Product Marketing Tests Smarter Commerce Solution Messaging with Customers

Description and objective

IBM Sterling B2B Integration Product Marketing held the first two of what will be ongoing Customer Information Exchange Round Tables on June 23rd. The objective of the events was to spend time with current customers face-to-face to share information on messaging. The agenda of the sessions included discussion of the value of the combined IBM Sterling companies, the Smarter Commerce high level overview, and review of two in-progress, cross-brand Smarter Commerce solutions: from Sell, a Customer B2B Integration solution and from Buy, a Supplier Integration and Management solution.

Who attended?

Round table attendees were provided by sales reps, and several reps came to the sessions. At the first round table, which focused on the Customer B2B Integration solution, customers from Interstate Gas Supply, Formica, Tempur-Pedic and Bob Evans were present. At the second round table, which focused on the Supplier Integration and Management solution, customers from The Gap, DSW and Safelite Group were present. The customers were from IT, not business, and had titles like e-Commerce Manager, Senior Program Manager—Global operations, Director Worldwide Software Applications, Senior Enterprise Architect, and VP Application Development. Several of the companies were multi-nationals.

What happened?

The sessions were held at a round table and were informal. The team presented, and customers commented throughout, often building and expanding on each others' feedback. Customer comments were aligned around a set of four questions: Does the message make sense? Does it matter to you and your company? What should we change? What is missing?" The sessions were not research they were extensions of the kinds of conversations we have with our customers all the time—there were just more people in the room and a laser focus on validating and improving our current Smarter Commerce solution level messaging.

What we heard

The update presented on the *value of the combined IBM Sterling companies* was well received, with follow on requests for deeper dives into roadmaps with our PLM teams.

The *Smarter Commerce* overview was also well received and spurred some discussion amongst the customers. Questions about relevance were answered with a resounding "Yes." Improvements were suggested related to individual industry views, as well as helping an IT person understand how to deliver on these higher level solutions. There was discussion on this topic, much of it was around the notion that Smarter Commerce is a strategic approach and not a product or set of products. Does this thinking make sense? "Yes." Does it matter to you and your company? "Yes." What here should we change? "Make clear that it is strategy and that there are products to support it." What is missing? "How do I as an IT person sell this to business and get it done?" (The last comment is the opening for the next conversation with the customer.) Examples of things customers said included:

"This Smarter Commerce strategy is a great idea."

"I also think this is a great idea, it works well for retailers like us, and allows one to see all the channels, and buying habits. We can also see what our partners are doing with our brand. We could do targeted marketing messages, use mobile apps, this is great stuff."

"I also like it. It says the challenge is to market to the consumer though all the layers. I want to use this to win customers instead of having them go to competitors in other markets including Asia."

The question "Is growth important to you?" was asked. And, the answer was "The need to grow never left. Customer loyalty is first and most important, growth is second, and cost savings is third. There was much affirmative head-nodding from customers around the room when that comment was made. The line-up of these imperatives can be tested in marketing messaging summaries which are the core of many external presentations.

The *information presented on the two solutions, Customer B2B Integration solution and Supplier Integration and Management solution* also went over well. To summarize, the customers all understood the space, the concepts, and the problems. They all related to the thinking which made sense and was relevant.

One outcome here is that we need to provide more detail on how we could implement the solutions, and we need to clarify which pieces of the implementation are current and which are forthcoming. We also have an opportunity to talk more about where the lines are with social media tools as used by the consumer and the enterprise.

A second outcome surfaced when we discussed the question "What are projects on your IT radar, are they vendor managed inventory, electronic management of inventory, consolidation, consumer centric marketing, loyalty or?" One answer that resonated with the customers was: "…modernization and standardization. A lot of companies are going through what we are looking at in terms of this. You can help us by painting the picture of what they are doing. Tell us which is the best avenue to go down. Help convince us your combination is the way to go to achieve modernization and standardization." That is another piece of information we can test in marketing messaging moving forward.

A third outcome for the group was the importance of measuring performance in both the customer and supplier processes. There was some feeling that the processes might start with the results of having measured performance: "…this performance slide is the most important to me, if the amount of audits I to do is large because the supplier or customer is historically bad, I want to do more audits and act on the information, if the amount of audits is low because the supplier or customer is good I want to do fewer audits…then I need to be able to automate acting on the information." Historically, when messaging, we've talked about visibility and performance as the end goal of integrating and automating processes. This round table further solidified that analytics, visibility, and performance management is a leading message we should increase the focus on in our efforts to position more integration solutions.

Conclusion and what's next

We heard from a number of the customers (and sales reps) that the customers appreciated the engagement, and the engagement was also extremely valuable to our team of product marketing professionals. We will make these round table forums a part of our standard business procedures going forward to augment our one-off telephone conversations.

We will be refining the marketing messaging for our in-progress Customer B2B Integration solution and Supplier Integration and Management solution based on what we heard.

We will be refining the Customer Information Exchange Round Table process to make it more effective.

We will be identifying other solution areas to focus on in future Customer Information Exchange Round Tables.

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