Chapter 2
Strategies to Improve B2B Customer Relationships Through Digitally Enabled Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Offering experiences—memorable exchanges and interactions with a brand—has become a top priority for companies of any sector and dimension over the last decades, especially in the light of the advent of digital technologies. However, to date both academic and practitioner attention is mostly limited to B2C contexts, thus calling for a deeper investigation of the opportunities that experiences offer also to B2B firms. After a brief review of the literature on customer experience and the role of digitalization—especially after COVID-19—this chapter focuses on digitally enabled experiences to improve B2B customer relationships. The chapter is based on a three case vignettes analysis that emphasizes how B2B firms can make use of digital tools to craft more effective and impactful customer experiences. Three digitally enabled B2B experiential strategies are identified—downstream empowerment, farsighted customization, and relational flexibility—that ultimately support B2B companies in improving their customer relationships in the long run.

INTRODUCTION

Experiences have become increasingly important over the last decades for companies of any sector and dimension. Offering the own customers meaningful and memorable exchanges and interactions with a brand (e.g., company, salespeople, offer itself, communications, etc.) is an important driver of business success and competitive advantage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This has become especially true with the advent of digital technologies, as the empowerment of customers through digitalization has driven

organizations to focus more attentively on customer relationships, customer satisfaction, service quality and overall customer buying preferences and behavior (Batra, 2017).

Even though the concept has increasingly received attention both by academics and practitioners, it has been mostly limited to B2C contexts and relationships (Zolkiewski et al., 2017; Pandey & Mookerjee, 2018). However, especially with the uncertainty raised by and surrounding Covid-19, as well as its impact on global industries, B2B companies are starting to see the benefits of investing in customer experience and the advantage it can give them over the competition. Indeed, during the pandemic also B2B buyers got used to interact with their customers through digital tools, trying to replicate the strengths of in-person exchanges also via online or remote interactions with the supplier company. The concurrent progressions in terms of digital experiences in the B2C market have raised the bar even more, as B2B customers now expect the same kind of seamless, omnichannel "shopping" experiences they are confronted with as consumers, also in their business relationships.

After a brief review of the literature on customer experience both in B2C and B2B settings, and the role of digitalization in shaping them to create better customer relationships, this chapter focuses on strategies to improve customer relationships in B2B settings through digitally enabled experiences. In particular, the chapter is based on a three case vignette analysis, that highlight how B2B firms can employ digital tools to create meaningful experiences that can positively impact the relationships with their customers. The three cases – *Paulstra*, *TeamViewer Frontline*, and *Doosan Machine Tools* – do not necessarily present examples of strategies that were undertaken *because* of Covid-19, but they were offered and/or turned out as an effective response to market needs during that period, and indeed, they do not represent short-term buffers to handle the emergency, but forward-looking strategies for improving customer relationships in the post-pandemic future.

This chapter emphasizes how digitally enabled experiences can innovate and positively impact a company's relationships with its customers not only in B2C but also in B2B settings. From an academic standpoint the chapter responds to recent calls to further investigate customer experiences, and especially digital ones, in business and industrial contexts. The chapter also speaks to managers operating in several B2B industries, offering insights about how to improve buyer relationships and overall value chain relations by creating effective, long-lasting strategies that offer better experiences with the aid of digital tools.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: A CONCEPT BORN IN B2C CONTEXTS

Customer experience is defined as a journey consisting of multiple interactions between a company and its customers across a series of touchpoints over time (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These touchpoints include all the moments and instances of customer-firm contact along the customer journey. They can elicit multidimensional responses – cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social, and sensorial ones – and can have a social, physical, or digital format, or a combination thereof (De Keyser et al., 2020).

The notion of *experience* grounds its roots in a variety of scientific disciplines, such as philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. The concept of *customer experience* goes back to the 1980s, when literature on consumer behavior in business and management studies was rapidly growing. Those were the early years in which the customer started to be envisioned and understood not only as a rational decision maker, who is solely interested in a product's functional benefits, but also as an emotional human being with feelings and individual preferences. Therefore, customer experiences include the role of emotions

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