



Pandemic means manufacturers must boost the customer experience

Lockdowns shine spotlight on the need to move into more virtual, self-services models

A survey conducted by the National Association of Manufacturers found 53 percent of its members anticipate a change in operations in the coming months and 78 percent expect a financial impact from the pandemic. The challenges mean an industry built on field-sales agents meeting directly with clients now needs to shift to driving sales on web properties.

The pandemic has created a roadblock as field-sales reps are unable to meet directly with clients and existing web properties are ill-equipped to handle a shift to a different model or high-volume sales. Many manufacturers had plans for more B2C-type experiences but did not have the technology, people, and processes to move ahead. Now, systems that did not change for decades have become a business priority for every manufacturer.

Manufacturers need more global visibility from lead to cash and shorter intervals for Configure, Price, and Quote (CPQ) activity to close deals. They also need to identify alternative revenue streams to provide tighter consumer intimacy, better margins, and effective remarketing capabilities.



Moving to a new model

The pandemic has accelerated and reprioritized digital agendas for manufacturers. There is a need to shift the business from product-only, highly commoditized sales to a more services-oriented revenue model. Data can then be used to monetize subscription opportunities.

Many manufacturers have realized the importance of direct links to their customers. While channel partners are still an important part of the process, the pandemic quickly revealed that not owning a commerce channel is a poor strategy and relying on spreadsheets to track customer details for the field team is not a viable option.

Addressing this requires reimagining a company's portfolio of products and services to connect better with customers. For example, an HVAC manufacturer can build a commerce channel that not only sells air conditioners but arranges installation, parts ordering, and ongoing maintenance services.

Creating a deeper connection with customers beyond the sell-it-and-forget-it mentality provides more stability in times of disruption. Customers need to feel they get additional value if they buy directly from the manufacturer. At the same time, it is a balancing act to ensure channel partners do not see more B2C activities as a conflict. For example, distributors may require a minimum quantity for an order but a manufacturer can offer small customers more flexibility.



Delivering a personalized experience

The goal of digital CRM transformations is to create a real-time consumer-like experience with customer-service and support functions, and it requires a careful examination and planning of your customer personas and journey maps. It is time to design for personalized commerce experiences based on a buyer's history.

Manufacturers need to address:

- **Segmentation:** Know your customer to define a world-class customer experience with personalization and AI-guided selling to leapfrog the competition. Imbedding digital marketing is critical to long-term benefits.
- **Servitization:** Reimagine products and services to develop new go-to-market opportunities with the potential for subscriptions and bundles. And it is more than just products. Data can also be explored as a service possibility.
- **Stabilization:** Cloud-based platforms form the foundation to provide and deliver a great experience. Delivering capabilities as-a-service will most likely mean redefining IT architectures to keep up with the speed of business.
- **Seamless:** Frictionless engagement makes it easy for customers to interact with you in the way they want. No matter how customers interact, they should receive the same experience from every channel.

Creating this change is not just a technology implementation; it is a significant organizational and process transformation. Both employees and customers are impacted by new digital platforms. Manufacturers need to define the client experience throughout the value chain for projects to be truly successful.

Understanding the new customer journey

Manufacturers need to better understand their own business, set themselves up differently, and serve a new direct customer. Defining journeys and personas provides insights into who the customer is now – not who they were in the past.

The new customer will come in through a mobile device, tablet, laptop, or a phone call to customer service. Whether they are calling to order a new product or following up on a warranty, manufacturers need to understand how they want to delight their customers, the experience that needs to be delivered, and the future they want for the customer experience.

Web properties need to be more than content hubs, for example. An environment that presents the catalog and supports online ordering transaction completion is only one element. The next is systems that pick, pack, and ship to customers, and this is another opportunity to build deeper bonds.

Manufacturers cannot create new revenue streams with just technology implementations. The pandemic has caused a fundamental disruption in the market and only organizational and process change will be effective. Defining the new customer experience is the only way to be truly transformative and value-added. Manufacturers should start with journey mapping to ensure the digital customer experiences are impactful and meaningful.



For more information, **please contact:**

Kathleen Williams

Vice President

kathleen.a.williams@capgemini.com



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