Forging the future of commerce

Before selecting a business-to-business e-commerce technology partner, companies should first ask themselves: What is the outcome we want to achieve? Do we need a strategic partner in digital transformation, or a firm to implement a discrete technology solution? Examining your digital maturity, internal skill sets, and investment intentions will make it easier for you to find the perfect match.

These are recommendations of James Kim, Chief Strategy Officer for SMITH, a global "experiential commerce agency" that specializes in both design and implementation of commerce solutions. SMITH, which largely works with upper mid-market to global enterprise companies, has delivered a wide range of commerce experiences over the past 20 years for clients ranging from Best Buy to AT&T. In each case, their focus is on the end-user experience. "We want to make it as great a customer experience as we can and put humans before technology, that is, commerce without compromise," he says.

Kim says today's B2B companies have to consider business-to-consumer e-commerce designs because that's what their clients have come to know, and it has increased their level of expectation. Today's customer, he adds, has an "'I want what I want when I want it' attitude," largely born of B2C experiences —for example: how apps on a mobile device help simplify their personal lives. People bring these B2C expectations to the table when they start working with B2B brands.

"We all now have an expectation that things can be simpler and that it should be easier to do business with our business partners, compared to the past." Even emerging experiences, such as chat bots and voice interfaces have made their way into people's lives and are raising the bar of expectations, Kim says. "Even though B2B brands understand that B2B is more difficult and complex, that doesn't mean their customers can 'unsee' what they already expect in their personal lives."

Although SMITH prefers to be brought in before a client starts to choose technology vendors, that's not always the case. One of its clients, a global fast-food company, wanted to improve its existing e-commerce platform. SMITH won the client's business when it recommended re-architecting the platform instead of ripping it out and replacing it. The project included redeveloping the product catalog, ultimately implementing a system that dramatically increased the frequency of transactions, lowered the cost-per-transaction, and shortened delivery time for customers. The client told SMITH its re-architected commerce platform is the "their biggest breakthrough since the drive-thru window," Kim says.

In another case, a private university wanted to redesign its network of multiple library websites onto a single, more efficient platform for all. Although the university's websites already had an e-commerce system in place, SMITH worked with over 120 databases to design a user experience that utilized a single search system shared by all users, regardless of the library they used. SMITH began the website redevelopment by conducting focus groups of all end users, including professors, graduates, and students of all levels, to determine what they wanted. "Here our core effort focused on utilizing a 'design-thinking' approach, including personas and user journeys, to understand how to deliver the best experience. For brands to be successful in the future, they must consider business goals, while being laser-focused on the customer experience," Kim says.

When SMITH begins to work with a client, the firm asks the client to identify its goals and to think about how their commerce experiences will compare with those like Amazon and Grainger, which have set industry standards for e-commerce experiences. To determine how to do this, SMITH likes to conduct a two-day deep dive session with the client to work through its expectations and ensures a focus on "the right problems and opportunities."

"We always vet a potential client on whether we have the right capabilities and experience to reach the right outcome," he says. "We engage in a thoughtful discussion in what they are trying to achieve, what their internal capabilities already are, what have they thought about or not, and what's the desired outcome of the project. All of the best-practices and technologies in the world don't matter if the end result isn't a strategic bullseye." ■

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What I Need in a B2B Partner

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8 Completed

- Grasps the complexity of my business. Outcome-focused.
- Thinks big with strategy and provides bulletproof technology solutions.
- Orchestrates technology around humans, not vice versa.
- Can design, develop, and deliver an omnichannel commerce and content platform that moves the needle.
- Clear vision for how to leverage emerging trends like cognitive systems.
- Road-tested. 20+ years of user experience design and commerce expertise.
- Strong client roster. B2B work for brands like AT&T and Microsoft, and in a range of industries.
- Will roll up their sleeves in the trenches with me.
- Chemistry with the team.

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