Is Your Business Ready for Multi-Channel Marketing?

A couple of marketing strategy concepts these days are “omni-channel” and “multi-channel”. Although these are buzzwords in the business marketing field, it doesn’t mean they can’t be unpacked to yield some helpful insight for local small business CEOs. That is exactly what the local Chamber of Commerce addressed last week in their monthly “Shop Local” seminar series. Dr. Christine Beech, Executive Director of the St. Mary’s University Kabara Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies presented a data-rich focus on the topic of “Navigate & Compete - Creating a Shop Local Environment in an E-Commerce World”.

Beech challenged her business audience to ask these questions of their small business as she introduced them to a variety of data, all focused on the need for a multi-channel strategy:

1. How do you encourage shoppers to choose your local business when they have so many choices online?
2. How do you get them to walk into your business?
3. Specifically, how can you start to use your own website as the other half of your business that generates engagement and excitement in your customers so they continue to want to shop locally?

Marketing research, Beech summarized, demonstrates that “Omni-channel customers now expect to start their search for goods and services in one place and continue it seamlessly in another whether on a different device, media outlet or store location.”

The take home message that Beech gave local business folks was that:

1. Brick and Mortar is not going away.
2. Neither is Ecommerce.
3. However, creating a relationship between the in-store experience and online experience and gaining a reoccurring customer in the process is the backbone to future growth.
4. Bottom Line: Competing effectively in today’s market requires an understanding of how to use both the face to face and on-line shopping experiences to increase your business.

The data suggests that currently, only 28% of small businesses are using the internet to sell their products. In other words, they have a website, but they are not using it for sales. That means the majority of small businesses are missing out on the power of on-line sales as a way to grow their
customer base and their revenue. Think about this, Beech noted, “the customer found you on the web and they want to buy something locally. Or…they came in and loved the store and want to buy more of your product. If it is not easy to find and buy your product online, Amazon is probably the next stop”.

Omnichannel -- also spelled omni-channel -- is a multichannel approach to sales that seeks to provide customers with a seamless shopping experience, whether they're shopping online from a desktop or mobile device, by telephone, or in a brick-and-mortar store.

Margaret Rouse wrote a recent piece that provides further insight to these concepts. She writes for and manages WhatIs.com, TechTarget’s IT encyclopedia and learning center. She is responsible for building content that helps IT professionals learn to speak each other’s highly specialized languages. She identified some key benefits to multi-channel marketing as:

1. **Management of sales through feedback**: By maximizing marketing efforts through promoting a message through as many channels as possible, companies have the potential to collect feedback from different customer segments. Overall performance can be determined through this feedback and improvements can be made by crowdsourcing information. By ensuring that resources are being used effectively and efficiently, operational costs decrease.

2. **More sales**: The more visible a message is the more potential customers a company can attract. By concentrating efforts on a single channel, the potential to reach the most prospective customers is diminished. Companies can use their presences on various channels to mold a personalized image that can build a customer following and boost retention and loyalty.

3. **Achieving a 360-degree view of the customer**: When companies collect feedback from customers, they can better understand what is expected by their customer bases and how to improve product and service offerings. Companies can then augment marketing efforts and identify which channels work best for certain customer segments and strategize to cater to the needs of that group of customers.”

Beech gave the following suggestions for merging the company website with the retail store:

- "Your website is your second location storefront. 45% of consumers are unlikely to purchase from a retailer with a poorly designed website. 58% visited the store’s website before visiting the store location.

- Make sure online information is accurate and up to date – don’t leave products on the website that are not currently available, or make sure to state clearly that they are on order and when they arrive.

- Don’t hide the ball from online shoppers – put prices online otherwise shoppers will go elsewhere to look online.

- Provide a full shopping experience online – offer vibrant descriptions of products / not just basic information."
• In store product interaction still maintains an advantage – the ability to touch, feel, and smell is only an in-store option.

• Don’t forget to pay attention to third-party listings – update your store hours for holidays, make sure you appear accurately on maps and that the store profile is correct.”

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