# New era of retail an opportunity for enhanced customer experience

By Wynand Smit   11 Jan 2018

In the mid to late 90s the number of internet businesses grew exponentially. Since consumers were getting connected in their millions, this space was ideal for entrepreneurs to create hype around projected profitability. At the height of the boom, it was possible for a promising dot-com company to become a public company via an initial public offering and raise a substantial amount of money even though it had never made a profit-or, in some cases, realised any material revenue whatsoever.
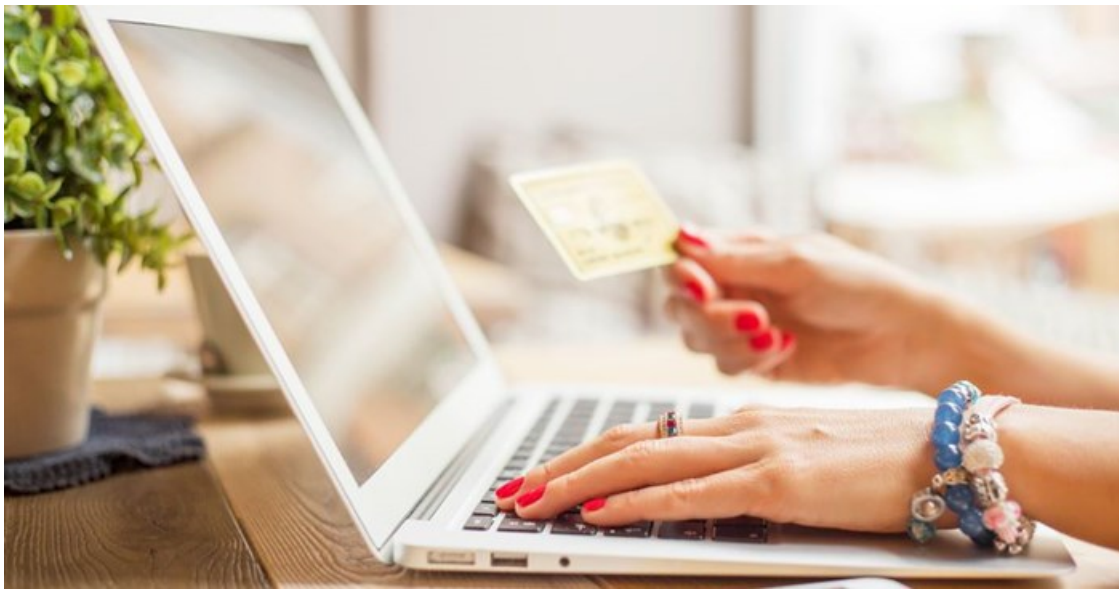
Then, around the turn of the century, the bubble burst. Many of those new businesses didn't make it. Others, such as Amazon and eBay, recovered and went on to thrive. The dot-com bubble was both exhilarating and terrifying, but it lay the groundwork for the future of online retail.

Originally, many brick and mortar stores maintained websites just because they felt that they had to, and this led to frustration from customers who couldn't replicate the physical shopping experience online; stock levels were inefficient, delivery processes were unpredictable and, in some cases, the websites only showed what you could buy in the stores, with no online shopping available at all.

The end of brick and mortar retail?

In recent years, there has been an interesting development in retail: brick and mortar stores are having to scramble to provide a functioning online offering to consumers, or risk losing out to their more agile competitors. The costs involved in maintaining branches (and the staff within those) have seen many brand-name businesses closing stores and consolidating their strategies. There are still customers who prefer to shop in the physical environment, but changing consumer patterns are driving adaptation in the retail sector.

At the same time, online retailers – the ones that are getting it right – are enjoying increased customer bases and growing profitability. The hiccups of early online retail, including the lack of seamless purchase-to-delivery processes and no recourse to customers in the event of a problem other than for those customers to go into a branch, are becoming resolved. At the heart of those businesses, customer service is central to their success.

Increasingly, stores are themselves becoming connected, so customers can connect while in the brick-and-mortar shopping environment and have their purchases facilitated. Companies can get instant feedback about service, and gain valuable data about purchasing habits.

Effective customer service

Connectivity and the fact that in just a few years mobile has outstripped desktop as a means for customers to contact and interact with companies has changed the game plan. Your company may have spent years developing an efficient website for desktop, only to have this shift to mobile and require you to redevelop the entire thing. Customers expect to be able to use social media to interact with brands, and they want to get from browsing products to receiving them in the space of a few clicks.

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While contact centres used to be almost exclusively voice-based, recent years have seen the addition of multiple channels, according to what can most effectively resolve customer interactions, be those channels chatbots, email, online chat, SMS, text and more. Contact centre agents, in the online retail environment in particular, are the face of the company.

You may have a chatbot on your website named 'Greg', and Greg's only human aspect is that he was designed and programmed a certain way, to perform the tasks you need, such as offering product information or guiding a customer from browsing to purchasing. You could have a team of agents working in a centralised space to provide assistance to customers, or you could have a hosted contact centre that's cloud-based to save on the capital outlay. The point is, you have flexibility in how you present your company to your customers.

The era of online retail is on the rise, with sophisticated technology providing more options to customers, and, increasingly, opportunities for enhanced customer experiences. You have an opportunity to provide real products and services to your customers in ways that suit them.

The dot-com bubble of a few years ago was largely due to businesses being unable to make good on promises, but finally, companies can offer authentic, personalised business in a cost-effective way. The challenge to online retailers is to keep imagining what comes next, to stay ahead of the trends and match the needs of your customers.

ABOUT WYNAND SMIT

Wynand Smit is CEO at INOVO, a leading contact centre business solutions provider.
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