REALIZING THE OMNI-CHANNEL STRATEGY FOR TELECOMMUNICATION COMPANIES
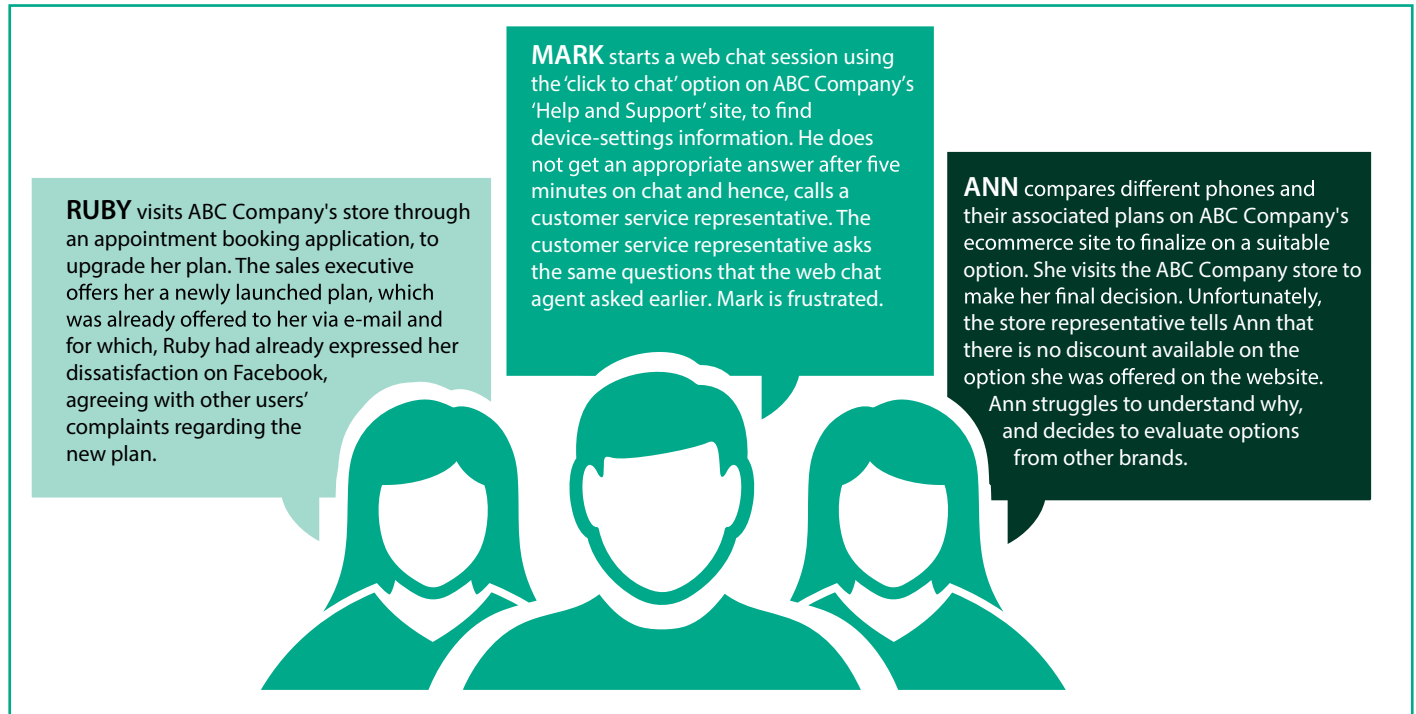
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Introduction

Advancements in digital technologies are leading to an increase in the list of channels, such as smartphones, smart kiosks, smart TVs, wearable gadgets, and social media that serve customers. Organizations around the world are keen on utilizing all of these to provide a better customer experience. The telecommunications sector is no exception. They are investing heavily in developing channel strategies. In the crowd of existing channels and innovative ideas, the key aim to provide 'customer-centric solution' should not be lost. However, the channel strategies if developed in silos most often lead to customer dissatisfaction. Thus, providing a true omni-channel experience is the key to engage customers in the right manner. This paper aids telecommunication companies and digital strategists in realizing their omni-channel strategy.

Let us look at typical customer experiences that highlight the need for an omni-channel implementation.

RUBY visits ABC Company's store through an appointment booking application, to upgrade her plan. The sales executive offers her a newly launched plan, which was already offered to her via e-mail and for which, Ruby had already expressed her dissatisfaction on Facebook, agreeing with other users' complaints regarding the new plan.

MARK starts a web chat session using the 'click to chat' option on ABC Company's 'Help and Support' site, to find device-settings information. He does not get an appropriate answer after five minutes on chat and hence, calls a customer service representative. The customer service representative asks the same questions that the web chat agent asked earlier. Mark is frustrated.

ANN compares different phones and their associated plans on ABC Company's ecommerce site to finalize on a suitable option. She visits the ABC Company store to make her final decision. Unfortunately, the store representative tells Ann that there is no discount available on the option she was offered on the website. Ann struggles to understand why, and decides to evaluate options from other brands.

If you are a telco or the digital partner of a telco, and come across such complaints often, you are suffering from the 'multichannel' syndrome. This typically results in reduced sales, and increased support calls. Additionally, the negative sentiments on social media begin to depreciate the brand image significantly. The only remedy for this is to develop and deliver a true omni-channel experience for customers.

What is an omni-channel experience?

By definition, omni-channel is an approach to making your business seamlessly available to your customers, in their preferred manner, whenever and wherever they need it. The key objective of providing an omni-channel customer experience is to convert a prospect, who is unaware of the brand, into a brand advocate. Improving customer experience is not merely about providing better user interfaces on multiple devices, but also how well integrated the processes across channels are. The central idea is to ensure the customer does not feel disconnected, when interacting with different channels of your messaging.

Multichannel - inconsistent, disconnected, and impersonal

Omni-channel - consistent, seamless, and highly personalized / tailored

Need of an omni-channel experience for a complex customer journey
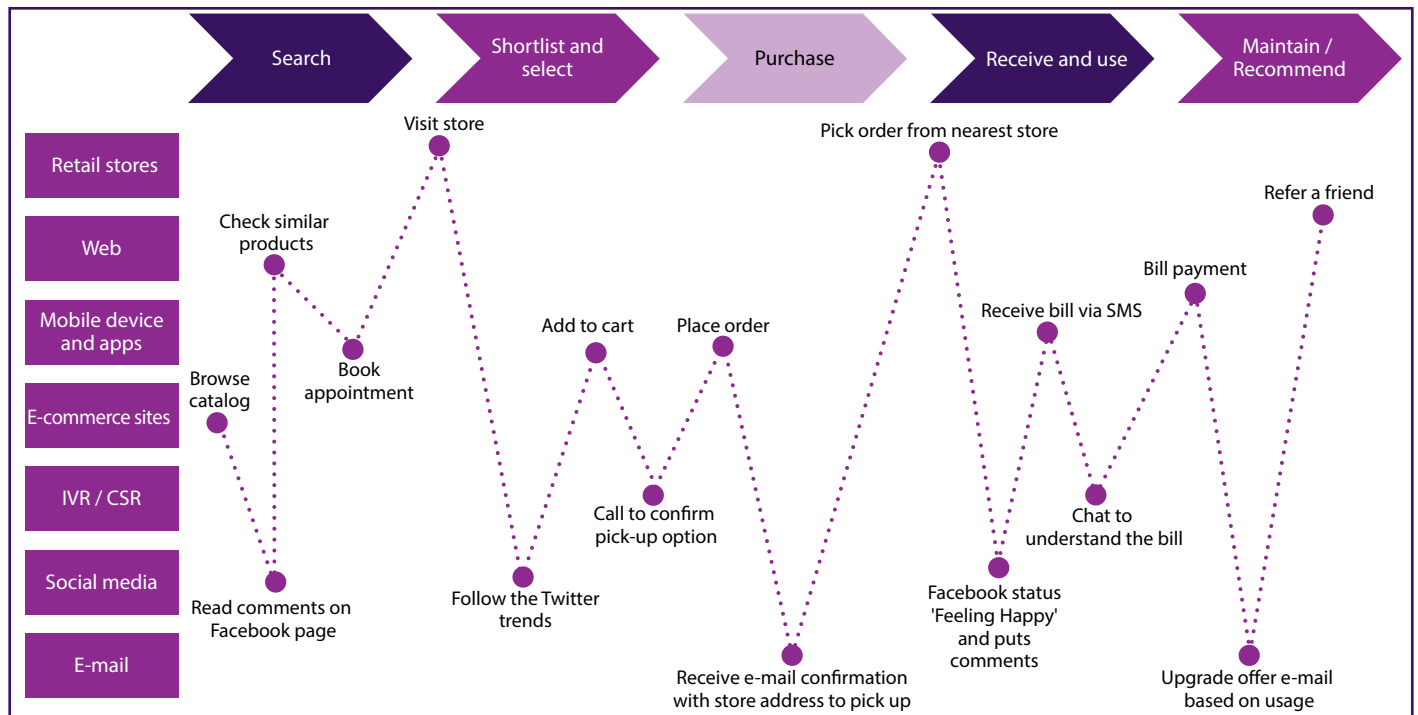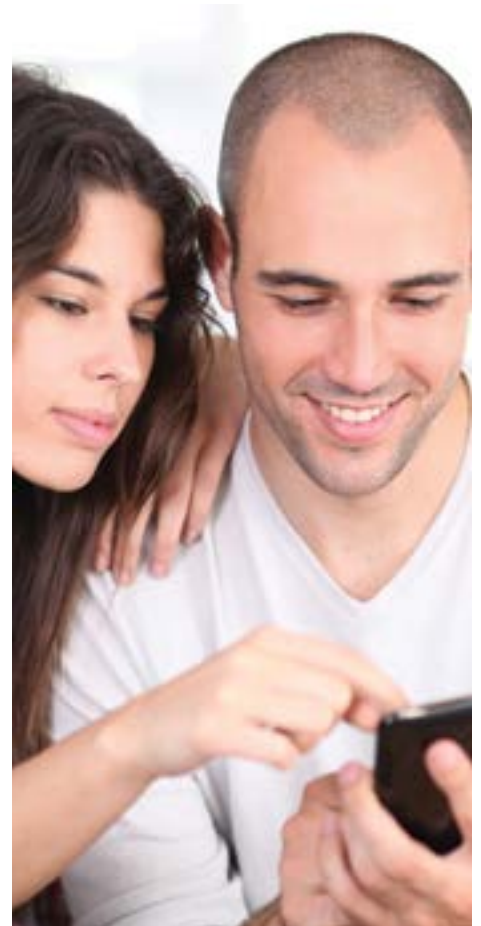
A telecom customer may

- Browse products (phones / plans) on an ecommerce site

- Read comments about the product on Facebook

- Check similar products on Google

- Book an appointment with a store agent through the mobile app

- Visit the retail store to check the product

- Follow the Twitter trends

- Decide to shop online next day

- Call the call center to confirm 'pick up at store' option as the store is near the customer's office

- Pick the order from the store

- Change her Facebook status based on the overall experience

- Receive the bill through e-mail

- Chat with an agent to understand the bill

- Pay the bill online

- Get an e-mail for upgrading the plan based on his usage

During this journey, the customer traverses multiple channels, by either personal choice or convenience. A consistent experience is thus crucial in such a scenario for a telecom customer.

Issues faced due to the silo structures implemented by telcos

Telcos today are leveraging all the channels in developing their channel-specific strategies. These are predominantly conceptualized and delivered separately, lacking the cohesiveness necessary to provide a true omni-channel experience to the customer. When these strategies and technology landscapes are developed in silos, customers like Ann, Mark, and Ruby will increasingly be dissatisfied.
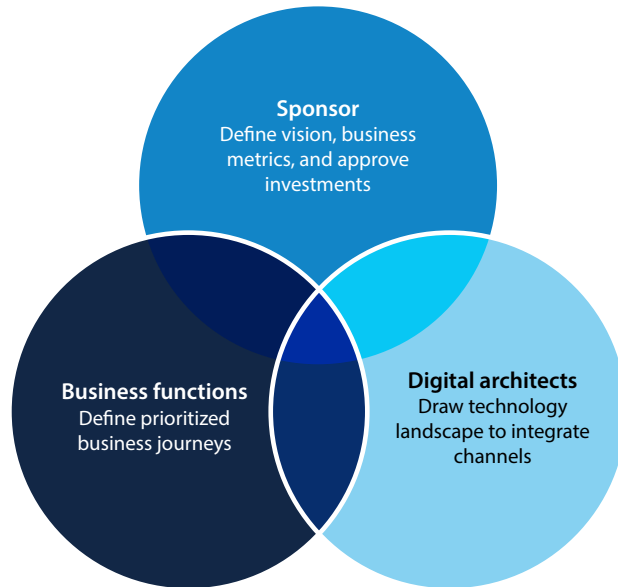
	Search	Shortlist and select	Purchase	Receive and use	Maintain / Recommend
Retail stores		Visit store	Pick order from nearest store		
Web	Check similar products				Refer a friend
Mobile device and apps	Book appointment	Add to cart / Place order		Bill payment	
E-commerce sites	Browse catalog			Receive bill via SMS	
IVR / CSR		Call to confirm pick-up option		Chat to understand the bill	
Social media	Read comments on Facebook page	Follow the Twitter trends		Facebook status 'Feeling Happy' and puts comments	
E-mail			Receive e-mail confirmation with store address to pick up		Upgrade offer e-mail based on usage

What are the customer expectations?

- "I want to be able to deal with the provider easily, anytime, and in a way that suits me"

- "Consistent experience, which is contextualized and personalized"

- "I want choice and total control"

Realizing omni-channel

Omni-channel experience is a business problem to begin with. Before charting out an omni-channel technology strategy, organizations should start thinking about business outcomes and omni-channel use cases / user journeys. This will help achieve the omni-channel objective, as well as functional capabilities. Subsequently, organizations can map the omni-channel strategy to develop the individual channel strategies.

Digital architects should draw a short-term and long-term technology landscape to deliver omni-channel capabilities.

Sponsor
Define vision, business metrics, and approve investments

Business functions
Define prioritized business journeys

Digital architects
Draw technology landscape to integrate channels

The above diagram highlights the need for collaboration between principle stakeholders – an important success factor in the implementation of an omni-channel strategy.

Implementation of an omni-channel strategy needs strategic vision, time, and money. Integration of various business functions such as marketing, aftersales service, and logistics is key to providing a seamless customer experience.
Hence, having executive sponsorship is crucial to any successful omni-channel program. This paper will talk about key technology building blocks and provide a reference omni-channel architecture.

Before jumping into the technology, let us look at a few interesting omni-channel use cases, and capabilities –

Omni-channel assisted care and proactive care

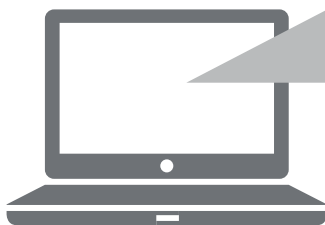A call center agent, Paul, receives a call from Ann. Paul's smart desktop shows the top reasons, and probable solutions to Ann's probable problems such as her latest bill, which is unusually high due to a technical error, and hence the excess amount should be reversed to her account in 24 hours.

Another reason could be a 'call drop' issue, as Ann has expressed her dissatisfaction over Facebook regarding the same. A probable solution could be to install a range extender.

Ann –
"It's regarding my last month's bill."
(Before Ann gives further details)

Paul –
"Hello Ann, we are extremely sorry for the inconvenience. I am aware of your bill-related issue. The excess is due to a technical error. The excess billing will be reversed to your account in 24 hours. We also offer you a 15% discount coupon at your favorite bookstore, ABC. "

This will delight Ann. Companies may take additional steps to proactively send a text or e-mail to Ann, preemptively acknowledging the bill issue, along with an approximate resolution time, and a discount offer. Proactive care would reduce support calls, and assisted care would help to increase loyalty due to the excellent customer experience.

Social analytics to improve recommendations and targeting

RUBY is a frequent flyer and one of ABC company's high-value customers. She has recently opted for the newly launched 'Freedom' plan. The plan is supposed to serve two purposes – she doesn't need to change the SIM while traveling abroad as it is activated for international roaming, and the charges for the voice and data plans are optimized for international travel. Ruby feels that although the first purpose is served, she is still paying huge charges for data while she is traveling. She has expressed her dissatisfaction regarding the Freedom plan on Facebook. She is also following a thread of a flexi-plan offered by ABC Company's competitor and likes the reviews posted by customers. Next day, Ruby receives a call from ABC company's call center agent who understands the issue and offers her a customized Freedom plan based on her data usage requirements while traveling abroad. This plan fits her requirements. Ruby has just changed her Facebook status to 'Feeling Happy.'

The above example is not just about customer experience but also about reducing customer churn and increasing the Net Promoter Score (NPS). An improved recommendation is an opportunity for the business to cross-sell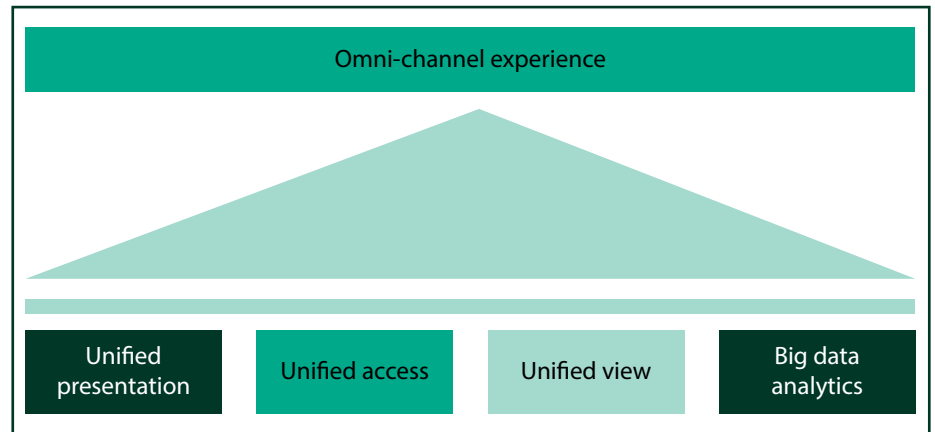 and upsell. Consultative sales (retail stores), proactive care (self-care channels), and co-browsing (help and support channels) are a few initiatives that can help businesses reduce operating expenses. Recommendations based on social listening, real-time personalized offers based on user location, and real-time personalized offers during a live chat are use cases that will improve sales. The next section talks about the technology building blocks that will play an important role in building an omni-channel roadmap.

Four technology pillars of the omni-channel strategy
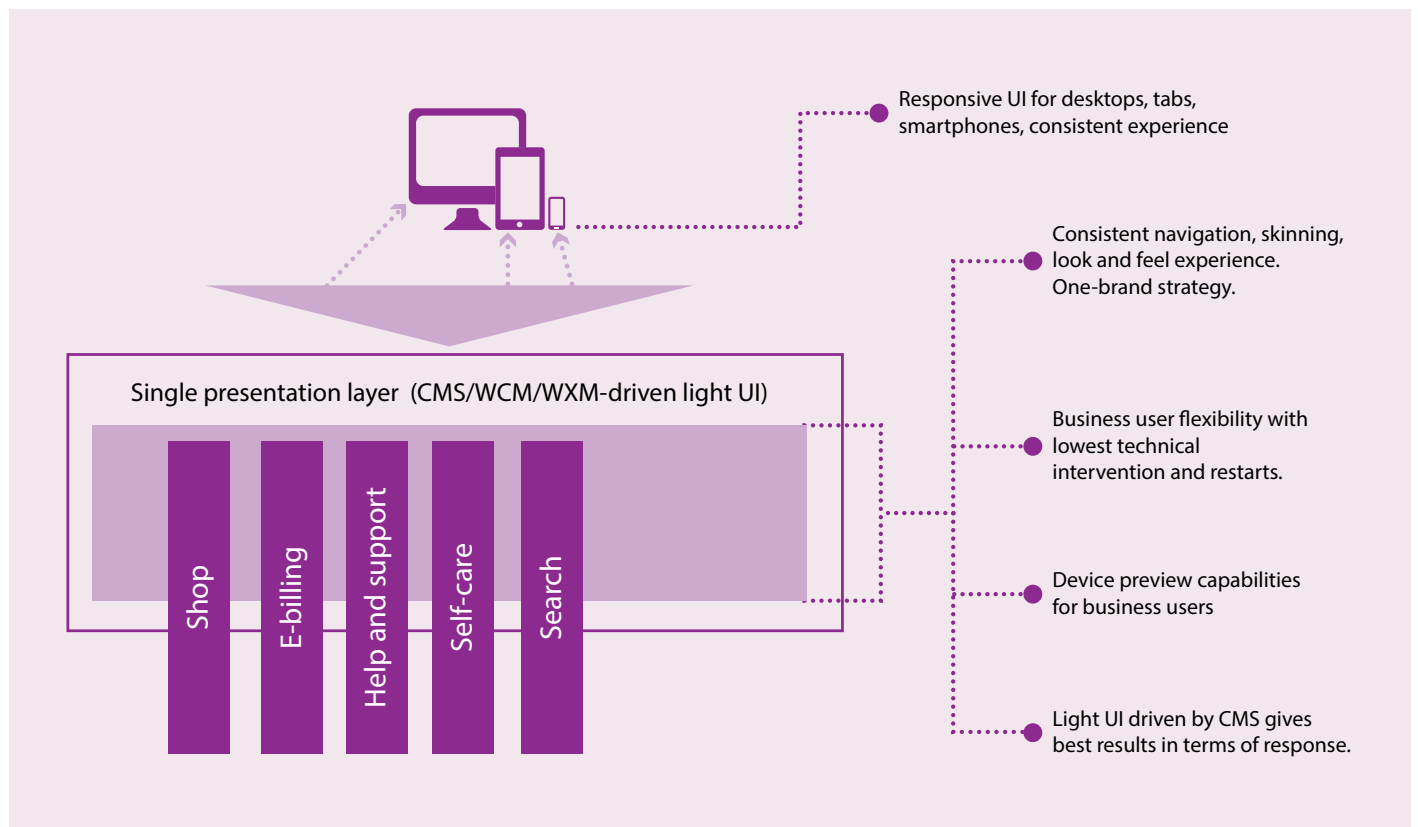
Unified presentation, unified experience

It has been observed that telecom organizations build customer-facing applications in silos, using different platforms such as portals (self-care), ecommerce platforms (browse, compare, and buy), knowledge management systems (help and support), web content management systems (marketing websites / micro sites), and bill presentment applications. Here, problems occur because the presentation layers of each of these platforms are different. The navigation, skinning, and look and feel of these applications or sites is inconsistent, and in some cases, completely different. The responsive web design techniques and

styles utilized to present tailored content along with menu structures are different, as well.

On the other hand, some leading telcos are strategizing to deliver a unified presentation layer concept. Light UI

(JQuery, Angular, Mustache), driven by a content management system (CMS) that acts as a unified presentation layer for all Web and mobile channels, is today, a leading trend. The following diagram provides an overview of this concept. This is the first step towards breaking the silos.

Omni-channel experience

Unified presentation	Unified access	Unified view	Big data analytics

Single presentation layer (CMS/WCM/WXM-driven light UI)

Shop | E-billing | Help and support | Self-care | Search

Responsive UI for desktops, tabs, smartphones, consistent experience

Consistent navigation, skinning, look and feel experience. One-brand strategy.

Business user flexibility with lowest technical intervention and restarts.

Device preview capabilities for business users

Light UI driven by CMS gives best results in terms of response.

Greater experience value will lead to decreased confusion while accessing different sites, in turn reducing the number of support calls. Businesses can quickly make UI-related changes, all at one place, leading to a faster go-to-market for new offerings / content.
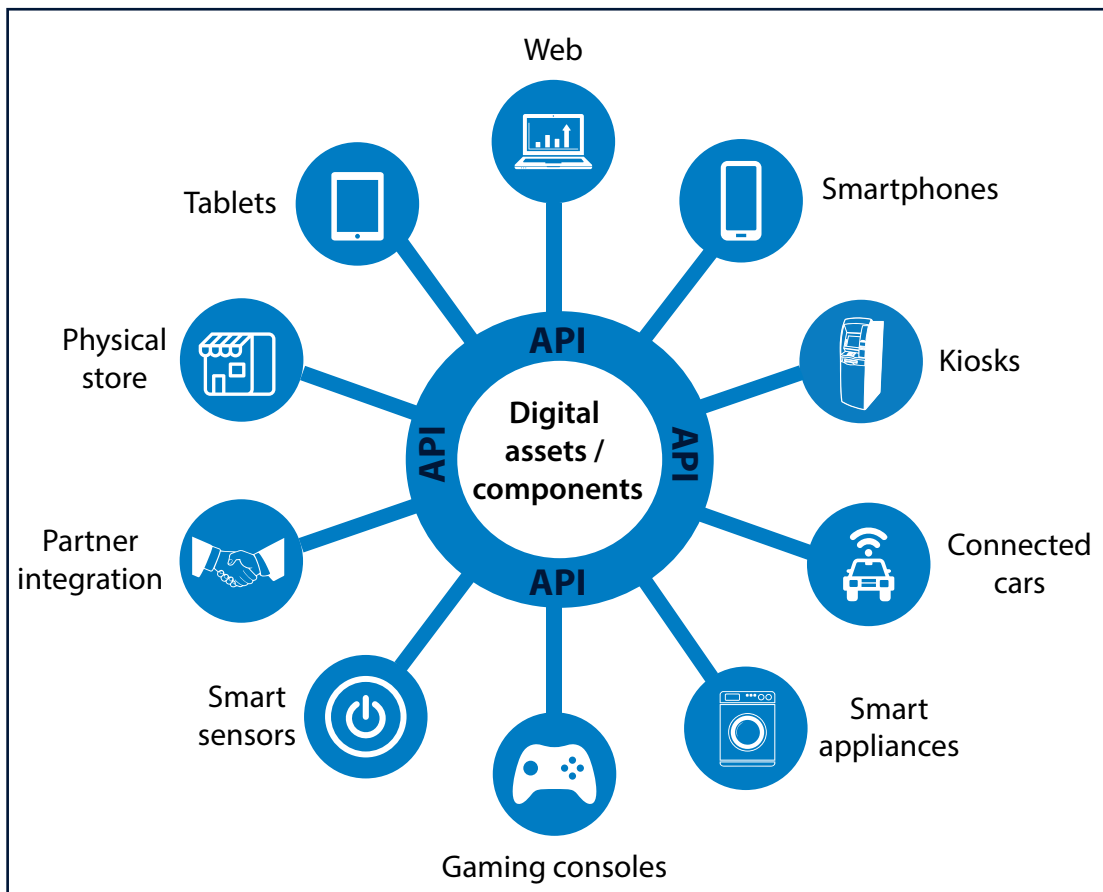
Unified access to all digital assets –

With the successful adoption of REST-based architectures, the digital realm is going through a big change that back-end systems went through, with the advent of service-oriented architecture (SOA). Monolithic applications are being replaced by services, or rather resources. These are offered both within and outside the enterprise, over a wide and ever increasing range of channels. For the digital domain, this specifically means that customer self-care, E-commerce, product management, and other components will provide these functions in the form of APIs. Channels and partners can build mash-up functionalities on top of these APIs. This is one of the building blocks of a true omni-channel experience, and ensures consistency of business functions across the extended enterprise. It also opens up avenues for monetizing certain functions and building new business models on the API management layer. Multiple use cases can be built, such as –

- APIs from partner ecosystems that can be leveraged to provide location-based or preferences-based offers

- Integrated Wi-Fi, which can be aimed to roll out Wi-Fi capability for users who have broadband at home, so they can utilize their broadband data when out-of-home and during roaming. Telcos can opt for integration (partnering) with Wi-Fi providers. As a part of this, telecom provider may provide authentication services and send QoS parameters relevant to the customer to the Wi-Fi provider through API management gateway. The location details are mapped within the provider system to enable the user to connect to the nearby Wi-Fi. The API management layer is seen as a `Unified Access Layer', to all digital assets and information, for all available channels.

TM Forum has been working to develop APIs that enable an open digital ecosystem and provide critical management functionality to digital services that rely on multiple partners and systems operating in a complex value chain.
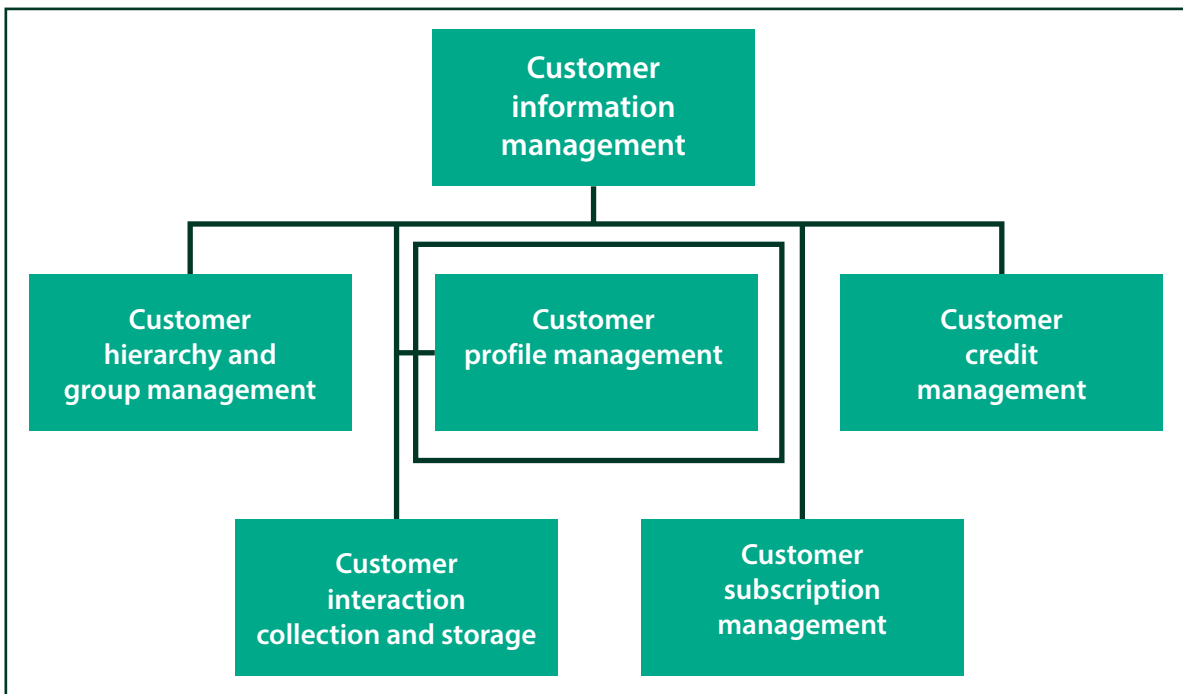
Unified view of customer –

Predicting customer churn becomes difficult when multiple service requests are made by the customer for different offerings, leaving her dissatisfied, and potentially leading to the loss of a privileged customer. The first stepping-stone to a delighted customer is to have a single-customer-view. In a digital ecosystem, both CRM and customer experience systems have customer profiles. However, multiple customer profiles, lead to disconnected experiences, across many customer interactions. Thus, there is a need to connect customer profile information across different systems. A typical single-customer-view program may impact the identity model, existing CRM, data warehouse, or analytics implementations. As a first phase for transformation, it is advised to analyze the existing identity and account management processes to enable a 360-degree view of the business. There are commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) products available in the market to implement customer 360-degree view. Alternatively, companies may also opt for a custom solution. In some scenarios, you may need to have a business process intervention to gather this input from the customers themselves. For example, if the customer's identification is based on a MSISDN in the system, it is quite possible that a customer with multiple MSISDNs, may not be identified as a single customer. A strategy involving an incentive of unified bills and account-specific limited offers can be used to encourage the user to add his subscriptions to his profile. This enables businesses with legacy data to create an enhanced customer profile at a single location, thus providing a single-customer-view. An alternative is to use billing addresses to find out account subscriptions related to the same user. Customer profile management and enhancement is an important aspect of Customer Information Management (CIM). TM Forum's Framework talks about detailed functional capabilities of CIM. (Ref: www.tmforum.org)

```
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │     Customer         │
                    │    information       │
                    │    management        │
                    └─────────────────────┘
```

- Customer information management
  - Customer hierarchy and group management
  - Customer profile management
    - Customer interaction collection and storage
    - Customer subscription management
  - Customer credit management

Big data and analytics –

Big data analytics solutions / products can be utilized to realize use cases like social analytics for improved targeting or omni-channel assisted care. To realize these use cases or futuristic use cases like proactive care, collection of huge data from different channels, and social networking sites are needed for analysis. The experience from the customer perspective is highly personalized and tailored, which can improve brand advocacy.

Big data and analytics will soon become the backbone of omni-channel implementations. Structured and unstructured data in huge volumes, collected from various channels, can be better analyzed with these kinds of solutions. It can also enable the provision of real-time offers on any channel.
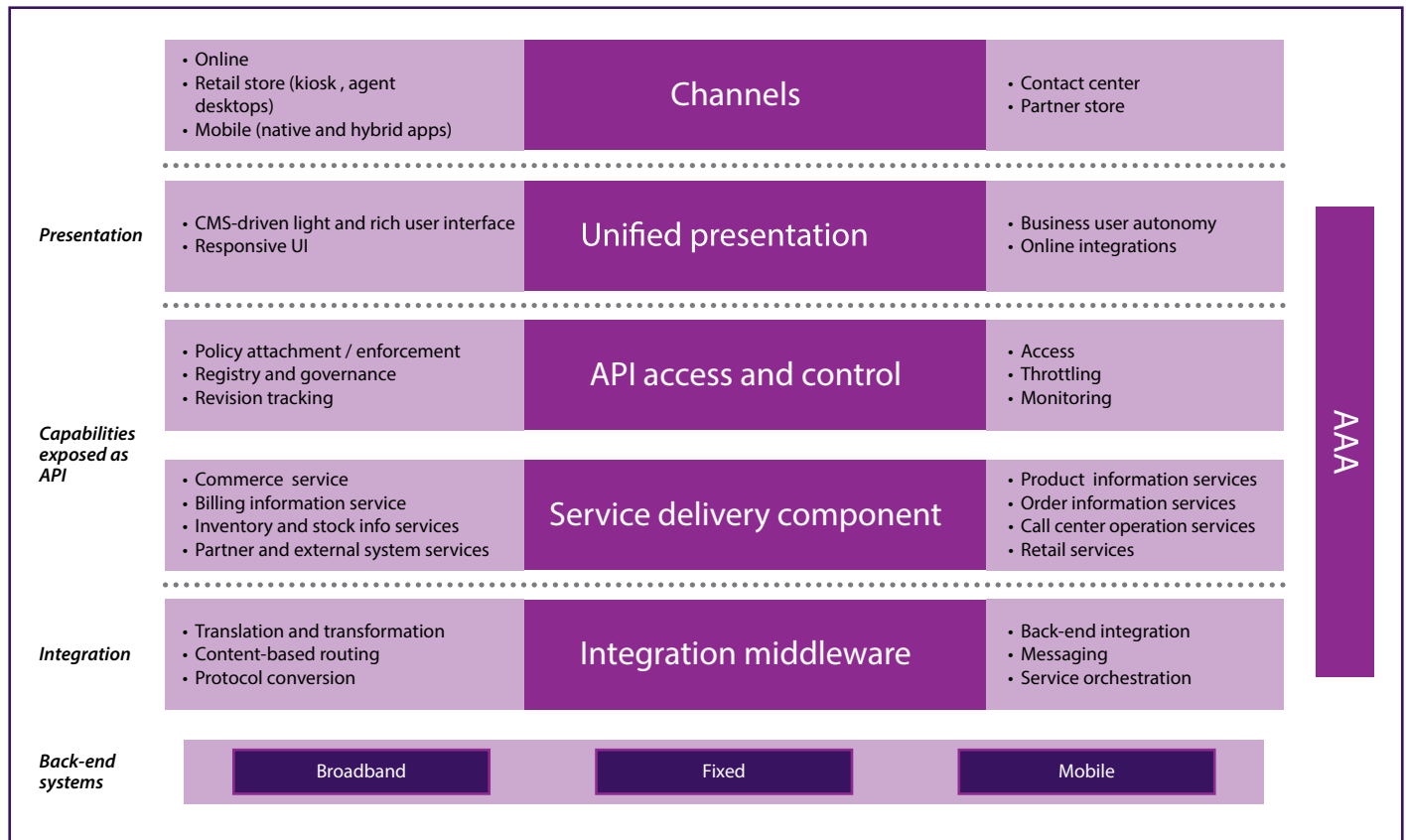
It will be useful in both:

- Reducing operational expenses by providing proactive and personalized care

- Increasing sales through appropriate recommendations and real-time offers

Reference conceptual architecture

The following diagram depicts a simplified omni-channel conceptual architecture. This can be extended to build full-blown channel architecture that realizes the omni-channel experience.

	• Online • Retail store (kiosk , agent desktops) • Mobile (native and hybrid apps)	**Channels**	• Contact center • Partner store
Presentation	• CMS-driven light and rich user interface • Responsive UI	**Unified presentation**	• Business user autonomy • Online integrations
Capabilities exposed as API	• Policy attachment / enforcement • Registry and governance • Revision tracking	**API access and control**	• Access • Throttling • Monitoring
	• Commerce service • Billing information service • Inventory and stock info services • Partner and external system services	**Service delivery component**	• Product information services • Order information services • Call center operation services • Retail services
Integration	• Translation and transformation • Content-based routing • Protocol conversion	**Integration middleware**	• Back-end integration • Messaging • Service orchestration
Back-end systems	Broadband	Fixed	Mobile

AAA

In summary:

Omni-channel is about evolving and enabling businesses for the future. Bringing the omni-channel experience into reality is the responsibility of business functions, channel strategists, as well as IT and business executives. Technology building blocks, big data analytics, and integrated business functions can certainly provide a true omni-channel experience to the customer. However, lack of vision, or patchwork tactical solutions will lead nowhere.

Providing an omni-channel experience requires a strong top-down approach from the organization, with the right structures in place to orchestrate business functions. Last but not the least, a good digital partner who can make all of this come to life.

About the Author

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Vishvajeet is a senior technology architect and has over 14 years of IT experience. He has played pivotal roles while delivering large-scale digital transformation programs and has led omni-channel consulting engagements for clients across domains such as telecom, retail, manufacturing, and finance. His expertise has helped Infosys define and deliver digital roadmaps for many of its clients. His current areas of interest include customer experience, big data, analytics, and IoT.

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