Creating a Consistent Customer Experience -
How CSPs can learn a lesson from Apple's approach to CEM

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Think back to the last time you went in to make a purchase at your local consumer electronics store. The limited range of products in the store may have made it a frustrating experience, or you may have been overwhelmed by the options available but unable to get any assistance from an overextended or untrained sales staff. If you visited a big box store during a peak shopping time, such as the holiday season or over the weekend, you may have been turned away by crowded aisles and long lines, or you may have showed up to find that the store had gone out of business, as many have over the last several months.

Compare that experience to the typical experience of a customer visiting the Apple Store. Apple's move into the retail store business in 2001 was fueled by Steve Jobs' desire to be the "gold standard" for how products should be sold, and the

Apple Store experience measures up to that goal. Every aspect of a visit to an Apple Store is carefully managed, from the online Concierge system to make a service appointment to the greeter at the entrance to the process for getting a device repaired or replaced. As a result, when a customer enters an Apple Store, regardless of where it is located or what he is there for, he knows exactly how that visit will go, and he will most likely leave feeling as though he had a positive experience.

Too often, communications service providers are the equivalent of the local retail store. A customer may have multiple ways of communicating with the CSP—for example, a retail store, a reseller, a call

center and Web-based chat—but may experience variable pricing information, product availability and support capabilities among these different channels. Similarly, a customer may have multiple services from a single CSP, but find that the CSP cannot generate a single customer view across these services, again creating a fragmented experience. In short, CSPs sorely lack the ability to create the consistent customer experience that Apple has been able to achieve.

Bringing Consistency to the Back End

It is no longer enough for a CSP to simply deliver a service to a customer. In order to succeed in this increasingly competitive and sophisticated market, the CSP must follow Apple's lead and actually manage the customer experience. And in order to do that, the CSP must be able to not just manage the service, but manage the process by which the service is consumed, on an end-to-end basis, from the time the subscriber orders the service to the time it is actually delivered—much the way that Apple manages the experience from the time the customer walks in the door of the store to the time he walks out with either his problem solved or a new product.

One considerable hurdle that CSPs face in doing this is the combination of legacy systems that support their operations. Each new service delivered by a Tier 1 CSP has historically required its own service delivery environment and OSS/ BSS environment, each with its own representation of the customer, and with little to no integration or visibility among them. Without a unified view of the

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subscriber—including service profile, usage history identity information and device information—the CSP has no way of treating that customer in a consistent manner. The CSP needs to be able to

correlate disparate subscriber information across multiple dimensions, including service type, access technology and even region, and make that information available throughout the organization, from customer service reps to marketing groups to retail employees to technical support departments.

The CSP must similarly be able to correlate information about how the actual product is created and delivered, on an end-to-end basis. Typically a

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product such as a calling plan must be assembled from a number of service components (e.g. call waiting, call forwarding, packages of minutes), and sold to the market through offers (e.g. family plan, business plan, prepaid plan). The product must then be activated on the network, which requires interfaces to dozens of systems, including billing and CRM, as well as the network itself.

ConceptWave terms this end-to-end process control "Unified Sales Management," referring to an approach that manages the entire sales process—from pre-sale brand management and offer management through to order fulfillment—across multiple channels. The primary challenge to a Unified Sales Management approach is that each of the back end systems involved in the sales and order fulfillment process contains a representation of the product, which can cause disruptions if those representations are out of sync. Add the fact that the CSP's various sales channels may not receive consistent product and customer information, and the risk of a disjointed, inconsistent customer experience becomes a reality.

Resolving the Data Dilemma

Centralizing this product information may be the most effective way to counter any inconsistencies, but this approach is not always practical or efficient from a cost and resource perspective. A more reasonable alternative is providing a common interface to multiple back end systems, and then implementing a front-end system that provides unified access to all the information associated with an order, either via a federated approach or a slave/master configuration. The CSP can then bridge its back end systems and gain a consolidated view of the product data across the various back end applications.

One successful example of this approach is a project that ConceptWave is doing with a large North American cable operator. This operator had multiple back end systems that were built for different channels, each of which supported a separate product set. This meant that a customer who purchased through more than one channel had multiple profiles within the various systems, making it difficult for the operator to obtain a single, comprehensive view of the customer, including all products owned and current status.

ConceptWave provided the operator with a centralized information portal that can pull data from multiple back end applications, including order management, provisioning and billing. The operator can query any system from this portal without having to toggle among management consoles of various systems, ensuring that the order process can be managed on an end-to-end basis from a single hub that can be accessed by those who touch the process, ranging from customer service representatives to provisioning technicians to marketing managers.

Conclusion

Too often, CSPs equate managing the customer experience with managing the service. However, while service quality management is an important part of customer experience management, customer experience management extends far beyond technology solutions to encompass more strategic concepts such as brand management, touch mapping and service blueprints. Those companies that have excelled in customer experience management—regardless of industry—have identified their value proposition and consistently promoted it through

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all interactions with the customer, from the time he walks into the retail store or logs onto the web site, through to the delivery of the product or service, and any follow-up support that may be necessary.

Love it or hate it, Apple has put a tremendous amount of work into creating a consistent experience for its customers that derives from its core messages of simplicity and ease of use, extending from logo to product design and packaging to retail environment. In order to succeed in the digital age, CSPs need to take a similar end-to-end approach to their businesses—or risk being the stodgy, generic PC to the edgy and innovative Apple.

About ConceptWave

ConceptWave® is an independent software vendor (ISV) and leading provider of lifecycle management solutions that allow global multi-play communications service providers (CSPs) and operators to rapidly introduce new market offers. Our customers can immediately re-tune or change existing offers to meet competitive needs and simplify the managing of service orders found across wireline, broadband data, wireless, cable, voice, and unified networks. Our catalog-driven order fulfillment solutions enable customers around the world to introduce complex multi- product and service offers in record time, translating into increased revenues, reduced operating costs, and highly satisfied loyal end-consumers and service subscribers.

We have successfully helped our customers transform their businesses and ensure agile order fulfillment and orchestration through our award-winning Product Lifecycle Management and Order Lifecycle Management solutions. Visit us online: www.conceptwave.com.

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