Mastering Omnichannel B2B Customer Engagement

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Executive Summary

B2B buyer demands have changed the game for B2B sellers. Conditioned by their personal experiences as consumers and empowered by digital technologies, B2B buyers expect a consistent and personalized experience in every stage of their purchasing journey. But while many B2B sellers have made progress in developing discrete digital touchpoints, most struggle with weaving them all together with their existing channels to create an engaging and seamless omnichannel customer experience.

> **For B2B enterprises to be successful in their future digital commerce endeavours, they need to rethink their approach to customer engagement and how they invest in people, processes, and technology to power that engagement across channels.**

In July 2015, Accenture Interactive and SAP hybris commissioned Forrester Consulting to explore evolving B2B buyer demands and B2B seller omnichannel practices. In this study, Forrester surveyed 750 B2B companies and 1,307 B2B buyers at organizations with at least 1,000 employees across North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia Pacific.

KEY FINDINGS

Forrester's study yielded four key findings:

› **Business buyers are increasingly adopting digital touchpoints.** B2B buyers are escalating their use of digital channels to research and complete purchases while still interacting with companies through other traditional channels at some point in their customer journey. As a result, B2B sellers are tasked with building out capabilities to serve customers' needs in every channel.

› **B2B buyers have high expectations for personalization and exceptional service across the buyer journey.** Experiences with B2C online sellers have raised the bar on buyers' expectations of B2B sellers as well. Business buyers now demand high levels of service and personalization throughout the customer journey — and are willing to reward sellers that are able to deliver that experience.

› **B2B sellers are not prepared to deliver a seamless omnichannel experience.** B2B sellers understand the importance of seamless omnichannel customer engagement but are inhibited by company silos — both in terms of data and processes. Sellers report challenges across all stages of the customer journey.

› **Excellent customer engagement requires the right omnichannel strategy, partner ecosystem, and technology infrastructure to meet buyers' expectations.** Creating a consistent, high-quality customer experience across channels entails more than just putting point solutions in place. Mastering digital to actively engage customers requires a focused business technology agenda that puts the customer in the center, a culture of constant iteration and analysis, and (usually) support from a partner ecosystem to help fill capability gaps and speed time-to-market.

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B2B Buyers Embrace Digital Channels

Building out omnichannel capabilities has never been as important for B2B sellers as it is today. B2B buyers are actively incorporating digital channels into their buyer journey, leaving sellers that have yet to develop these channels lagging behind. But as digital channels are often not the only channels that a B2B buyer touches throughout his or her purchase journey, sellers must find ways to integrate data from all of their channels in order to delight their customers. Sellers told us that 38% of their customers are using online channels exclusively, while another 32% use a combination of online and offline channels. The research found that:

› **Buyers research online even when buying work-related products offline.** The survey revealed that 98% of global business buyers do at least some online research on work-related purchases that they make offline. The vast majority of respondents do online research for at least 25% of their offline purchases, with many respondents turning to online sources much more frequently. In fact, the vast majority of respondents do online research for at least 25% of their offline purchases, continuing an omnichannel trend from last year (see Figure 1).

› **Buyers are increasingly turning to consumer sites to research products.** While almost all of our respondents have access to a company-mandated internal portal or company-dedicated buying website, they are using an array of other sources to research products and services that they purchase for work. Out of convenience, increasingly they are starting their research at online consumer marketplaces (33%), search engines (26%), and business marketplaces (17%).

› **Buyers are expanding their online purchasing across the board.** Buyers are increasingly using online channels, both to research and buy. Our data shows online channels beginning to overtake more traditional buying channels such as via sales reps, customer service reps, and mail-order. Moreover, B2B buyers not only report higher total spend online, but also higher percentages of work purchases made online, and a larger average purchase size for online work purchases (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1
B2B Buying Habits

"Of those work-related purchases made *offline*, what percentage are typically researched *online* as part of the process?"

	2015	2014*
75% or more	22%	21%
50%-74%	24%	21%
25%-49%	29%	24%
11%-24%	18%	19%
1%-10%	7%	12%
0	1%	2%
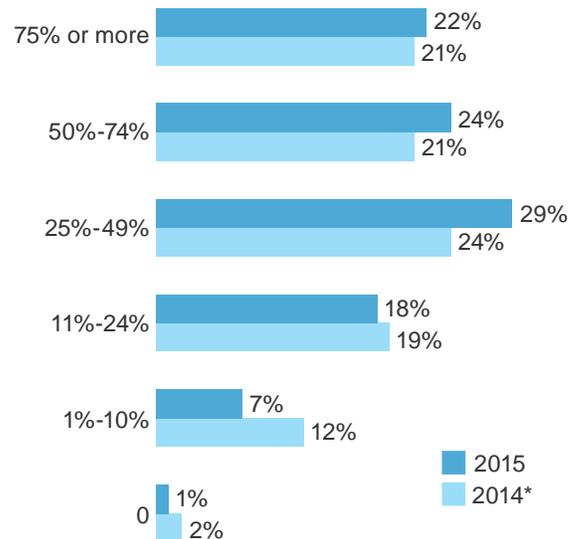
Base: 696 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America and Europe

*Base: 930 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America and Europe

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of SAP hybris and Accenture Interactive, September 2015

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FIGURE 2

B2B Buying Behavior Has Increased For Work-Related Purchases From The Previous Year

"How have your B2B online work-related purchases changed from 2014 to 2015?"

Increased · Stayed the same · Decreased

	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased
Total spend on work purchases	65%	28%	7%
% of total work purchases made online	63%	27%	10%
Average work purchase size online	53%	36%	11%
% of purchases where you bought more online because you saw are commendation	49%	39%	12%

Base: 1,307 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America, Europe, Latin America, and APAC

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of SAP hybris and Accenture Interactive, September 2015

B2B Buyers Have High Expectations For Engagement Across The Customer Journey

Today's B2B buyers bring their B2C digital commerce expectations for functionality, personalization, and service to B2B eCommerce. They're increasingly looking for the convenience and intimacy they've come to expect from B2C, and they're willing to reward sellers that provide it. The research found that:
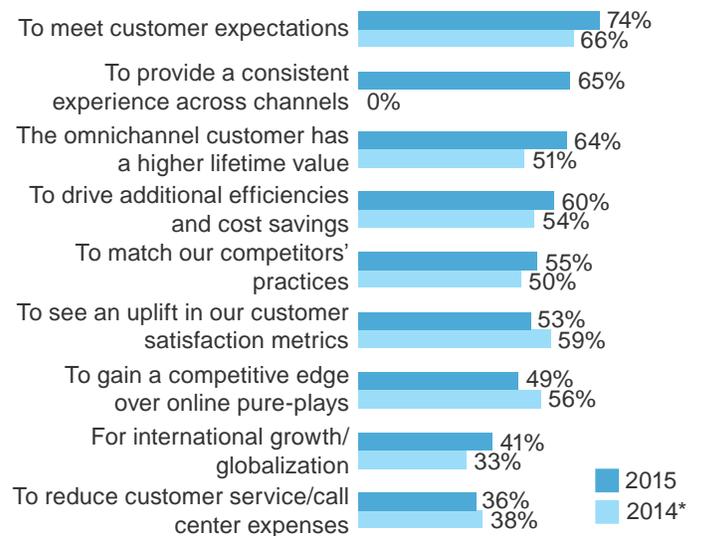
› **Sellers are increasingly driven to invest in omnichannel to meet customer expectations.** B2B sellers indicated that they're investing disproportionally in meeting customer expectations across multiple channels. Seventy-four percent of North American and European respondents chose "meeting customer expectations" as their top driver for investment in omnichannel initiatives. (see Figure 3). Not far behind, 68% of sellers said that providing a "consistent customer experience regardless of channel" was a priority. B2B sellers recognize that

customer lifetime value depends on them providing a compelling and seamless commerce experience for customers across multiple channels.

FIGURE 3

Businesses Feel That Their Customers Have Increasing Expectations For Consistent Omnichannel Experiences

"What would you say are the primary drivers behind your organization's investment in omnichannel initiatives?"

	2015	2014*
To meet customer expectations	74%	66%
To provide a consistent experience across channels	65%	0%
The omnichannel customer has a higher lifetime value	64%	51%
To drive additional efficiencies and cost savings	60%	54%
To match our competitors' practices	55%	50%
To see an uplift in our customer satisfaction metrics	53%	59%
To gain a competitive edge over online pure-plays	49%	56%
For international growth/ globalization	41%	33%
To reduce customer service/call center expenses	36%	38%

Base: 450 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America and Europe

*Base: 526 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America and Europe

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of SAP hybris and Accenture Interactive, September 2015

› **Buyers are willing to repurchase from a supplier if that supplier offers transparency, personalization, service, and low prices.** Above all, B2B buyers want to know the price they're going to pay for something. B2B buyers don't expect to jump through multiple hoops or wade through several conditions to learn their actual price for a product or service. The survey data shows that "price transparency" is even more important to buyers than knowing if a supplier has the lowest price (see Figure 4).

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Another notable top factor in terms of overall rankings is whether the seller has excellent customer service and post-purchase support. When buyers told us in their own words about excellent experiences that they had with B2B online work purchases, they cited personalization and support as the most common reasons for feeling as they did.

FIGURE 4

Personalization And Price Transparency Lead To Repeat Customers

"Which of the following do you consider to be the five most important factors that influence your willingness to buy again from a supplier for work-related purchases?"
"I would buy again from the same supplier . . ."

Base: 1,307 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America, Europe, Latin America, and APAC

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of SAP hybris and Accenture Interactive, September 2015

Sellers Are Challenged To Meet Buyer Expectations

Despite a wide recognition of buyers' wants and needs, sellers have a hard time meeting buyers' expectations across the customer journey. Creating a personalized and seamless omnichannel experience involves integrating a myriad of people, processes, technology, and data to enable channels to share information in real time (or very close to real time). B2B sellers as a whole just aren't there yet. The research found that:

› **B2B firms face challenges with technology, data silos, and measurement.** Sellers rated the top barrier to their omnichannel strategy (both in terms of No. 1 and overall rankings) as "difficulty sharing customer data and analytics between channels, countries, or locations." Furthermore, a top-five response in terms of overall rankings was a "lack of the right business measurements and incentives." Sellers cannot create personalized experiences if their various systems can't talk to each other, nor can they easily improve their customer engagement based on the data that they do have access to if they aren't even sure what to measure.

"Good metrics are incredibly difficult to obtain. You can obtain all sorts of information, but how much of it relates to how much customers stick with you when they have an alternative choice, or come to you in the first place?"
— *Finance director of a large manufacturer*

› **Sellers face sales and marketing challenges across all phases of the customer journey.** B2B sellers find personalization to be an implementation challenge in every stage of the buyer journey. Disparate systems and processes complicate data aggregation and sharing efforts. Earlier stages — where buyers are first starting research — are understandably harder, as the sellers have less available information about who the buyers are. But personalization is still a noteworthy challenge later in the sales process as well (see Figure 5).

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FIGURE 5

B2B Sellers Are Challenged To Engage Buyers Across The Customer Journey

"Please indicate the level of challenge your marketing and sales teams experience when creating a personalized experience for all stages of a prospect/customer buying journey."

☐ Somewhat challenging ☐ Very challenging

	Somewhat	Very
Awareness: Prospects discover that they have a need (passively)	38%	28%
Discovery: Prospects begin to evaluate options at a high level	36%	29%
Interest: Prospects gather a list of available options and narrow down into a shortlist	38%	25%
Evaluation: Prospects research their shortlist to determine their best option	36%	25%
Action: Prospects convert into a customer by purchasing the product or service	34%	27%
Use: Customers take possession of product or service and begin touse it	33%	24%
Advocacy: Customers share their experiences with others, online orin-person	34%	23%

Base: 1,307 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America, Europe, Latin America, and APAC

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of SAP hybris and Accenture Interactive, September 2015

FIGURE 6

Customer Data Is Only Available In Some Channels

"To what extent do you have the following data about your individual customers readily available across your various sales and marketing channels?"

☐ Information not readily accessible in any channels ☐ Information available in some channels ☐ Information available in all channels

	Not readily accessible	Some channels	All channels
Customer name	12%	28%	60%
Levels of client satisfaction	9%	35%	56%
Customers' shipping and billing addresses	16%	36%	48%
Past purchase history	11%	42%	47%
Information about when products were delivered	13%	42%	44%
Service and support issues our customers have had	12%	44%	43%
Prior sales/marketing contacts we've had with each customer	13%	43%	43%
Customers' payment options/habits	16%	41%	43%
Products/services researched	13%	47%	40%
Clients' custom pricing and catalog items	17%	43%	40%
Information about clients' businesses	13%	47%	39%

Base: 1,307 business decision-makers with more than 1,000 employees (500+ in Europe) in North America, Europe, Latin America, and APAC

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of SAP hybris and Accenture Interactive, September 2015

› **Most customer data is only available in some channels.** B2B sellers indicate that they have customer data necessary for personalization available in some channels, but not all. For example, they said that they have customers' names, purchase/service histories, and business backgrounds available fairly broadly, but that they don't have other critical personalization data such as pricing available across all channels (see Figure 6).

B2B Sellers Must Take Control Of Their Omnichannel Experience

Forrester has previously stated that "omnichannel solutions are not possible without technologies and enabling business processes capable of providing consistent and responsive content, data, and transaction services to all channels at the customer's moment of need."[1] B2B sellers are on the right
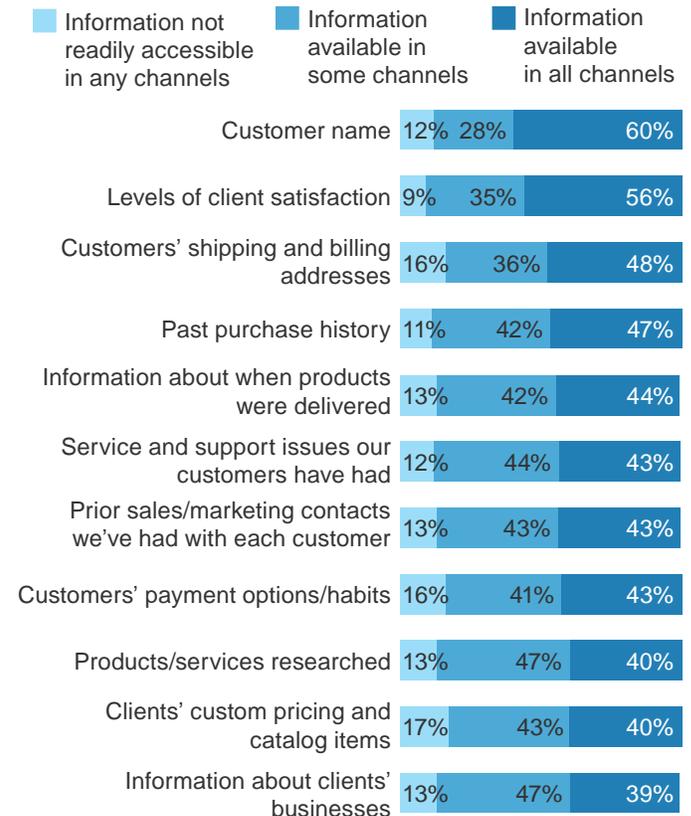
track in working to implement omnichannel touchpoints, but must accelerate the integration of technology platforms with people and Agile processes to support a real-time operating environment. Creating personalized omnichannel engagement requires:

› **Technology that supports today's complex customer journey.** Customers largely enjoy the freedom to take whatever path to purchase they desire. The idea of a funnel where customers go into the top and come out the bottom no longer exists in the way it once did. Today's B2B sellers must design a business technology agenda that supports customer engagement across the entire

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customer journey. Ensuring that the right technologies are in place to support such customers requires a multistep process:

- Mapping customer journeys to understand typical customers' interests and behaviors.

- Determining what capabilities your company needs in order to serve your customer on his or her journey.[2]

- Comparing these capabilities to your systems of engagement to see where you have gaps that can either be filled by existing systems or through new investments.

Different technology solutions help facilitate engagement at various stages in the customer journey — although most will overlap and touch the customer more than once (see Figure 7). Once you have figured out what capabilities you have, the key is making sure that you have a platform in place that allows you to extend those capabilities across channels.

> "A big driver for us is for people in the organization to get out and be able to contact qualified customers and contacts that have issues. So our staff and agencies need to have all the best information at their fingertips when they deal with a customer, and therefore we can appear market-leading. So that, effectively, our presence supports the brand."
>
> *— Finance director for a large manufacturer*

› **Agile processes for analysis and refinement.** As the digital landscape and customer needs are constantly evolving, mastering omnichannel customer experience means embracing Agile business processes that allow for rapid change. Organizations should take an iterative approach to prototyping, developing, testing, and fine-tuning solutions. With the customer journey in mind, businesses should engage in a continuous cycle of identifying customer needs, designing a digital engagement they want to deliver, engineering the delivery of that engagement, and then analyzing results.

› **The right people and partners to make omnichannel a reality.** Creating excellent omnichannel customer engagement requires leaders that are committed to delivering digital and customer experience excellence and

FIGURE 7

Technologies Must Support The Customer Journey
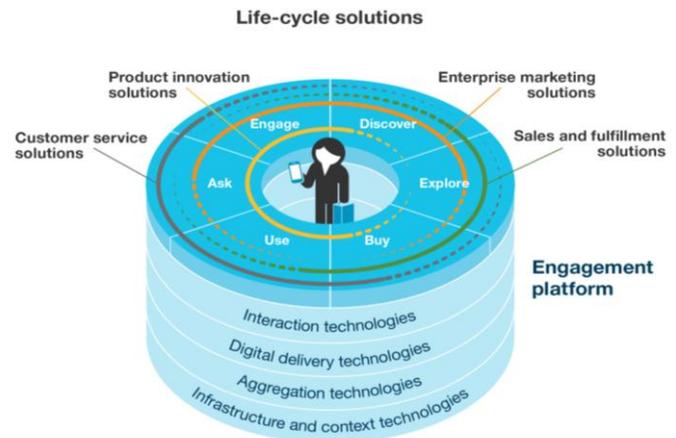
Source: "Elevate Omnichannel Customer Experience With Continuous Business Services," Forrester Research, Inc., May 2015
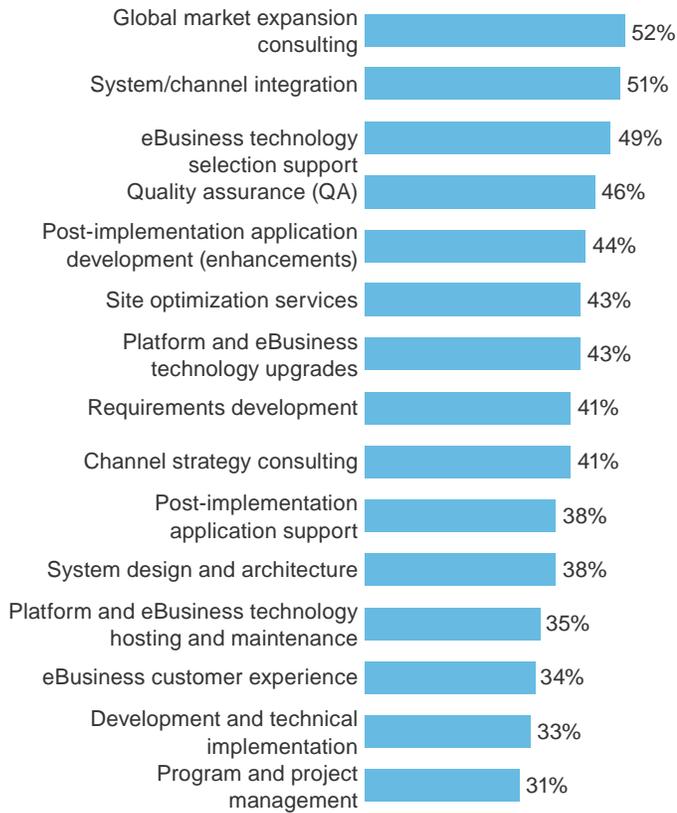
willing to rally the company around these shared goals. Beyond leadership, companies need access to various strategic, technical, and customer experience skillsets to be successful in today's omnichannel world. Many companies turn to third parties to help fill gaps and speed time-to-market for new initiatives; in fact, a recent Forrester Consulting study commissioned by Accenture Interactive found that 87% of B2B organizations utilize third-party solution providers for at least one component of their digital strategy. Forrester's Q2 2014 Global eBusiness And Channel Strategy Professional Online Survey also found a wide range of services for which eBusiness pros turn to trusted consultants (see Figure 8).

> "Five to 10 years ago, the implementation and project management would have been managed by an IT specialist. We might well have done a lot of stuff in-house in those days as well, whereas we might not do that anymore."
>
> *— Finance director for a large manufacturer*

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FIGURE 8

eBusiness Professionals Turn To Trusted Consultants To Help Fill Gaps

"For which of the following have you previously (in the past 24 months) employed the services of a systems integration firm or digital agency?"

Global market expansion consulting	52%
System/channel integration	51%
eBusiness technology selection support	49%
Quality assurance (QA)	46%
Post-implementation application development (enhancements)	44%
Site optimization services	43%
Platform and eBusiness technology upgrades	43%
Requirements development	41%
Channel strategy consulting	41%
Post-implementation application support	38%
System design and architecture	38%
Platform and eBusiness technology hosting and maintenance	35%
eBusiness customer experience	34%
Development and technical implementation	33%
Program and project management	31%

Base: 85 eBusiness and channel strategy professionals

Source: Forrester's Q1 Global eBusiness And Channel Strategy Survey

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Key Recommendations

It takes a village to deliver world-class omnichannel B2B eCommerce. You need the right technology platform, qualified and experienced commerce professionals, and the right customer-obsessed mindset to make it all happen. Forrester's in-depth surveys of enterprise B2B buyers and sellers found that to differentiate their offerings and win in the age of the customer, B2B sellers must:

› **Prioritize developing and delivering market-leading personalization capabilities** Buyers want more personalization across all stages of the customer journey, and they're willing to reward the businesses that offer it to them. If you don't deliver that B2C-like personalized experience, someone else will. Leveraging technology to do data sharing and hiring people who know how to delight customers in a very personalized way is no longer optional, but mandatory.

› **Constantly measure efforts and refine offerings**. Building and refining a digital business is not a one-off initiative; rather, it is a process that is constantly under refinement. As you plan and execute new changes, the only way to know if they are effective is to implement them and then measure their effects. Adopt practices of continuous measurement, analysis, and fine-tuning in order to ensure that your digital engagement is always evolving and progressing.

› **Embrace an omnichannel strategy.** For the second year in a row, buyers told us that they expect to be engaged anywhere and everywhere they want to research and buy, weaving individual touchpoints together into a seamless customer experience. If your channels are still organized as silos, then the time to act is right now or you'll be left further behind. B2B sellers need to consider an enterprise-wide digital strategy and align technology, organizational structure, and processes to fully leverage their omnichannel capabilities.

> "The shape and size [of digital transformation] is the important aspect. We have to get the basics right first to start the journey."
> *– Director of a manufacturing and materials company*

› **Build upon a proven and powerful platform.** In order to deliver on the promise of seamless customer engagement across channels, different systems need to be able to interact with each other. By adopting the right integrated technology platform to sit between and across touchpoints and enterprise systems, businesses can more readily share data from across channels. More-sophisticated digital businesses are working to master internal APIs to connect their various process-level building blocks together to create seamless customer experiences at every relevant touchpoint.

> "Compared to our history, we have taken giant leaps to open up the master data in our legacy systems to make it available for our dealers and the dealers' customers."
> *– Solutions leader at a UK-based auto manufacturer*

› **Engage with experienced ecosystem partners.** In a world of constant digital evolution, nearly every company has gaps in their skills and capabilities. To help close the gap, creating an ecosystem of mutually beneficial partners is key. Third-party consultants offer expertise and resources. The good ones have already solved similar problems for other clients and can help with measurement, strategy, implementation, and fulfillment.

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Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 1,307 buyers in North America, Europe, Latin America, and APAC and 750 business decision-makers in the same regions to evaluate B2B buyers and their online experiences and how B2B sellers are leveraging platforms and technologies to address the growing demand of B2B buyers. Questions provided to the participants asked where they shop online for work, what would appeal to them moving forward, and what they would like to experience in the future. Forrester conducted five phone interviews with respondents of the same profile to gather additional in-depth insights. The study began in August 2015 and was completed in September 2015.

Project Director: Mark Brozek, Market Impact Consultant

Appendix B: Supplemental Material

RELATED FORRESTER RESEARCH

"Evaluate Your B2B eCommerce Maturity," Forrester Research, Inc., November 2014

"Elevate Omnichannel Customer Experience With Continuous Business Services," Forrester Research, Inc., May 2015

"Accelerate Digital Business With A BT Agenda," Forrester Research, Inc., June 2015

"Linking Customer Engagement To Business Capabilities In The Age Of The Customer," Forrester Research, Inc., February 2015

"Death Of A (B2B) Salesman," Forrester Research, April 2015

"Forrester Wave™ B2B Commerce Suites, Q2 2015," Forrester Research, June 2015

RELATED ACCENTURE INTERACTIVE AND SAP HYBRIS RESEARCH

"Digital Transformation in the Age of the Customer," Forrester Consulting, October 2015

"Building the B2B Omnichannel Commerce Platform of the Future," Forrester Consulting, November 2014

"Customer Desires vs. Retailer Capabilities: Minding The Omnichannel Commerce Gap," Forrester Consulting, January 2014

"Digital transformation: Re-imagine from the outside-in," Accenture Interactive, 2014

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Appendix C: Endnotes

[1] Source: "Elevate Omnichannel Customer Experience With Continuous Business Services," Forrester Research, Inc., May 2015

[2] Forrester considers eight classes of business capabilities to be central to engaging empowered customers as they move from context to context. For more information, read: "Linking Customer Engagement To Business Capabilities In The Age Of The Customer," Forrester Research, Inc., February 2015.