

# Best Practices in Building an Omnichannel Experience

By Dean Mueller



*Today's customers want it all. They want to go online and easily find products, prices and delivery information. But they also want to call with questions and speak to a knowledgeable service rep. Some still want to look at pictures in a catalog.*

*But no matter how they interact with you, they want it to be seamless and consistent.*

A McKinsey study showed that B2B buyers use 10 channels now vs. just five in 2016. And 94% of B2B users say new omnichannel methods are as effective or more effective than pre-COVID. In other words: Buyers don't want it to return to the way things were before the pandemic.

Channel boundaries are dissolving. Buyers seamlessly move between online, branch and customer service.

## **What is omnichannel?**

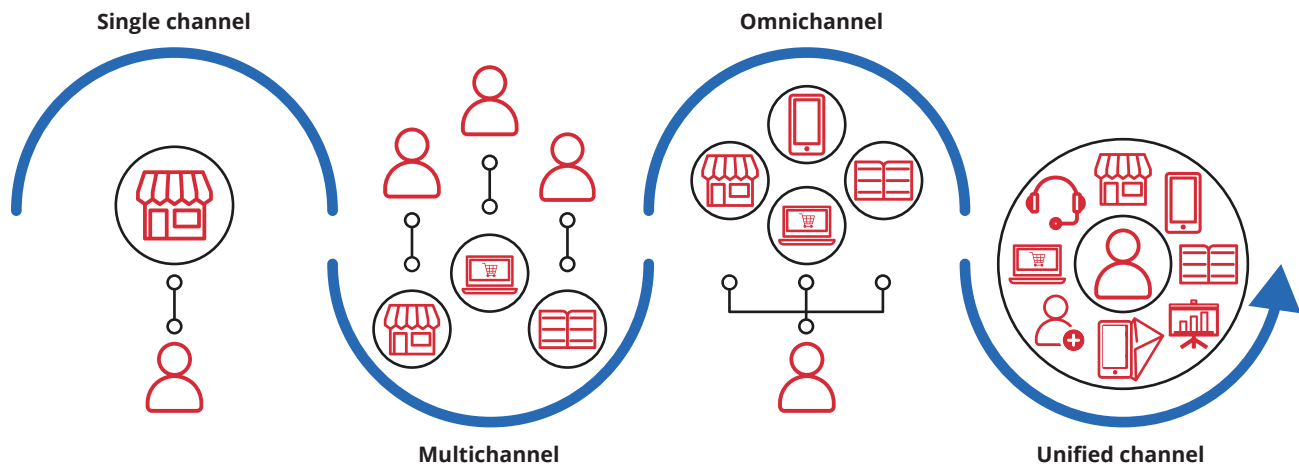
Very few distributors can deliver a true omnichannel experience today. But that's going to change rapidly.

Creating an omnichannel infrastructure means your customer's experience is consistent, no matter how they interact with you. It means the entire shopping, sales and service process is linked, and every interaction along that path, and how your company responded, is immediately accessible to any front-line employee. And the status of an order placed offline with a sales rep can be checked online and vice versa.

It's important to remember that, from a customer's point of view, an omnichannel experience isn't just shopping or buying. Rather, it is every occasion a customer has to connect with a distributor.

For a distributor, it's an evolution to a customer-centric experience.

## Chart 1: What is omnichannel?



## Examples of Omnichannel

One example of an omnichannel experience is when a customer needs a repair. They may start by going to your website, and if the option is available, may chat online with a service rep. But if the issue is complicated, it may require the involvement of a distributor support expert.

That conversation will proceed much more smoothly – and more likely result in a solution for the customer – if that expert can instantly access a history of the customer’s purchases and inventory.

Another example is in the buying and fulfillment process. Let’s say a contractor finds the products they need on a distributor’s website but then orders those products through a mobile app. They need the product right away, so they then go to the branch and show the order confirmation to a rep behind the counter. That rep then brings up the transaction to complete the order.

Each of those steps requires near-immediate information sharing, which your technology setup must support. A problem at any step in that process will detract from a distributor’s ability to provide a seamless customer experience.



## How to Build an Omnichannel Strategy

To offer that kind of seamless experience means distributors first must build a strategy that allows customers to shop when, where and how they want, whether it is digital, in person, in print or in some combination of all those.

You need to start by defining your priorities. Ask these questions:

- What are the key value drivers for your business?
- Where do the products and services you sell fit on the Distributor Relative Value Model?
- What channels are used in the key customer journeys?
- What are the key customer priorities when it comes to how they shop and buy?

## The Distributor Relative Value Model

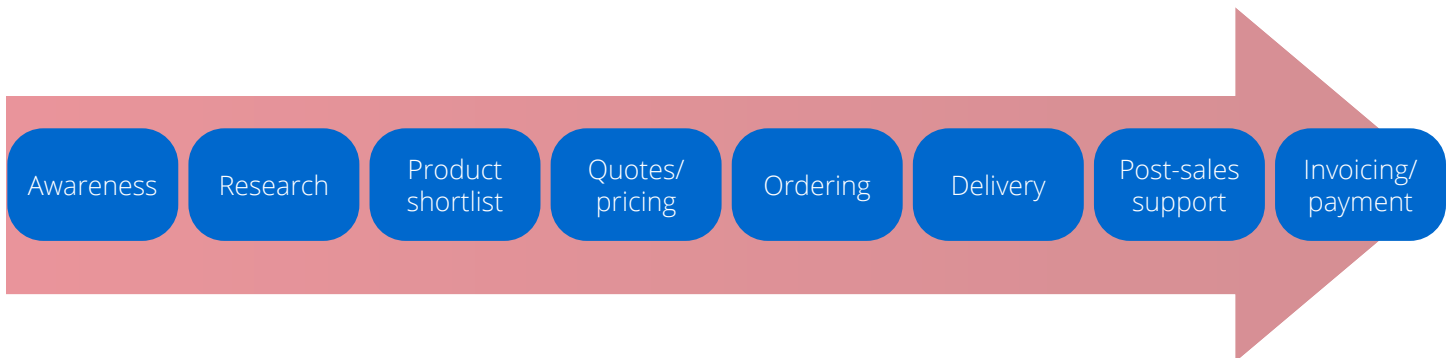
		Logistics Complexity		
		Simple / Standardized	Hybrid	Complex / Customized
Product Complexity Sophistication Transformation Information	Complex / Customized	BIM Application	Repairs Energy and Lighting Surveys	Industrial Vending Local Branches
	Hybrid	Product Training Marketing Services	Sales Rep	Bin Replenishment Kitting & Assemblies
	Simple / Standardized	Easy-to-Use Website Wide Product Assortment	Large Deliveries	Project Staging Tool Rental

The Distributor Relative Value Model is comprised of two factors: Product Complexity (sophistication, transformation, information) and Logistic Complexity (storage, transportation, delivery). These factors are ranked from Simple/Standardized to Complex/Customized. A company that has a simple and wide product assortment with an easy-to-use website will have a high value in adopting ecommerce (the red squares in bottom left). This is a business where sales reps, local branches, most value-added services and the telephone are not that important to the sales process. In this corner of the Relative Value Model, distributors' customers can self-service.

In contrast, distributors who offer value-added services, consultation from sales reps, counter sales at the branch or phone access usually see fewer shopping-cart sales. The top-right green section includes examples that would be less apt to adopt ecommerce due to the complexity of their products and logistics. However, customers increasingly use more channels to research product information before purchasing. Distributors with product and logistic complexity are realizing the importance of an ecommerce channel for the initial point of contact in the sales cycle.

Then move into building your strategy:

## Chart 2: Example of B2B Customer Journey



### **Identify and prioritize top customer cross-channel journeys.**

Tap into analytics from across your organization. Journeys are complex and may include bouncing back and forth between your channels, as well as third-party channels, to make a buying decision.

**Design experiences for those key customer journeys.** For high-priority customer journeys that use multiple channels, build the capabilities they need.

**Embed a customer-centric mindset.** If customers are at the core of your omnichannel capabilities, it will help you select the right technology and find the right people to deliver what customers need.

## Omnichannel Requirements

An omnichannel strategy must be built on a solid foundation of data and the right technology.

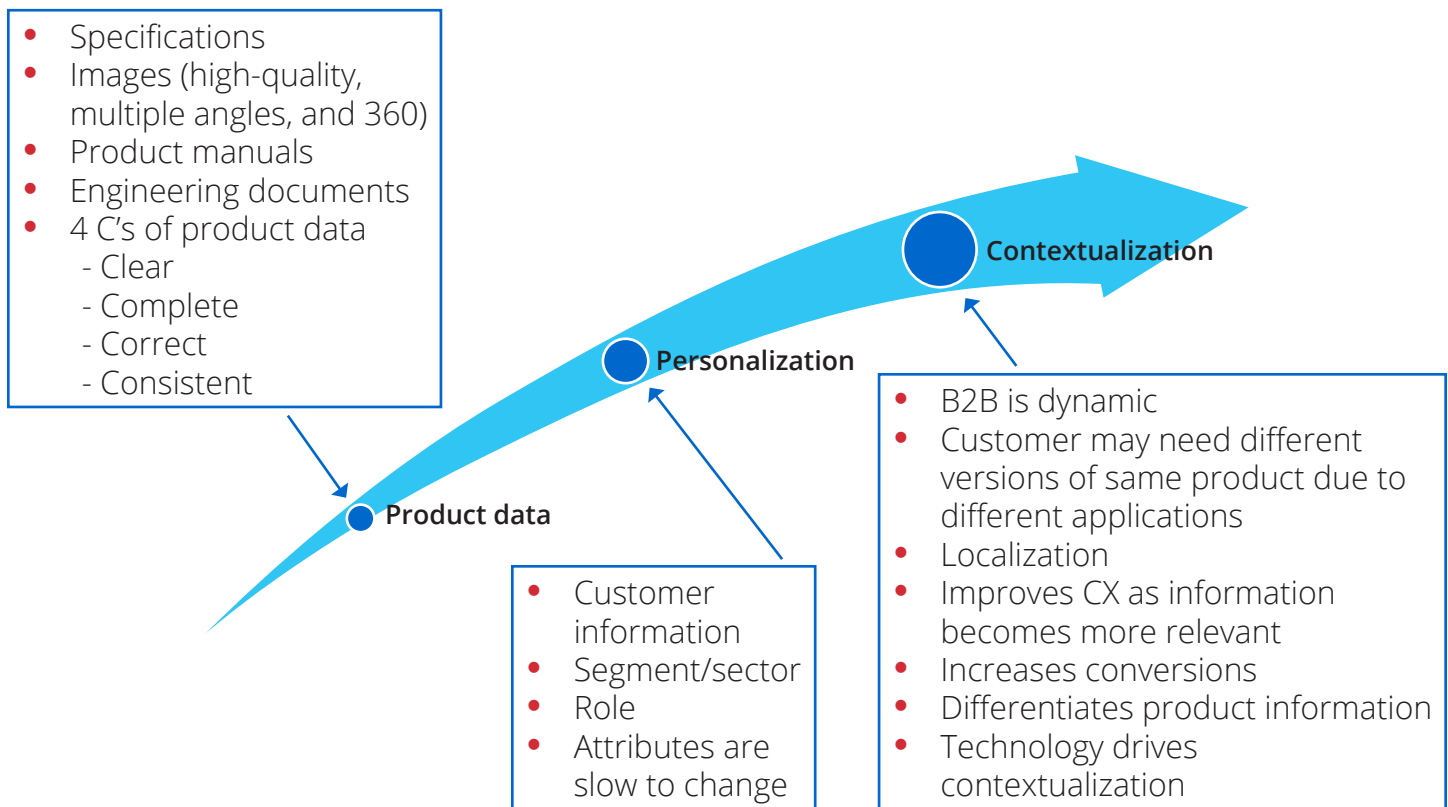
### **Product Data**

Distributors have historically underinvested in their product data. In the Distribution Strategy Group State of eCommerce in Distribution survey, we asked distributors what they saw as the biggest barriers to eCommerce success. More than a third said that inadequate product data was the most significant barrier.

Distributors' data usually sits in multiple locations, which doesn't support an omnichannel strategy. The health of your product data determines the success of your omnichannel strategy. It is a foundational and strategic asset for distributors.

Your product data must be clear, complete, correct and consistent, as well as available across all sales channels. It must also be dynamic, recognizing that multiple factors contribute to how a product is used, such as region, end-market, role in an organization and application. Hyperpersonalization (using real-time customer data from multiple touchpoints to target customers with relevant offers and products) and contextualization (using a customer's history and behavior to deliver the right content at the right time) improve the customer experience and increase conversions wherever your customer shops.

### Chart 3: Product Data: Make It About Your Customer



## Supporting Technology

B2B buyers want to move from channel to channel, and a distributor's technology stack should support that. For example, a customer might start with the website to research a product, move to the website's chat for questions, call a sales rep and download a technical resource – all before buying.

Today, distributors have multiple options to ensure that the buyer's experience is relevant and consistent, providing a great customer experience:

- AI assists in driving relevant recommendations and supports cross-selling and upsell opportunities online and offline that buyers are likely to act on.
- A CRM supports a comprehensive customer view.
- Digital experience platforms (DXPs) can help provide exceptional and relevant personalization.

## Omnichannel: A Requirement for Survival

Don't make the mistake of assuming all customers want the same thing. Or that a particular customer will always want to shop, order and communicate with you using the same channel. Market research has shown time and again that buyers now prefer search for shopping and email for ordering, but they all shop and buy across all other channels.

Many larger distributors already offer these seamless experiences, and they are taking market share from smaller competitors. Compelling omnichannel experiences are a requirement to survive and should begin with a key focus on what drives value for your customers. They also require a strong digital foundation.

Some tips:

- Focus on your top cross-channel journeys first – don't attempt to do everything at once. Identify those using CRM, web and email data, as well as by using traditional customer research for your top two deciles of your customer base.
- Provide exceptional and consistent customer experience in those journeys to drive continued customer loyalty.
- Address sales channel conflict head-on, proactively developing customer-centric solutions. That mindset starts at the top.



The results for any distributor that does this well?

- Competitive advantage
  - Cost savings through greater efficiencies
  - Increased customer satisfaction
  - Profitable sales growth
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Distribution Strategy Group offers strategic guidance for distributors in the face of disruption, including:

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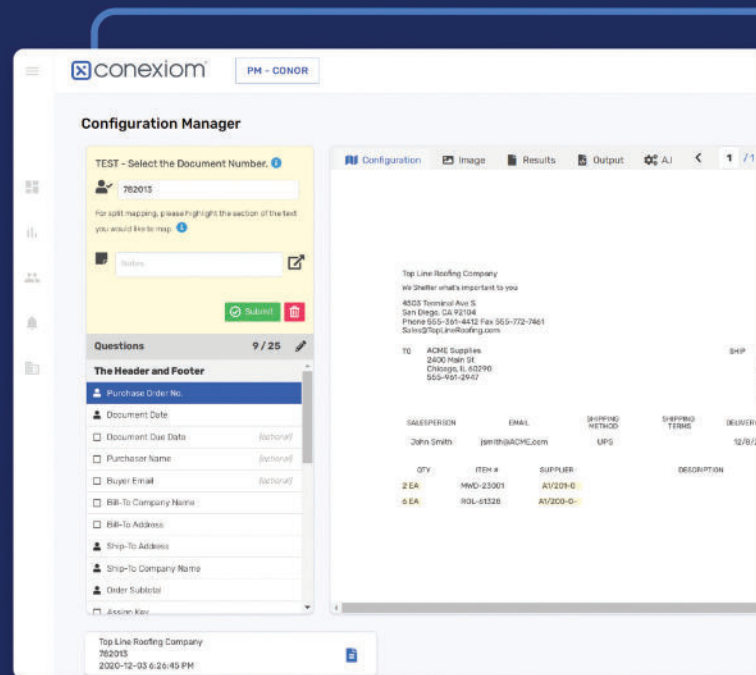
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