

Omnichannel retail: Are your online and offline experiences consistent?

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When engaging in omnichannel retailing, the retailer aims to create "an integrated sales experience that melds the advantages of physical stores with the information-rich experience of online shopping", according to Darrell Rigby's [Harvard Business Review article](#).



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A [recent research study](#) of consumers' omnichannel experience, specifically in the FMCG context, suggested that the channel experience is a contested one. A sample of 20 respondents were asked to answer questions about their perception of the online vs the offline store experience.

Half of the sample felt that the experience – the look and feel of the two channels, well-categorised products, and cleanliness – was consistent. The other half, however, indicated that products looked better and flashier online than they did in-store, that there was a customer service difference (online being better than offline), and that the online store looked cleaner and more attractive than the physical store.

Even though only half of the sample experienced such inconsistencies, retailers are likely to notice them. With more FMCG retailers moving towards improving the omnichannel experience they offer, working on and improving channel consistency in order to ensure a seamless experience is key.

Get the relevant departments involved

Omnichannel retailing is argued to be the responsibility of more than one organisational function. The business needs to adopt a systemic perspective – which means involving the HR function, the supply chain division, and the marketing and communications department.

The people with the necessary knowledge and skills to enhance an omnichannel experience must be appointed; orders

need to be correctly placed, fulfilled, and delivered; and the online and offline image, communication, and advertising needs to convey consistency. So, the three departments need to engage often and work together like a well-oiled machine, unified in providing a consistent customer experience.



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Regard each channel as *the* channel

Whether online or offline, both channels should enjoy equal investment. Let's be honest: it can take longer to replace offline in-store branding and price tags and specials than their online versions. So, consider having a policy to update nothing online before everything in-store has been done. Yes, this might look like a lost opportunity to make money online in the meantime; but problems arise when the customer encounters differences between the two channels in what is promoted, viewed, and experienced.

For example, customers don't always understand the difference between an 'online-only special' and an 'offline special'. If such differences are intentional, communication about them should be prominent and crystal clear. Furthermore, customers view you as a single brand with one type of offer and as having one voice. If any form of inconsistency is experienced, suspicion and distrust arise.

Customers seek consistency because it signals trust and makes them feel more comfortable about engaging with your brand. Consistency also improves [purchase intent and brand perception](#). Establishing trust is of cardinal importance in building not only brand perception but also confidence in and loyalty towards your brand. So, channels need to change at the same time in order to ensure consistency.

Online and offline are complementary

The offline store is complementary to the online store, according to Wang and Goldfarb's 2017 research article '*Can offline stores drive online sales?*' in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. They found that many consumers visited a physical store before making an online purchase. This signals the importance of the reliability and trust that must be gained offline before moving to buy online. This also suggests that initial brand perceptions are often formed by the in-store channel.

So, make sure that you're in-store channel delivers every time. This is particularly important when it comes to customer service. In the online environment, the customer has immediate access to all product information, as well as the prices.

In contrast, in-store attendants are often not readily available to answer questions or to assist with finding products – and prices are often missing or even incorrect. Don't let the in-store experience falter. It remains a key touch point to build your

brand, to instill customer trust, and to offer positive experiences.

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