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Selection *perfection*

Senior omnichannel and eCommerce manager
Mark Appleford tackles etail decision making.

TECHNOLOGY CHOICES ARE no walk in the park.

Let's consider a recent study from eCommera and Coleman Parkes of 200 United Kingdom retailers with revenue of over £100m.

It identified retailers are struggling to harness the power of new technology: 46% of respondents said their technology stack is inhibiting growth. Consequently, 64% plan to increase investment in 2017.

When it comes down to reasons why, retailers cited website stability, customer experience and analytics as the three areas that require greater focus. This proves that while retailers might have invested in the latest technology, many are unable to implement it correctly.

You need to have a clear view of your eCommerce strategy before you start.

Prepare by plotting out the end to end

customer journey. Start with the front end screen design, for both desktop and mobile (just think 50:50 in percentage terms). Move through to the checkout screens, and payment, then the order management or integration into an existing order management system, then your despatch process, or click and collect process, and finally complaints and returns.

You may want one supplier to do all of this, or you may need a modular solution where you cherry pick the pieces that you want, and plug them into existing systems.

It is very hard to get performance metrics on eCommerce from specific retailers. Target something achievable, say a 2% conversion rate in your forecasts, and somewhere between 10% and 20% of your business moving to online over time (assuming a bricks and mortar base).

Then think about functionality. More

functionality does not equal more conversion. Good eCommerce sites are clean and easy to use. They appear simple. But making something look simple is not easy. You need to find an eCommerce partner that gets this and is not going to simply up-sell you on more functionality and more cost.

Once you have answered the questions above then start talking to vendors, but then it's about people and how you want to work. Email and even teleconferencing can never replace face to face contact. It's really important to understand who is going to do all the work, after the sales pitch is done, and the contract is signed.

Who is there to answer the phone when something goes wrong and what time zone are they based in? I have found that the fastest progress comes from having a dedicated account manager, with regular face to face meetings. You can't beat a quick sketch or a scribble to explain something clearly. And ideally you can get the same sketch through to the development team that will then bring this to life. Being able to tap into larger customers or platform development is great too, it means that you will get new developments more quickly.

Do not be afraid of using the same systems or functionality as your competitors. Your customers come for the product, and the content you put around the product, not the eCommerce platform.

Here are some tips to aid your decision-making:

1. Work with a vendor who can scale to the required level but still remains agile enough to move with shifting retail priorities. Some of the larger enterprise vendors can struggle with this flexibility.
2. Focus more on the ability to get things done rather than a cumbersome list of functionality, half of which you may not need to deliver a quality online experience.
3. Ensure your vendor has key staff available to jointly strategise and prioritise the development roadmap. The value of a vendor that can contribute to strategy is far greater than a technical implementer that simply takes instructions.
4. Many retailers favour eCommerce solutions that are provided by their ERP vendor. This restriction is unnecessary and often sub-optimal. There can be far more value in selecting a specialist eCommerce vendor who can seamlessly integrate to your existing systems.
5. eCommerce is a very specialist area with a complex and dynamic ecosystem, vendors that live and breathe eCommerce are usually better placed to provide guidance on maximising the online channel. ■