits into the overall customer strategy. “One of the biggest marketing challenges many companies face is that they don’t actually operate a customer – centric strategy,” agrees Rachel Morgan, Planning Director at data-insight agency planning-inc.

“For example, within a company you may have a brand team, an online team and a direct marketing team; however they tend to be very disparate.

“This type of set-up is great for delivering focused projects in a particular channel, but it will invariably have a detrimental influence on your overall customer strategy and ultimately, the effectiveness of your communications.”

Morgan believes the big hurdle then is getting companies to acknowledge the



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customer is of value to the business as a whole, rather than just being seen as an outlet for marketing material – a new take on the old sales/marketing debate.

## SCV

“When you have customer-centricity running throughout a business, you can begin to consider building a single customer view that integrates all parts of your business for effective, holistic marketing,” she says.

This focus on the need to create a single customer view that will facilitate joined-up sales and marketing across the company is an issue that Ai Data Intelligence Managing Director Jon Cano-Lopez sees as critical.

“You have to get some form of single customer view to get a true picture of your

marketplace,” he says.

Echoing the comments by Salmon above, he adds: “If you have all the data you need, you get it all into the one place and you really, genuinely understand your customers and prospects, then the channel is irrelevant. The customer is all that matters.”

“The channel sits at the bottom of the pyramid. On top of that you put your prospect and customer database then for every piece of activity you simply choose the most appropriate channel and timeframe.”

And Cano-Lopez believes the single customer view is finally gaining real traction and momentum, which can only be a good thing.

And Salmon agrees wholeheartedly here: “Digital hasn’t changed anything in this sense because you still need to make the right offer to the right customer at the right time and through the channel the customer prefers.”

## COMBINED APPROACH

“I still have retail clients, for example, who divide their business into online retail and offline retail. In my opinion, that’s not the right way to do it as the only way to optimise your marketing activity is to combine the two.”

In Salmon’s opinion, all of this brings

marketers back to the need to test, test and test again.

“It’s difficult to know which channels will deliver better for you on a given piece of activity and of course all channels can affect each other, so it comes down to adopting a policy of continually testing everything you do over and over again to close the loop and allow you to progress at each step.

We know that customers can be stimulated a number of times across a number of channels prior to purchase and we can number-crunch that process down, but yet again it comes down to having a proper single customer view.”

Salmon’s final few words of advice are worth noting: “Customer, customer, customer.” ■



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