An enterprise driven omni-channel strategy must empower the mobile workforce

By Lynette Hundermark   24 May 2015

More and more South African companies across industries are talking about building omni-channel strategies and infrastructures to give customers a consistent experience at every brand touch point.

One channel that is frequently neglected in this discussion is the mobile workforce - which, for many organisations, is their customer frontline. Here, mobile technology can help support sales and service staff as well as customer-facing executives to gain access to real-time account, product, inventory and service level information that they can use to be more responsive to the needs of customers in addition to making better business decisions.

With mobile technology at their disposal, nearly every person in the workforce becomes a powerful customer touch point, ready to deliver the personalised and timely service today's digital customer expects.

Shifting from paper at the office desk to digital mobile processes can empower organisations to save money, become more efficient, and respond faster to company needs. For example, we worked with a home appliance company to end its paper trail and improve customer service through an enterprise mobility strategy.

Faster response, smarter decisions

The home appliance company (mentioned above) now uses mobile technology to manage technicians and customer service requests. For example, if a washing machine is broken, a technician is dispatched to the customer's home. On arrival, he'll already have some information about the fault and the customer on his mobile device, thanks to an app that gives him mobile access to the core ERP system.

Image via 123RF

While he's there, he has the ability to check if the spares he needs to fix the faulty appliance are in stock, where he can order them in real-time. Before he leaves, he'll be able to tell the customer when he'll be back to complete the repair. If there's no mobile internet connectivity onsite at the customer - an increasingly rare circumstance - the app will store the data offline until there is a connection available.

Meanwhile, senior managers can track service incidents in real-time on a dashboard, allowing them to make smart decisions in response to trends and performance indicators. For example, if they see that many of the same spares are being ordered for a particular model, they'll know that there is a pattern developing and can therefore order in extra spares (ahead of time) to cater for the demand.

As this example shows, integrating mobile apps with ERP systems can close a customer service loop for companies with mobile service and sales staff. But where should one begin? From the outset, it's important to understand that there's certainly more to success than simply tweaking a back-office system to work on a smartphone.

Creating a mobile strategy for an omni-channel world within your enterprise

Here are some of the important elements to bear in mind as you mobilise your core business processes:

1. User experience
This will, to a large extent, determine the success or failure of your mobile strategy. It's important that employees find your enterprise apps simple and enjoyable to engage with, otherwise user adoption may be poor and the expected productivity gains could fail to materialise. Bear in mind that your employees have been using consumer mobile apps for years and have the preconception that apps should be easy to use.

That means apps should be intuitive, responsive, and attractive. Aim to make them as simple, fast and seamless as Google Maps or WhatsApp - if you can't, educate users about why this is the case. For example, you might need them to go through a VPN to securely access sensitive data, which may slow down response times.

2. Form and function

Since the mobile device does not have a big screen, keyboard, mouse or as much storage space and processing power as PCs, you may need to streamline functionality on a mobile app. For example, a mobile device might be great for checking inventory or sending an invoice, but less so for creating a quote for a complex order or doing some heavy-duty data mining. And if your customer facing team need to show customers sales presentations, a tablet might be a better choice than a mobile phone with its small screen.

3. Connectivity

Mobile connectivity is getting faster and more reliable all the time, but you cannot yet count on having a high quality connection wherever you are. Thus, mobile apps should allow for local storage and processing so that workers can get on with their jobs even when they don't have Internet access.

4. Different workers and processes have different needs

The requirements of a factory foreman using a ruggedised tablet on the production line will be different from a sales manager who might need to access business intelligence, email and sensitive customer data on the road. Bear in mind the different connectivity, security and functionality needs of different categories of workers.

5. Bringing your own device (BYOD)

Think about which mobile operating systems you will support, given that Android and Apple's iOS dominate the enterprise market. Will you let workers bring their own devices to work or make them use corporate devices? How will you manage data ownership, app development and technical support if you opt for a bringing your own device (BYOD) policy?

Closing words

The service your employees provide to customers in the real-world is every bit as important as their experience with your call centre, Web site or mobile apps. Whether it's a rep in a store using a tablet to show a customer the features of a new TV or a technician in a B2B environment managing service requests on a smartphone, mobile technology can deliver efficiency gains and better customer service. It is however imperative not to neglect the frontline of customer service and sales in your omni-channel strategy.

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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