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SOFTWARE AND TECHNOLOGY

Heard at NRF: Contradictory conversation from vendors "Unified" but "Decoupled"

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By Emily Pfeiffer

At NRF 2020 Vision, commerce tech vendors touted their latest innovations for digital retail. The theme, from booth to booth, was an eerie echo of words like "connected" and "unified."

NRF's Digital Council (composed of retail CIOs, heads of digital, and similar, as well as tech providers) discussed several hot button terms during their meetings. Hearing from them underscored for me that even these very savvy business leaders are frustrated by the constant onslaught of contradictory and changing mandates.

What I heard from vendors: Benefits of unification
From one provider to the next, unified/connected commerce described a wild variety of offerings, from supply chain and logistics services to marketing platforms.

Picture the overlapping voices of so many well prepared and well-spoken vendors working to get to the heart of retailers' needs as they promise an oddly similar-sounding unified system of services that offers a:

- Single source of the truth
- Complete view of the customer
- Full-service solution (in whatever specific area they cover)
- Simplified selection process (one throat to choke)

Providers have been building out their digital suites, buying up smaller solutions to fill in gaps, and developing their own connective tissue between disparate systems forever.

However, these vendors are in a tough spot right now, as the API-first trend nudges retailer expectations toward openness and flexibility, rather than locked-in, pre-connected solutions.

Unified but also headless (whatever that means)

"Headless" architecture has become forefront in digital commerce provider selection discussions, but the industry

seems unable to agree on a clear definition of this term. I have heard it described variously as:

- Commerce platforms without a UI (though this added confusion around whether it was the front-end experience layer that was separated, or the back-end business user interface that was missing).
- "Decoupled" or "atomized" bits of the full solution that may be deployed independently.
- API-first sets of microservices that can be implemented as a fully headless instance, or selectively added on to existing architecture.
- Categorized chunks of services, each offered as optional functional areas. *

* One Industry Advisor told me that certain providers had done such an incomplete job of atomizing their offering that they should only be allowed to call the new architecture "macroservices."

Headless tells you nothing about what you are going to get from providers. It just tells you how you can get it. It is a description of the architecture or delivery of services, and nothing more.

Retailers should think of "headless" as:

- An opportunity to select only and exactly the services they need to run their digital business.
- A chance to experiment with microservices, without major commitments (contractual or cost of entry).
- A fundamental shift in how we think about the ecosystem that runs digital retail business.
- A loose suggestion that the experience layer (or front-end) of a Web site may now be managed separately from the back-end commerce engine.
- Most importantly, a call to action for retailers to stop seeing the digital business as separate from the greater business.

Decoupled services let retailers tie digital services to core business functions more directly, breaking down the walls between online and offline selling, marketing, clienteling and logistics.

This trend certainly does not mean that the business user's interface is now gone. It may become more optional as time goes on, but providers still offer the interface. Few retailers are likely to want to invent and maintain their own cross-functional UIs in the short term, so this should come as a relief to most.

How retailers should parse the unified/decoupled dichotomy

As retailers continue to explore this changing landscape, they should evaluate how they want to work with their providers as a model of engagement, determine their digital maturity to better understand how ready they are for a headless environment, and remember that none of this is one-size-fits-all.

VENDORS ARE challenged to provide very different architectural options as they should as we are smack in the middle of the Age of the Customer, which requires these providers to build for the varied needs of their customers: the retailers that use them.

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