

6 Ways to Become a Connected Retailer

Today's consumers really are different. First, they choose to be connected—90 percent use some kind of online device. Second, they like to research purchases online, even when they buy at stores. Third, they are impatient—they want immediate information, and they expect to receive their purchases quickly.

To compete, your business will need to connect with consumers in more ways, too. Here are six strategies to help you choose your communication channels and make those connections—so your business can provide the omni-channel, connected experience your customers want.

1. Choose Your Channels

To create a seamless experience for your customers, note which communication channels you already use, then identify two or three you can add quickly and easily. Next, take this expanded list and check for brand consistency. Finally, look for possible hand-offs among channels. Are existing hand-offs clean? Can you add some? Channels you can consider include:

- Your website
- Your e-commerce site
- Mobile and desktop browsers
- Mobile and desktop social media

- Review sites (like TripAdvisor and Yelp)
- Email
- Your blog
- Voice (telephone)
- Mobile text
- Mobile apps
- Wholesaler sites
- In-store experience
- Your loyalty program(s)

2. Step Back and Think Strategy

Review your marketing strategy—value proposition, market definition, and approach for customer acquisition and retention. Are you a price or service leader? What is your competition like? Can (or do) you offer a unique specialization that sets you apart?

Now, review each piece of your strategy and find a way to turn it into customer engagement across channels. For example, a retailer that sells hobby supplies might want to create and share—on its website, in an app, in a blog and elsewhere—project-focused shopping lists.

For those aiming to increase traffic to your brick-and-mortar store, you might use online channels to mention you offer gift registries and drive visits by offering in-store discounts for completing a registry. Whatever strategy you use, plan on revisiting it every few months, because both goals and markets evolve rapidly.

3. Make Things Easier for Your Customers

When considering expanding into a new communication channel—or changing the way you use it—think first, “How can I use this channel to make things easier for my customers?” Anything you can do to make it easier for customers to find and use information, to put a shopping list together, to locate your store, to share their views, to ask questions or to make purchases will help them be more engaged with your business—and that’s what you want.

Consider each interaction your customer has or could have with you, and look for opportunities to drive out complexity and speed up the process. Any improvement you can make—even something as basic as accepting easier-to-use payment methods—will earn customer gratitude and loyalty. One noteworthy improvement could be around working with your employees. Make sure they understand the vision for the company’s focus on customers and avenues to promote that vision.

4. Empower Customers

It’s not enough to simply use a given communication channel—you must be relevant. What will help consumers to accomplish their current objective, at that time and place?

Depending on your business model, that may mean providing detailed product search capabilities on a website or in an app, or it can be something as simple as

delivering clear directions to your store location with a link to a good mapping tool.

Other strategies to empower and engage with your customers include joining social media groups that are relevant to your market or publishing an email newsletter filled with customer-requested content. You can provide how-to content in a blog, newsletter or webpage.

Consider creating branded apps people can use in your stores and elsewhere. You can even create specialized apps that your in-store staff can use to assist customers.

Your goal is to make customers feel they have answers—or can easily get them—from your business. Too much information is just noise, while too little won’t draw customers in the way you want. Experiment, ask for feedback and find the right balance.

5. Tap the Engagement Power of Social Media

Retailers today must establish a social media presence that is consistent with your brand and engaging. Provide content on products, your team, your community outreach—anything that adds to the conversation and encourages consumers to engage with you. Use this channel to provide tips and recommendations, announce flash sales and even share news about your social media presence (“Our new Instagram page is live!”). Customer testimonials are good, too. It’s also perfectly acceptable to repost others’ content where helpful.

You will want to add posts, pictures or other content at least weekly, but don’t

overwhelm your followers. Watch your engagement data to find what works and what doesn't. Most importantly—stay engaged. Respond to others when they comment on your posts, especially when you have an opportunity to take a negative remark and turn them into a happy customer.

6. Surprise and Delight Customers

Another way to identify and optimize communication channels is to think of ways to surprise your customers. What can you do to evoke that “wow” response? To get ideas, go back to your business model and market strategy.

Are you a price leader? Stun store visitors with a bargain-loaded endcap. Is customer service your big differentiator? Create your own unique, red-carpet

treatment and train your staff to master it. Set up a special play area for children in the store. Create eye-popping seasonal decorations. Host holiday parties or seasonal special events.

Use technology to delight customers. Arm your staff with eye-catching apps that help them look up prices, retrieve fast answers, locate a product on the shelves or demonstrate products in action.

Finally, whatever delight mechanisms you set up, don't be shy about them. Share stories about them on social media, in newsletters and blogs, or via whatever channels you have chosen. It is one more way to reinforce that seamless customer experience you are working to create. ■

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