



Protect Your Brand and Customer Experiences From a Creaking Supply Chain

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The worst of the COVID-19 pandemic may be behind us, but that crisis is leaving a wide variety of new issues in its wake. Chief among them for many brands and customers is a persistent disruption in the global supply chain, which has resulted in a painful combination of low stock and raised prices. Combine this with the unprecedented volume of workers worldwide quitting their jobs (a phenomenon the media has labeled “The Great Resignation”) and the result is a murky, anomalous, and potentially treacherous landscape for organisations to navigate.

Unfortunately for the brands and organisations that have already endured so much these last few years, it doesn’t look like the supply chain will sort itself out soon. Garden furniture, for example, was in short supply last summer because of these very woes, but brands will likely have double the stock they need in the summer of 2022!

The system will bring the full force of this ongoing imbalance to bear when it catches up with itself, which is one of many factors companies will have to contend with as they consider their customer experience (CX) strategy. In today’s paper, I’m going to explore these challenges in greater detail

and what your brand can do to protect its customer experiences.

HOW THE SUPPLY CHAIN IS CREAKING

Let’s spell out exactly which supply chain disruptions I’m referring to when I say that the system is ‘creaking.’ The first factor to consider is manufacturing, and how even though the global manufacturing giant is slowly waking post-quarantine, it will still take time for it to fully catch back up with demand. This gap has resulted in a gamut-spanning shortage of everything from automobiles to video game consoles.

Secondly, let’s consider shipping. The uncertainty produced by the pandemic has resulted in long queues of ships waiting to enter port, which has pushed shipping costs through the roof. And, of course, because the goods on those ships aren’t actually reaching anyone, retail brands currently have only about half of the inventory they need to address returning customer demand, driving prices even higher.

While on the subject of rising prices, let's also take a look at the third element here: commodities. It's common to assume that the aforementioned shipping problems are the sole reason wheat, sugar, coffee, and other staples are all more expensive right now, but the truth is a bit more nuanced. Many suppliers treated the pandemic the exact same as they would an economic recession, and assumed demand for these goods would fall in a similar fashion. In reality, many customers had more money than they normally would during a recession, and because most restaurants were closed down, they bought far more staples and prepared more food at home. This factor is more subtle than the other two, but no less important to understanding supply chain woes.

Finally, let's briefly return to the notion of The Great Resignation, which is closely interrelated with supply chain problems. Faced with insufficient pay, hazardous working conditions (and, as many recent airline horror stories indicate, hostile customers), workers the world over are leaving their current jobs in search of greener pastures. This challenge is especially pronounced here in the United Kingdom, where Brexit created an exodus of European workers and thus compounded our labor shortage. This phenomenon is occurring across many industries, but mass resignations in trucking and other logistics sectors are proving especially problematic for the global supply chain.

MEETING THESE CHALLENGES HEAD-ON

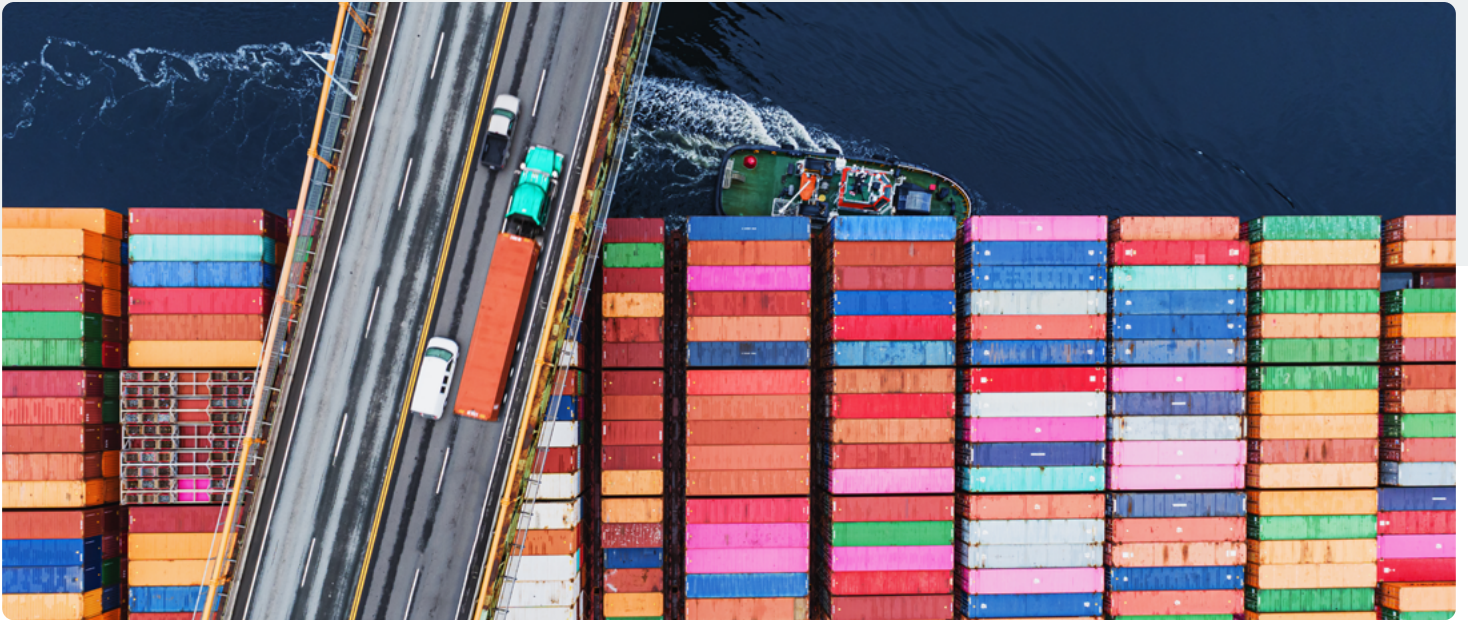
Now that I've defined the supply chain challenges brands face (and your odds of finding garden furniture next year), it's time to examine what your organisation can do to address these challenges from a CX programme perspective. This process has seldom been more formidable, but the approach I'm about to discuss will help your organisation brave these uncharted waters and round out the effectiveness of your CX programme.

The first principle to remember here is that because customer moods are changing and growing more complex, you must refrain from making generalisations about customer segments. Rather, use that time and energy to stay ahead of your customers' priorities best you can. It's no small task, especially right now, but it's imperative to continue carefully listening to your customers and feeding that intelligence into a platform to help you identify actionable insights. This combination of versatility and careful study will help you know what your customers want next before they themselves may even know.

Relatedly, it's important to remember that numbers will only get you so far.

NPS, OSAT, and related metrics can help your organisation understand that shifts are occurring, but understanding human psychology as it relates to your customer experience and ongoing supply chain problems will tell you the other 90 percent of the story. This again speaks to the importance of having an experience platform that can analyse sentiment, not just numbers, to help make sense of your customer experience narrative in great detail.

Finally, remember that your company's DNA needs to be at the heart of your experience strategy, especially in uncertain times. Remember why your customers come to you, cherish those connections, and put them at the forefront of both your strategy and your employee training. Those connections are what keep your customers returning to you and what keep them from seeking out the competition instead, so tapping into that proverbial DNA should be a top priority. If you can achieve that objective, customers will keep cherishing those experiences even amid rising prices or other volatility.



EXPANDING BEYOND SUPPLY CHAINS

The methods I've discussed today may not neutralise every threat your brand faces due to the creaking supply chain, but they will form a better defense around your organisation and your customer experience than only paying attention to numbers or only reacting to problems as they arise in real time. They may not allow you to predict exactly

what will happen next with the supply chain, but they will allow you to foresee what your customers will want next and help you plan accordingly. In short, these methods will help you ensure that the difference you make for your customers is meaningful.

The factor that makes CX programmes so invaluable is that that difference doesn't have to be restrained to addressing the supply chain. Whether it's

becoming more inclusive of marginalised groups or helping your organisation plan for large-scale challenges like climate change, a CX initiative built as I'm encouraging you to build it will help your organisation bridge those gaps. It's a ceaseless process, but taking the journey in a more holistic way will help your organisation persist and prevail against any challenge, supply chain or otherwise.

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