



# Rethinking Customer Engagement

*Complacency around customer interaction has been a problem for many B2B organisations. **Rachel Barton**, Managing Director of Accenture Customer Strategy, talks to Criticleye about why it's time for a different approach*

Twenty-four hour availability and mobile accessibility are now commonplace in the B2C context. B2B organisations are beginning to integrate a level of flexibility and transparency into their customer service models. The question is, are they adapting fast enough?

A recent [report](#) from Accenture, which surveyed 1,450 B2B executives on customer engagement, found that 85 per cent of respondents described customer experience as “important to their companies’ strategic priorities”. However, fewer than half said they were seeing a significant return having invested in new ways to connect.

**Rachel Barton**, Managing Director of Accenture Customer Strategy, explains how B2B companies can improve levels of interaction with customers in a way that provides real competitive advantage.

#### Why is customer experience becoming so important in the B2B space?

B2B organisations have always claimed that their customers are different when compared to consumer-facing companies. Actually, from what we are seeing, that’s no longer the case.

Increasingly, business customers are taking expectations created by the technology in their home and personal lives into the office.

These capabilities, combined with the accessibility provided by B2C organisations, is leading those who operate in a B2B context to question the value proposition that’s on offer. This consumerisation of the B2B arena is real and it’s breaking a lot of orthodoxies.

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#### How are businesses responding to these changes?

The whole B2B market has shifted and companies are beginning to wake up to it. Interestingly, our report found that 88 per cent of B2B organisations are increasing investment in their customer experience year-on-year. That would not have been the case, even two years ago.

Clearly, many are aware that the opportunity exists, but very few are actively doing anything to the extent that they are able to deliver tangible commercial returns. So, despite the realisation that, yes, it’s important, few are actually getting it right.

#### What can be done to deliver that ROI?

Those organisations that we would describe as ‘playing to win’ identify and then target what their customers notice and value, rather than relying on an intuitive approach to improving experience and making changes because they ‘feel right’.

Predictive analytics allows them to anticipate how these trends will change

moving forward and, as such, they are able to make business-led decisions about where they want to invest and which customers to invest in.

These companies are thinking about their customers’ life stages, buying patterns and how they’re going to target them as their individual requirements evolve. They are personalising their customers’ experience to drive the greatest lifetime value rather than ‘in-the-moment’ value.

#### Are companies being held back by legacy infrastructure?

There is an assumption that doing something big is going to take a long time and involve a disruptive IT transformation. Companies look at legacy infrastructure, which has probably been patched together over the last 20 to 30 years, and think: ‘We’re going to need to do an entire transformation and that’s going to take two or three years.’

My advice is to be pragmatic, think about what you can do now. There is nothing stopping organisations from launching pop-up shops, taking a white-label digital offer to market or using test and learn concepts to release technology faster.

Some organisations, particularly in the tech space, are actually sharing their products or software online before they’re launched so that their B2B customers can experiment and suggest any requirements for improvement.

The market has been entirely opened up by IT advances and that’s facilitated a collaborative digital environment; it’s a win-win for the customer and supplier. ►

As you take those products and integrate them into your core offering, something more profound might need to take place. But the point is you don't need to have worked it all out before you embark on that journey. We are moving away from the assumption that organisations need to undertake a four-year programme because, by the time they've finished, the result will probably be out of date anyway.

It's now more important to consider how you build agility into your organisation, how you test and learn, and where you can use some of the more innovative cloud-based and collaboration tools available.

### Do B2B companies need to rethink their digital strategy?

Many organisations, particularly those in the B2B space are understandably nervous about adopting digital. To be successful in the long run, digital has got to become a fundamental part of how you operate.

Take the insurance industry for example, we're seeing smaller companies disrupt the market. As a consumer, you can now buy a pension online and that's not just affecting the B2C space; it's disrupting the B2B space as well. As a business customer, why shouldn't you be able to browse different offers online – particularly if you're a small-to-medium-sized business – and work out what discount you can get?

There's no longer any need to be confined by letters, cheques, and appointment times between nine and five, and we're seeing some traditional B2B companies recognise that and develop solutions that rival some of these online disruptors.

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### Who directs customer experience?

Five years ago customer experience was owned three or four levels below the board — most likely within product line or the marketing function. It was seen as an opportunity to think about acquisition strategy and considered a tool for delivering in that context.

It's no longer appropriate for it to be managed at that level because it's not just about acquisition or an experience within a single channel. It's about how you are sold to and serviced, and whether an organisation lives up to the promises it makes during that acquisition journey. As a result, customer experience is being elevated within an organisation's hierarchy.

In the last 18 months we've seen more heads of digital, chief customer and digital officers appointed and, depending on the industry and the organisational construct, customer experience is owned at that level or by one of their direct reports.

### Which companies grasp what is happening?

In the B2C space, the example that is often referenced is Pingit, which was produced by Barclays. It was launched very rapidly and they have enhanced it's functionality as they have progressed. Based on the number of customers that they were trying to target, it has been very successful.

Ultimately, the organisations that are getting it right are asking: 'How do we do things that are low cost but high impact?' They then assess whether there is a larger scale market opportunity. They're the ones that are going to win because they've brought that agile thinking into their organisation and can therefore keep up with the rate of change. ■

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Rachel regularly features in the press and at industry conferences and was included in the Sunday Times' 'Top 35 women under 35 in business' list in 2009. She is a mentor with the Cherie Blair Foundation (where she was awarded their mentor of the year award in 2012) and was a finalist in this year's Red Magazine Women of the Year Awards. She is married with a daughter and lives in London.

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