

Omnichannel or multichannel - is there a difference?

By [Sandra McDiarmid](#), issued by [Wunderman Thompson](#)

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As consumer shopping behaviour continues to shift with velocity towards embracing digital channels, the fundamental need for brands to be top of mind, easily accessible and physically available has never been more pressing. The competition is intensifying and speed to market is an increasingly important factor, because once a consumer has downloaded a competitor's app and started using it efficiently, effectively, and most importantly, with ease, it becomes very hard to convince them to use your online platform or introduce it into their consideration set.



Sandra McDiarmid, digital experience director at Wunderman Thompson SA

The South African B2C eCommerce market is growing at a remarkable rate, having grown more than 60% between 2019 and 2020. It is forecast to grow by more than 17% annually by 2025 and is said to be worth around US\$8.46bn.

A recent Future Shopper Report, where Wunderman Thompson conducted research amongst South African online shoppers, reveals that 74% say they prefer to shop with a brand that has both a physical and an online store, and that up to 80% claim they are likely to research online but still conduct the actual purchase in-store. So, it becomes critical for marketers and brands to enable a seamless shopping experience that accounts for both the digital and physical environments.

Focussing on creating physical and digital, 'phygital', experiences can help narrow the gap between the two, and this means that brands need to re-imagine how they use their physical spaces and touchpoints. Enter the concept of omnichannel, a much-used term in marketing and sales that is clearly here to stay...

What does omnichannel mean?

The most accepted definition of omnichannel in the digital and data analytics community is when a consumer is able to start a sale and/or service journey on any channel (digital or physical), and then complete that journey on another channel without having to start over, and without having to re-share or transfer information from the previous channel.

So, in a nutshell, it's about the cross-channel functionality that retailers can offer shoppers, and it's also about consistency of brand experience regardless of the channel or touchpoint. Customers 'weave' through different channels to interact with a brand and its products or services right through to sale and receipt – this is omnichannel retail. A multichannel experience is where transactions can only be initiated and finished on the same channel. Many organisations in South Africa are, in fact, multichannel on the journey to omnichannel.

In an ideal best practice world, offering an omnichannel experience entails enabling a customer to start a transaction in the physical world and complete the same transaction in the digital world without starting over or re-sharing information, or vice versa.

Being able to pre-order something online, and then have it delivered is a typical example of emerging shopper behaviour in South Africa – but the key to realising the real value of this for the brand is the ability to store and collect this data to start to learn more about an individual customer and their preferences... if they do in future appear in-store, how could the information about previous online purchases make the store experience more rewarding and satisfactory?

It's a simple example, but it does beg the question – how do physical experiences need to change and adapt to meet the new expectations that have been fuelled by online shopping experiences? If an app or online store 'remembers' what your regular shopping list is, how can the in-store experience leverage that information that has been gathered in the digital world? What tech do we need to enable this? Do we have the right data systems in place to enable this? Do we have the

right people at the coalface of our customer experience to use this tech-driven data appropriately? How does this affect our staff training? What data is considered private and what could be used to enhance a shopper's experience?

Of course, as responsible marketers, we must resist the temptation of thinking that shiny new technology alone will achieve a successful omnichannel strategy. It is there to support functionality, data gathering, dissemination and analysis, but it cannot 'create' an omnichannel experience. People use and grow an omnichannel world.

In conclusion, brands and businesses would do well to define exactly what they mean and what their customers are really looking for – is it a truly omnichannel experience, in the purest definition of the concept, or is it multi-channel choice and options?

If the answer is the former, it requires far more than a website design and build overhaul. In this instance there's a considerable body of upfront research and strategic thinking that touches all aspects of a business model, operational processes, and organisational structures. It all starts with understanding what omnichannel shoppers of the future will be looking for, and acknowledging that with that ambition, comes change management and the need to apply forward-thinking scenario planning.

Blended shoppers do not see channels – they see brands. They are going to expect changes in the bricks and mortar and digital stores. They will gravitate towards and reward those brands that make their omnichannel experiences as seamless, intuitive, and frictionless as possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra McDiarmid is digital experience director at Wunderman Thompson SA. As digital experience director, Sandra leads the creation and execution of content and communication across all digital platforms. She builds high performance cross functional teams that use data driven insights and strategies to create technology informed content that is customer centric and drives business on appropriate platforms. Sandra's experience spans across leadership roles in data, technology and creative content.

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