

Evolving from multi-channel to true omni-channel experiences

 By [Lynette Hundermark](#)

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The term omni-channel is on everyone's lips today - across all sectors - yet no brand in South Africa has managed to execute on a true omni-channel strategy. Look to the international market, however, and you'll find many examples of companies that have gained a real competitive edge from omni-channel approaches, including the likes of John Lewis, Tesco, Marriott International and Starbucks.

Starbucks stands out in the competitive coffee shop landscape partly because of how it's able to deliver a great customer experience across a range of platforms and channels.

When customers want to check their loyalty point balance, they can do so at any shop on the Starbucks website using the phone or on the Starbucks app. Each time they earn points or redeem rewards, the changes to their accounts are reflected across every channel in real-time. Thus, Starbucks gives consumers a truly customer-centric and consistent experience at every touchpoint.

Multi-channel versus omni-channel

The Starbucks case study is a good way of setting apart omni-channel and multi-channel strategies since there is some market confusion about how they differ. Multi-channel strategies are commonplace in South Africa, where most customer-facing companies offer you a range of choices about how you interact and transact with them.

Thus, practically every bank, telecom operator and retailer uses a range of customer channels from mobile apps, email and web front-ends to stores, call centres, and television to communicate with customers. Yet their presence across these channels isn't integrated in the same way Starbucks has connected its loyalty scheme across all touchpoints.

The result is a fragmented and inconsistent experience across different channels - for example, the call centre seems oblivious to the new promo running on television. In banking, you might find serious gaps between the service and messages you'll get from the team on social media, the contact centre, and the manager at your local branch.

Disconnected experiences

These inconsistent experiences frustrate consumers, who see each brand as a single entity. They don't know or care that there are different teams putting together the advertising, working in the call centre, and looking after the mobile app. They want a consistent experience from each of these touchpoints.

Increasingly, they demand a seamless and connected experience that uses the mobile phone as the hub of communication. Financial firms, especially, face competitive threats from digital disruptors such as Google, PayPal, Apple, and South Africa's Snapscan.

Such companies are masters of personalisation and are unencumbered by legacy, so they're able to deliver rich customer experiences across a range of digital channels. To remain relevant in the face of such competition, South African brands must evolve from multi-channel to omni-channel organisations.

A starting point

A good place to start is by understanding the customer expectation and situation across a range of contexts. For example, if my card has been swallowed at an ATM, I want to be able to report this emergency quickly using the mobi site or a mobile banking app.

In insurance, if I'm anxious about a claim for a car accident, I should be able to track the progress by phone, on an app, or on the Web site, and get consistent, up-to-date information at each of these points. Even better, the insurer should be able to use my channel of choice - be it email, SMS or the app - to keep me up to date with the latest developments.

A good mobile strategy can help fill the gaps in the customer experience.

It's an essential tool for customer retention in today's competitive market, given how central it is in consumers' lives today. Businesses, brands, marketers, and content providers must ensure they offer the best possible connected experience across mobile channels such as their mobi site or apps.

No mobile solution is an island

Unlike a multi-channel approach, mobile should not be viewed as a silo by a brand that is committed to omni-channel experiences. With a sound mobile strategy integrated into an omni-channel approach, brands can use push messages effectively within their apps to send personalised messages to customers if they have their permission.

Brands should review their business goals as well as how different customer segments use their devices to make mobile work well in an omni-channel strategy. Mobile-connected CRM is also a potential gold mine of information about consumers' paths to purchase, so it's a good idea to collect customer data where possible.

If this customer profile data is linked to information from legacy systems, it can help create the "smart" customer record that is so vital to providing a truly connected experience.

Closing words

Many South African organisations are talking up a storm about executing omni-channel strategies to increase customer engagement, but few are actually moving beyond the talk to deliver a truly seamless connected experience.

Those that take omni-channel customer experiences seriously and execute well could use it to gain a serious edge over their competitors by providing something invaluable to their end user.

ABOUT LYNETTE HUNDERMARK

With over 15 years of experience in the tech, digital marketing and mobile solutions space, Hundermark co-founded specialist mobile solutions consultancy Useful & Beautiful. With a passion for developing mobile products that are aligned to business goals, Hundermark's appetite for keeping abreast of the latest industry trends is fast establishing her as an expert tech commentator and opinion leader in South Africa. Follow @lynetteanthony on Twitter.

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