



UNIFIED COMMERCE:

Transforming the retail landscape

A new approach to customer-centric
coordination ushers in next-level outcomes



Retailers have years of familiarity with the principles and advantages of omnichannel commerce. Now a further step in retail evolution offers more. Unified commerce is an integrated approach to retail that consolidates all sales channels—both online and offline—into a single, cohesive system.

When organizations achieve this, they can deliver consistent data across all touchpoints, enabling accurate pricing, promotions, and inventory information for customers. Real-time data and advanced analytics help enhance customer engagement, streamline operations, and ultimately drive business growth. Unified commerce also breaks down the silos among different sales channels, so retailers can understand the whole customer behavior better, manage inventory with more precision, and enhance the personalization of services and products.

That potential is compelling. But making it a reality does include challenges—and not only the ones that involve technological choices. It also calls for a focus on the core goal that goes along with often complex implementation: growth. When implemented correctly, unified commerce lays the foundation for growth. A leading payment provider reports that customers in a unified commerce environment spend 30% more per purchase,¹ and estimates that unified commerce represents a \$3.3 trillion global opportunity.²

The enhanced customer engagement, improved operations, better-informed decision-making, innovation, and heightened customer satisfaction that can result from this approach are all means to that end. Breaking down the elements that make unified commerce different from its predecessors, taking the competent steps in turn, and learning from organizations that have already put it into practice can help define the path forward.

¹ Ayden, [“The Unified Commerce Index”](#), 2019, p.4

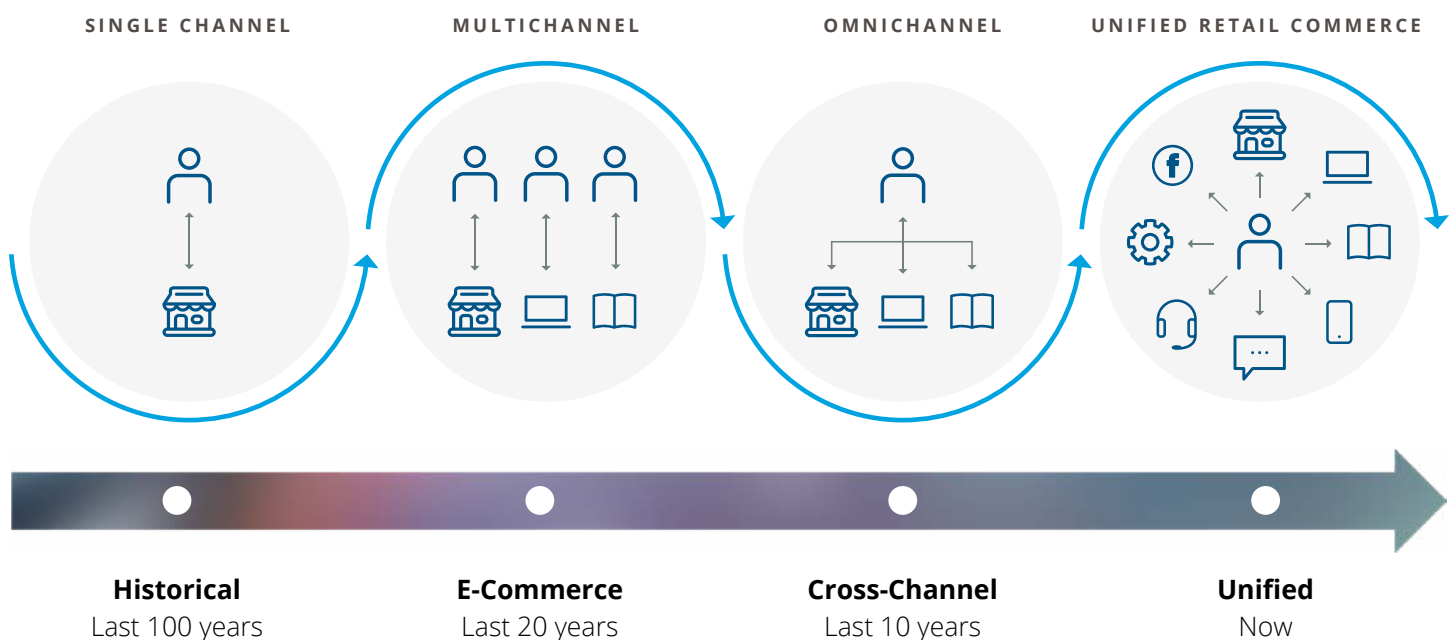
² Ayden, [“Unified Commerce Capitalizing on a £2.6 Trillion Global Retail Opportunity”](#), 2019, p.10



What is unified commerce?

At its core, unified commerce is a seamless connection between the front-end systems customers interact with and the back-end operations that drive the business and putting the customer in charge. That makes it possible to put the customers in charge: Instead of the retailer driving them through defined shopping channels, the customers drive the flow of information and experiences. While that happens, the organization collects customer and transaction data that can inform product views, cart additions, and inventory placement. Other digital retail architectures have performed this data capture in the past. The difference with unified commerce is what the retailer can do with it.

THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN RETAIL



Omnichannel vs. unified commerce: *What's the real difference?*

To many in the industry, news of “omnichannel” as the next big thing may still feel recent. But unified commerce is a genuine advance from that standard. In effect, omnichannel offers an array of experiences that are connected, but unified commerce turns all that into a single experience. To help clarify, let's enumerate the specifics behind each approach.

OMNICHANNEL COMMERCE FEATURES



Brand-centricity:

A cohesive experience from the consumer's perspective, ensuring consistent brand presence across various digital touchpoints, but linked to a particular brand.



Data collection:

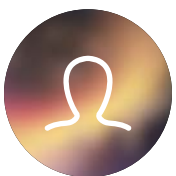
Organizations collect data across channels to personalize offers and recommendations.



Potential gaps:

In an omnichannel setting, there may still be gaps in the customer experience, such as inconsistencies in cart contents from one platform to another within the same retailer.

IN CONTRAST, UNIFIED COMMERCE CARRIES THE CAPABILITIES FURTHER



Customer-centricity:

Where omnichannel is built around the brand, unified commerce puts the customer at the center, focusing on a cohesive experience from the consumer's perspective that meshes with back-end operations.



Consistent information:

Product information, content, and experiences remain consistent across all touchpoints.



Integrated platform:

A single, interconnected platform coordinates inventory management, order management, and merchandise planning. Taken together, that can reduce the risk of stockouts and inconsistencies.

Advantages of unified commerce

Drawing distinctions between these two “cousins” in digital commerce is useful for understanding. But while “different” is good, “better” is better. What does unified make possible that more familiar omnichannel commerce does not, or does not do as well?

1

FRONT-END COHESION

Unified commerce is designed to deliver consistent data across all touchpoints, physical and digital, that provide the same product information and content regardless of setting. It also delivers inventory accuracy. Any retailer's brick-and-mortar employees have likely heard many versions of this: "But the website said you had it in stock!" In a unified commerce environment, customers can trust that if the products they want are shown to be in stock, they will be—which can reduce frustration and cut down on abandoned sales.

2

BACK-END HARMONY

What customers can't see still influences their experiences with the organization. Because unified commerce clarifies cross-channel insights into demand and behavior, organizations can bring more informed decision-making to inventory management to plan future offerings and promotions with more precision. The reduced friction in a unified system also helps cut down on stock-outs and allows inventory and sales data to flow in ways that lead to more timely, accurate offers and discounts personalized to individual consumers.



Relevance:

Why unified commerce is critical in today's retail landscape

The front end of a commerce architecture defines the customer experience. The back end shapes the way an organization conducts business. And the synchronization between the two—or the lack thereof—can determine whether either outcome meets customer expectations. Based on their other interactions in retail and elsewhere, people expect a high degree of personalization, and they don't want to settle for less. An industry survey found that 62 percent of them would deny a brand their loyalty if it delivered a non-personalized experience.³

Unified commerce can help transform the retail landscape by strengthening the retail structure from front to back and in between, resulting in an effective, integrated customer experience that aligns with the back-end operations meant to satisfy that experience. When shopping experiences are more reliable and personalized, customers feel more satisfaction and, ultimately, loyalty.

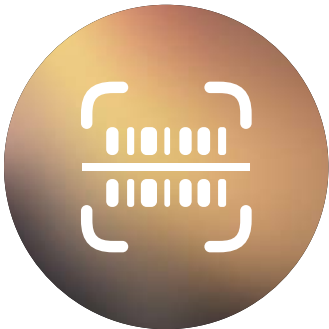
The potential benefits of unified commerce fall into three principal categories: customer experience, inventory management, sales, and revenue.

³ Twilio Segment, "[The State of Personalization](#)", 2022, p.11



CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

An omnichannel experience seeks to provide the same inventory, prices, and promotions if a customer switches between, for example, a mobile app and a website. With unified commerce, the customer enjoys the same advantages—but they also extend to interactions in the physical store, text and email notifications, and other interactions. Another phrase heard often in stores, “Sorry, that’s the online-only price”—vanishes in a seamless environment like that. What appears in its place? Deeper, more precise personalization that goes both ways to enrich interactions, suggestions, and offers as well as any necessary post-sale follow-up.



INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

No retailer wants to have miscounts, delays, misrouting or stock-outs. Physical and supply chain issues are sometimes at the root of those problems, but often, a lack of information is to blame. The end-to-end, real-time visibility that’s possible in a unified commerce architecture can help curtail those problems. Then, when it’s time to get merchandise from stock to store to customer, the system’s natural connection between the front and back ends helps make fulfillment faster and more reliable.



SALES AND REVENUE

That front-to-back, combined with the uniform experience from channel to channel, can make it easier to extend sales opportunities across channels as well—not only reaching customers where they are, but doing so in a consistent way. Unified commerce can deliver a richer stream of data, insights, and analytics that inform finely targeted promotions customers are more likely to find relevant and attractive. Overall, the organization’s bottom-line can benefit not only from these heightened conversion opportunities, but also from the general streamlining of operations.

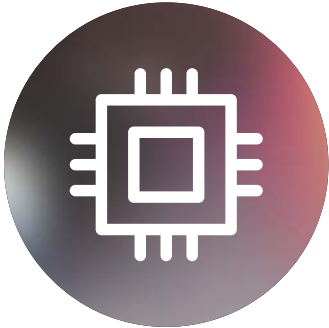
From here to there: *Strategies for implementing unified commerce*

Each organization's path to designing and implementing a unified commerce system will be bespoke and call for more detail than this narrative includes, but there are common steps each retailer should anticipate upon making the commitment to move forward.



ASSESSMENT

This journey doesn't begin with a single step forward; it starts earlier than that, with a look at the current state. That includes technology systems, practices, and policies. Knowing what works now and what should work better is the canvas on which to design the future state.



TECHNOLOGY

This time it's the retailer, not the customer, who has a shopping list to fulfill. As noted, unified commerce isn't a new or single technology, but rather a framework for combining them. That means a detailed evaluation to find the inventory, transaction, CRM, and other components that fit each organization's culture and ambitions.



INTEGRATION

The coming together of sales channels and data systems is part of what fuels unified commerce, but those things don't happen by themselves. Careful planning is necessary to bring the practices in line with the new system's capacity to manage them.



TRAINING

An improved way of doing business is a new way of doing business, and team members will need new skills to carry it out. Technology is a large part of that need, but not the only one, because the retailer will be embarking on a new pace and tone of customer interaction and the activities that support it. In addition to discrete training in identified skills, a deliberate program of enterprise change management can help bring everyone along with a shared sense of mission.



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND SCALABILITY

Another advantage to more data and more coordination is that refinement can happen more quickly and in a way that's more specifically responsive to fast-changing needs. That applies as well to fast changes in scale, which can offer peace of mind to retailers whose platforms might otherwise represent a barrier to successful growth.

Unified commerce in action: *Case examples*



UNIFIED COMMERCE IN ACTION: CASE EXAMPLES

ENTERTAINMENT

A major company sought to bring its many consumer experiences and interactions under a single identity with a frictionless approach to products, offers, and commerce, in a way that would capture and deliver more customer insights across the business. Its ambition was for customers to feel control of the relationships and journeys with the brand.

A unified commerce approach, simplified mesh architecture, revamped identity management, and other tools, will help this company deliver personalized, contextual commerce with robust awards, achievements, and awareness of past interactions, accessible via a fully portable identity. Privacy and content preferences, subscriptions and reservations, past purchases, and other particulars would follow each consumer from touchpoint to touchpoint.

Achieving an outcome of that type using unified commerce would allow the organization to personalize and commercialize consumer interactions, encourage and facilitate repeat business, avoid duplication in transactional endpoint experiences, and curate content delivery suited to each person—all with customers in control.



UNIFIED COMMERCE IN ACTION:
CASE EXAMPLES

RETAIL

When a major legacy retailer needed faster, more flexible e-commerce capabilities that would allow it to add products, expand categories, and outpace trends, Deloitte Digital worked closely with the company to create a unified experience. The new platform integrates a B2B business model into more than 40 different systems and processes and made it possible for the brand to launch a new third-party marketplace and one-stop shopping experience on its main website.

The team drove strategy, ran the program management office (PMO), and implemented innovative technology. They also built a custom data integration layer for a data interchange between Mirakl and the company's internal systems.

As a result, the new system enhanced the omnichannel customer experience, combining brand curation with marketplace efficiency and scale. Now, the company can scale rapidly without excessive supply chain costs and has already given customers new access to more than 400 brands and 20 product categories. The outcome demonstrated Deloitte's ability to manage complex integrations and drive strategic transformations that align with unified commerce principles.

Hurdles and how to surmount them:

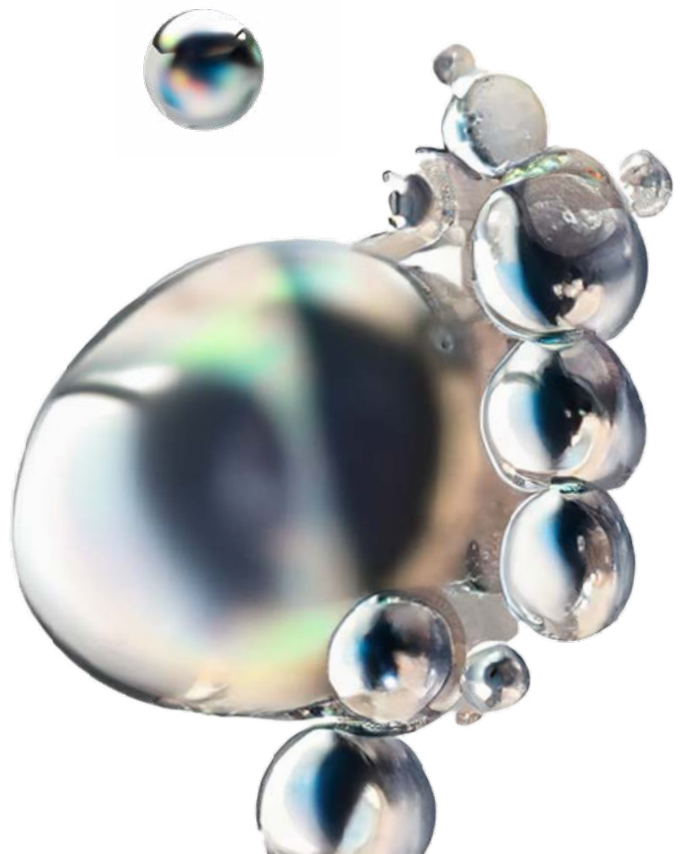
Common challenges and approaches

Because unified commerce is so comprehensive, the work of implementing it can be complex as well. Integrating different front- and back-end functions is likely to involve a mix of new and legacy systems that, in keeping with the point of the new approach, have to not only communicate but interoperate. Customer, inventory, and payment data may exist in separate regimes that don't even speak the same language or reside in the same place. Organizations may find a "composable" approach helps them "digest" these changes in a phased manner that's easier to manage.

In parallel with the integration of tools unified commerce also calls for collaboration among people and teams. Channels of responsibility will likely change, and new capabilities in data-driven decision-making will call for new skills and mindsets. That can make training, leadership, and culture management as important as any technology steps.

When unified commerce delivers on its promise, a retailer may expect rapid growth—which is welcome but can also be daunting. The structure of the new technology architecture is designed to scale rapidly. The organization

around it will have to flex to match. This is another reason a composable architecture may be attractive for helping to manage change while reducing disruption.



Toward a new standard of seamlessness and service

It's natural to observe that the front and back ends of a retail system both exist to serve the same mission: delivering for customers and building the business. It's just as natural to acknowledge that every guise in which a retailer appears to the consumer—online, on a device, in media, and in person—should be part of the same consistent experience.

No one sets out for it not to be that way, but the natural evolution of different technologies along different paths has led to disconnects in that picture. The much greater speed of business, operations, and commerce today makes those gaps more consequential than they used to be. People old enough to remember “please allow six to eight weeks for delivery” may marvel that that was ever acceptable.

To move toward adoption of this approach, it's important to focus on reality, not the jargon. It's possible to confuse the terms “omnichannel” and “unified commerce,” but not the reality of what they accomplish. In every part of a retail operation, unified commerce delivers more business intelligence, empowers more agility, and takes friction out of the path from consumer desire to consumer satisfaction.

The implementation of unified commerce will necessarily involve many technical steps as mentioned in the ‘key components of unified commerce’ section above and they should begin with careful assessment and planning. But there is more to it than that. Organizations should expect and manage change across people, processes, and technology. The new way of business may also spark lasting cultural shifts.

In one sense, unified commerce represents technology catching up to the reality of business. Front-end, back-end, CRM, inventory, pricing, and other systems that grew separately can now come together as part of the same enterprise heartbeat. But from another perspective, unified commerce is more than catching up—it's a step ahead. The ability to integrate customer needs with retail operations in a comprehensive way is transforming the retail landscape, and those businesses that embrace it can find themselves transformed as well.





Let's talk

With a global array of strategy and implementation services across technology, retail, change management, and other domains, Deloitte Digital has helped many major retailers plan and carry out transformations of the sort a unified commerce approach requires.

Contacts

KELLY MORAN

Managing Director,
Deloitte Consulting LLP
kelmoran@deloitte.com

POOJA WARUDKAR

Senior Manager,
Deloitte Consulting LLP
pwarudkar@deloitte.com

Sources

¹ Ayden, "[The Unified Commerce Index](#)", 2019, p.4

² Ayden, "[Unified Commerce Capitalizing on a £2.6 Trillion Global Retail Opportunity](#)", 2019, p.10

³ Twilio Segment, "[The State of Personalization](#)", 2022, p.11

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