Learn to Meet Customers Anywhere with Connected Experiences

The enhanced customer experience isn't limited to digital channels. Today's brick-and-mortar businesses must use content and data to deliver better everyday experiences when customers visit their stores.
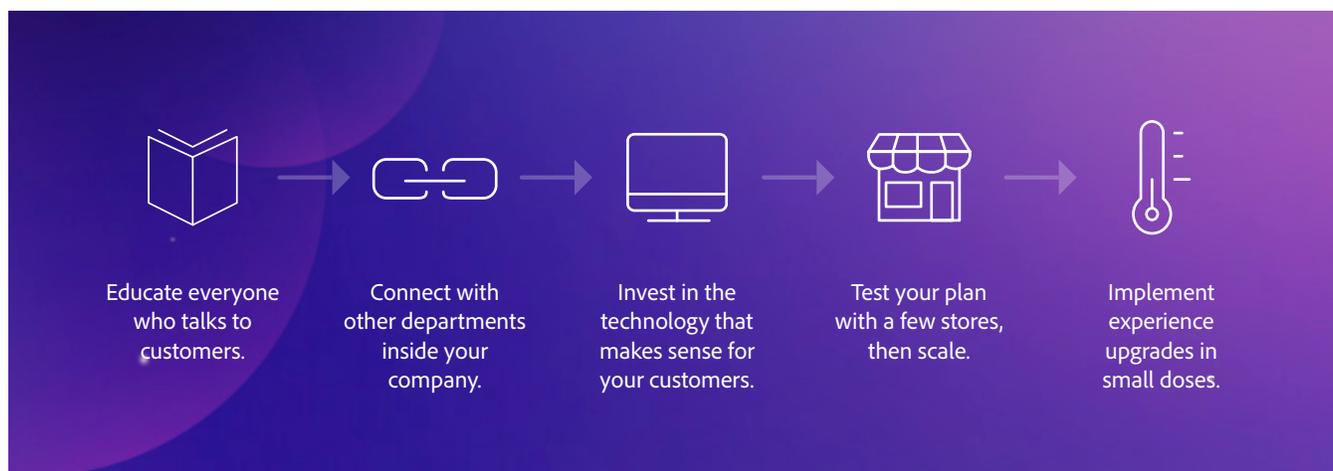
My name is Dave Bilbrough, and as an enterprise platform architect with Adobe, I've worked with countless brands to help them improve how they connect online and offline interactions, so their customers enjoy a seamless experience.

Imagine a customer starting the purchase process online before encountering some kind of friction that cuts the process short. If this person decides to go to the nearest retail store to complete the purchase, the in-store sales rep ideally should be able to help the customer pick up right where they left off, without starting the process over again.

Brands can use mobile apps, kiosks, and web properties to engage customers the moment they walk into brick-and-mortar stores. What's exciting about using digital channels to enhance in-store interactions is that the possibilities are endless.

That's not to say creating a frictionless brand experience is a walk in the park. Evolving with customer needs, maintaining consistency at scale, and measuring effectiveness so you can improve future campaigns are all challenges that can make or break any digital marketer. The brands of the future are the ones that will be able to take command of every new channel that arises and then integrate them seamlessly into growing and immersive experiences that speak directly to the hyper-connected customers of today—and tomorrow.

I've been lucky enough to work with some terrific innovators in experience business over the years, and I've picked up a few things along the way. Below are five steps you can take right now to connect frictionless brand experiences your customers are sure to love.

Educate everyone who talks to customers. → Connect with other departments inside your company. → Invest in the technology that makes sense for your customers. → Test your plan with a few stores, then scale. → Implement experience upgrades in small doses.

1. Educate everyone who talks to customers.

All it takes is a little misinformation to turn your hard-won connected and personalized experience from cool to creepy. I've seen this happen for a variety of reasons, starting with the mishandling of customer perceptions about the use of their data. It's imperative to train your in-store personnel to really understand the value that the service provides so if a customer says, "That's creepy that you know that," the salesperson won't respond with, "I know! It is creepy." An exchange like that could ruin not just one experience, but other experiences for that same consumer. Manage customer comments and perceptions by training the people who work directly with customers, so that they can communicate the value of connected experiences to the consumer.

However, I also want to point out that in this example the sales rep is not the party at fault. If your sales teams, customer service reps, and anyone else directly in touch with your customers can't explain the steps and processes involved in using customer data to create connected experiences, you're the one that needs to take corrective action.

Train anyone who interacts with customers to handle common misperceptions about data and privacy. Ensure that every employee is prepared to help your customers understand how you obtained their data, what's you're doing with it, and why. This can calm their fears of intrusion and encourage them to understand the benefit they receive when they do share their personal information.

2. Connect with other departments inside your company.
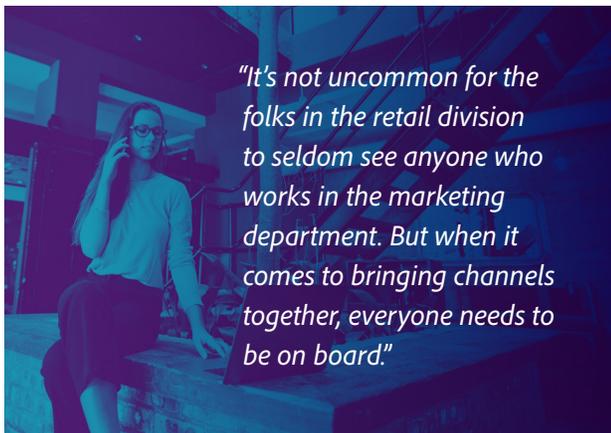
"It's not uncommon for the folks in the retail division to seldom see anyone who works in the marketing department. But when it comes to bringing channels together, everyone needs to be on board."

Sometimes the brands I work with are so focused on connecting the customer experience that they forget to connect with their peers throughout the company. It's not uncommon for the folks in the retail division of a company to seldom see anyone who works in the marketing department. But when it comes to bringing channels together, everyone needs to be on board.

Start by scheduling face time with all parties involved to explain the roles and responsibilities each department will have. It's also the perfect opportunity to discuss setting up a center of excellence. The center of excellence helps establish cross-departmental governance, something you'll want to cover once everyone's in the same room together.

Remember, your center of excellence will need to establish a thorough list of documented policies and procedures—and government regulations that must be complied with—before project kick-off. Take time to make the proper introductions, review project guidelines, and above all else, don't let anyone leave the room with unanswered questions.

3. Invest in the technology that makes sense for your customers.

Some of my past customers have made the mistake of choosing software and platforms to enhance in-store experiences without asking themselves what goals they're trying to achieve in the first place. This is precisely why I like to advise customers to work back from the ultimate aim, identifying technology needs only after their objectives are thoroughly defined and understood.

Will using beacons to send ads and coupons to customer smartphones be effective, or would your customers respond better to digital signage? What about a mobile app or voice control? With the overhead required to develop any type of innovative marketing technology, the last thing you want to do is invest in something your customers aren't going to respond to in a positive (and profitable) way.

Get started by mapping a handful of customer journeys, and then see what it's going to take for you to achieve a well-developed, anxiety-free shopping experience for your customers in the store. Consider what is going to be best for the average retail customer and then validate every step of your plan accordingly.

"By setting aside a small marketplace to prototype your vision, you can mitigate risk and evaluate results on a manageable level before applying the idea across the board."

4. Test your plan with a few stores, then scale.

Planning for scale is like purchasing insurance. Without a proper policy in place, you're simply asking for trouble further down the road.

I was recently talking about technology initiatives with a fast-food company, and the vision quickly grew into the hundreds of millions of dollars due to the number of locations across which the idea would need to scale. This may work fine for established and proven projects, but when you're talking about integrating new technology into physical storefronts by the hundreds (if not thousands), you're taking a large and unnecessary risk. Not to mention, it would be a fairly rapid undertaking to try and customize thousands of stores all at once.

That's why I always tell customers to identify a couple of test stores and go from there. By setting aside a small marketplace to prototype your vision, you can mitigate risk and evaluate results on a manageable level before applying the idea across the board.

The line between digital and physical touchpoints is fading fast.

From 24/7 access to your brand online to seamless experiences between channels both online and off, today's consumers want it all.

These customers are hyper-connected, intelligent, and even impatient, with a vast ocean of digital devices at their disposal. Brands that can keep up with their needs will be able to navigate the cross-channel ecosystem with ease. Brands that won't will be left behind.

Delivering seamless experiences at scale means keeping your marketing consistent wherever your customers may go. Brands that can't keep up across digital and physical touchpoints, however, risk creating a jaded customer base that is sure to grow weary of inconsistent and tiresome marketing messages.

That's why every brand needs the right data management platform to send consistent messages across the right channels at the right time. Businesses set on creating frictionless brand experiences at scale will also need technology that supports and manages reusable content. With the right system in place, content can be managed and delivered across any channel your customer chooses.

Being there for your customers on their terms is what will keep them coming back for more.

5. Implement experience upgrades in small doses.

Time and again, I've heard companies say they know exactly what their customers want. But the truth is, this is rarely the case. Most of the time, I see connected experience solutions being adopted to solve for a massive blind spot that a brick-and-mortar store creates in a shopping experience.

Instead of launching a completely new and intimidating shopping experience, I encourage all of my clients to consider rolling out every new process in small doses. That way, they won't inundate their customers with a completely new experience—and one that's entirely inconsistent with their last experience—leaving them frustrated, confused, and ready to run for the exit.

Also, don't assume you can design a great experience without plenty of testing and iteration. Companies that successfully connect real-world and digital shopping experiences are willing to try new ideas, analyze the data, and then act on the results. Follow that pattern, and you'll be well on your way to creating connected brand experiences at scale.
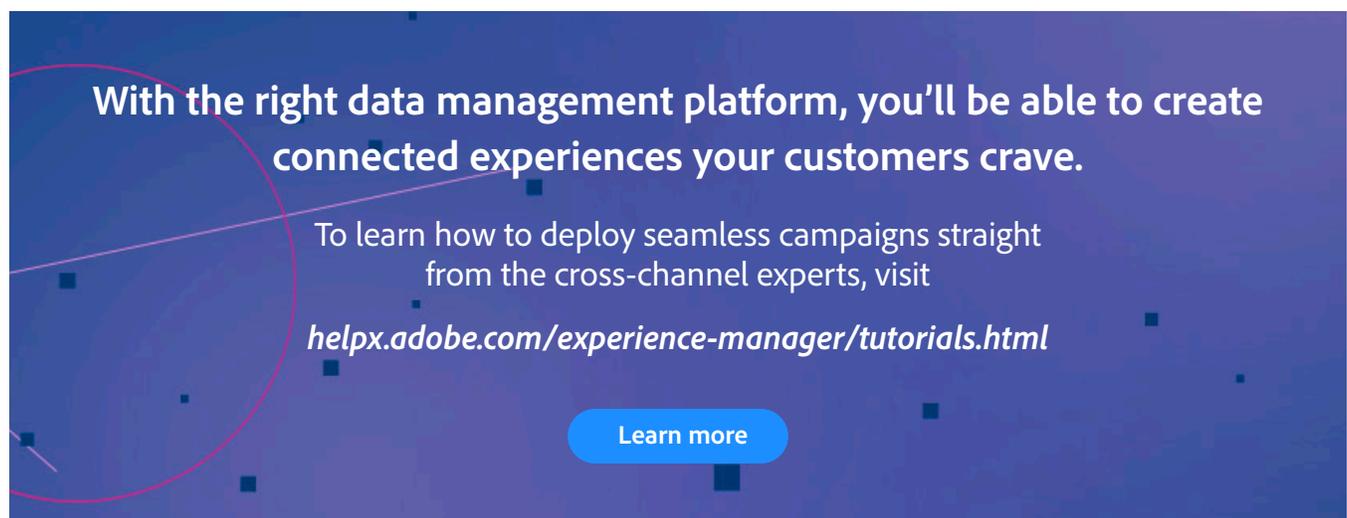
With the right data management platform, you'll be able to create connected experiences your customers crave.

To learn how to deploy seamless campaigns straight from the cross-channel experts, visit

helpx.adobe.com/experience-manager/tutorials.html

Learn more