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ALIGN CX ACROSS CHANNELS.

Part 6: Empowering your channel partners.



Changes in B2B customer buying behaviors and advancements in digital tools have turned customer experience (CX) into a potent competitive advantage that B2B sellers can wield. Today's B2B buyers expect sellers to provide cohesive, relevant, easy and timely experiences—and they'll part with those who don't.

B2B organizations like yours can no longer compete solely on the merits of their products or prices. Nor can your commercial teams (i.e., marketing, sales, commerce, pricing, product and service) merely improve their separate "slices" of CX.

Why? Because as a B2B seller you can't deliver truly cohesive experiences without gaining cohesion yourself. That means rethinking the traditional linear customer journey, with its sequence of handoffs from one commercial team to the next. It means breaking down silos to encircle the customer with a collective purpose. In this article, we discuss how to enable your channel partners to help deliver customer experience.

Coordinating customer centricity with your channel partners.

Channel partners are often a bridge that connects B2B suppliers with some portion of their customer base. Commodity players may sell the majority of their products through distributors, while specialty companies may use channel partners more tactically to sell to customers that are difficult to reach through direct sales. Think of the equipment dealers that sell and service excavators, forklifts and other construction equipment for contractors, the chemical distributors that streamline warehousing for manufacturers and bundle products for global buyers, or the insurance agents who provide a local presence for a national company.

These intermediaries not only facilitate sales and service—they inevitably shape and deliver many aspects of customer experience (CX) too.

However, many B2B suppliers have not fully aligned with their channel partners to help them understand segment strategies and objectives for CX. Nor have they empowered channel partners for their important role in helping execute those strategies—a mistake that can make or break competitive advantage in today's customer-centric environment.

The repercussions of this lack of alignment can ripple throughout the customer journey, causing significant friction points that negatively impact customers' overall experiences. Dueling marketing strategies send mixed messages, leaving a customer with an inconsistent impression or insufficient information. Crucial customer data remains siloed in partners' systems, preventing the integration that's needed to better serve customer

This article is part of a six-part series on a new operational framework that helps B2B organizations hard-wire customer centricity throughout their commercial operating models.

Part 1: Introduction: Compete in B2B through customer centricity.

Part 2: Shaping strategy around behavior-based customer segments.

Part 3: Connecting segment strategies to capabilities.

Part 4: Evolving your commercial operating model.

Part 5: Measuring and optimizing CX.

Part 6: Empowering your channel partners.

needs. Scattered information on product availability and delivery times frustrates customers. And service interactions feel disjointed due to limited mutual visibility into a customer's service history.

In previous articles of our six-part series, we've emphasized the importance of shaping strategies, capabilities, commercial operating models and CX measurements around behavior-based customer segments. Now, in the final installment, we'll explore how to solve friction points in your indirect sales channels by identifying the right partners, enabling them with valuable tools and incentivizing positive outcomes.

Partner up.

To deliver unified CX, you need to fully align with channel partners on what "good" experience looks like for each customer segment and what everyone's role should be. Three tactical steps can help you achieve that alignment:

- **Segment your partners.** Just as you segment your customers based on their behaviors and preferences, do the same with your channel partners based on their capabilities and how they compete in the market. Although you'll need to train channel partners to deliver the experiences you're targeting, it's important to first evaluate each partner's core capabilities and then leverage the right partners for segments in which they are well positioned. For example, for a customer segment that values high-performing products (regardless of price), you need channel partners that have strong technical capability and are capable of reinforcing messaging about product performance. These partners should also understand the post-sale needs for that segment, such as understanding how

your products perform on different types of equipment so that they can provide effective field technical service.

- **Enhance connected capabilities.** You may need to invest in CX capabilities for your channel partners as intentionally as for your internal commercial teams. Your partners need access to accurate, timely information from you—just as you need real-time insights from them to make in-moment adjustments. For starters, connect some of your systems and data to help inform choices that your partners will need to make as they support particular segments and deliver the desired CX. To promote better knowledge sharing, you could develop a partner portal with enhanced training materials and guides. Another capability to consider is an integrated customer relationship management (CRM) system so you can source and qualify prospects, and then send them to the right channel partner. More integrated supply chain capabilities can also drive better CX by improving visibility on inventory and demand forecasts and automated reorders.
- **Share the rewards.** Some partners may see your interest in collaboration as a threat, and they'll need to know what's in it for them. Clear, coordinated metrics can help (*see our previous article in this series for more on CX metrics*). Your channel partners should have a transparent understanding of how delivering on aligned CX contributes to growth, retention and lower cost-to-serve or enhanced value capture for segments for which higher levels of service are required. Setting a regular cadence for communicating about key metrics and establishing financial and nonfinancial incentives may inspire greater willingness

to coordinate action. Aligning your channel partners' incentives and rebate strategies with your segment objectives is crucial too.

Make it last.

By forging closer alignment with channel partners to deliver exemplary and seamless experiences for customers, suppliers have an opportunity to cultivate more transparent, trusting and enduring relationships with their partners. This is no small thing. In industries where channel partners frequently shift allegiances between suppliers or pit them against each other, it's a key advantage, compounding the business benefits of strong CX. Positive and long-standing alliances with your channel partners can significantly reduce churn costs, drive efficient interactions and ensure consistent market access, enabling you to meet customer expectations and thrive amid business fluctuations and challenges.



Questions to ask yourself:

- How are our channel partners representing our brand to our different customer segments?
- Are our channel partners delivering the experiences we've targeted for the customer segments they serve? If not, how can we help them?
- How can we build more integrated and trusted relationships with our partners so that our understanding of and proximity to the end customer is not construed as threatening?

Get in touch

Tom Aldred

Principal
Deloitte Consulting LLP
taldred@deloitte.com

Akshay Seshadrinathan

Senior Manager
Deloitte Consulting LLP
aseshadrinathan@deloitte.com

Greg Bausch

Specialist Executive
Deloitte Consulting LLP
gbausch@deloitte.com

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