

Best of Breed Customer Experiences Require Best of Breed Content Management Systems

Why Suites May Not Hit Your Customer Journey Sweet Spot

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Introduction

Providing superior customer experiences is not only a competitive advantage; for many companies it is their only competitive advantage. But gaining that advantage requires engaging with customers across a growing number of channels, touchpoints, and devices and providing content that is timely and contextually relevant—a tall order! Moreover, that engagement must span not just the buying phase of the relationship, the “buyer’s journey,” but instead the entire end-to-end relationship or “customer journey.”

That requires a number of tools and systems as we’ll see in this white paper, but the CMS is by far the most important piece, as it is the hub of the customer experience—it has to connect all of those components to provide a seamless experience to customers and to the employees who have to create and deliver those experiences. Selecting the right CMS is pivotal to success in providing compelling customer experiences.

One of the first decisions that a prospective CMS buyer faces is also the most critical—whether to buy an all in one solution or adopt a best of breed strategy. That decision sets the stage for how companies will be able to provide consistent and engaging experiences to their prospects and customers throughout the customer journey, today and into the future.

The challenge in implementing a content management strategy that drives and supports the customer journey is that it requires a lot of moving parts and pieces of technology in order to properly orchestrate content creation, targeting, and delivery. Content management vendors have responded to the challenge in two very different ways:

- All in one solutions (suites) that strive to provide most if not all of the components, typically including marketing automation, personalization, mobile support, and sometimes analytics and e-commerce.
- Best of breed (BoB) solutions that provide the core content management functionalities and readily allow buyers to integrate needed and/or additionally desired components to supply other services. Some of the components are already owned by the buyer and in use, while others come from partners and third party software vendors, certified by the CMS vendor, that can be installed to fulfill a particular need.

The suite approach is appealing as it promises to deliver a complete solution for all enterprise content management needs. But in reality, all in one solutions really aren’t, as they almost always need to be integrated with other enterprise and third party applications. And CMS suites are often composed of loosely coupled applications, obtained from acquisitions of other vendors.

As a result, suite solutions are best suited for organizations that have fairly stable markets and target audiences; and don’t need a lot of flexibility in selecting tools for managing extended customer relationships. They provide the vendor’s view of what capabilities are needed by a broad and diverse target audience; in essence a one size fits all approach.

Best of breed approaches, in contrast, enable organizations to pick and choose from the vast variety of tools and systems, including those they already own. As the name suggests, BoB makes it possible to assemble the best of the best tools for each department and employee involved in the customer journey. Those tools go far beyond sales and marketing automation to include web and mobile analytics, social media, community management and many others, with more arriving by the day.

It's true that Best of breed strategies require more thought in designing and architecting solutions, but as we'll show in this paper, for a large number of organizations, they can yield better, more long lasting results and also leverage investments made in the past by solving their integration challenges. They allow organizations to assemble and integrate their own choice of tools and applications needed to provide the right content to customers and prospects at the right moment in time, throughout all stages of the customer lifecycle and are the best for their staff in terms of usability. In short, Integration capability is the key to success with the Best of Breed strategy

The BoB approach is not for all organizations, and the same applies to suite solutions. This paper will help readers understand the facts about both approaches to help make that all-important decision.

The Buyer' s Journey is Dead—Long Live the Customer Journey

Successful inbound marketing is based on the delivery of content targeted at specific roles and selected channels at the particular stage and state they are in making a buying decision—that is known as the “buyer’s journey.” That notion has been gaining traction with marketers as they are increasingly challenged with getting and retaining the attention of prospects and customers.

Studies have found that buyers often are well into the process of making a buying decision—as much as 70%—before they engage with a sales person, if they engage at all. That means that content has to do the heavy lifting of attracting, engaging, and educating prospects and that content has to be tailored for a specific buyer profile and their stage in making a purchase decision.

Yet content needs don't end when a customer buys a product or service—they often increase. When customers begin to use products, they need and expect content that helps them maximize the benefits they gain from products, delivered at the appropriate time and via their preferred channels and devices. Buyers want to feel valued by their vendors, and also want to feel that they are receiving continued value from their investment, which in turn yields upsell potential for companies.

In short, the buyer's journey isn't the whole journey but merely the beginning. Consider the following statistics from Bain and Company, Market Metrics, Gartner, and Oracle:

- Increasing customer retention rates by 5% increases profits by 25%-95%.¹
- It is 60-70% easier to convert an existing customer than it is to convert a prospect.²
- Eighty percent of an organization's future revenue will come from 20% of its existing customers.³
- Businesses are estimated to lose as much as 20% of revenue from poor customer experiences.⁴

One final statistic: a recent Forbes study found that only 26% of companies have articulated a strategy aimed at improving customer experiences--the rest have a big opportunity to trump their peers!⁵

Despite the focus by many CMS vendors on influencing buyers' behaviors, in fact, customer loyalty and long term profitability are driven as much if not more by experiences in the post-purchase stages of the customer's relationship with a company. That requires content and tools designed and targeted to provide great experiences for the "back end" of the customer relationship. Post-purchase service and support are critical to customer satisfaction and for gaining customer advocacy—the most powerful imaginable marketing force and one that must be earned, not bought.

The complete end-to-end view from awareness to purchase to actual implementation and use is the "customer journey." It is a conceptual framework for marketing, sales, and service/support managers to use in planning and creating the various forms of information and content that customers need in learning about, selecting and buying, and using products and services, and taken a step further, becoming advocates or ambassadors for the company and its products and services.

It is also a framework for use in identifying and assembling the people, processes, and tools needed to create, manage, and deploy content for consistent and high quality customer experiences, in effect creating a "customer experience engine." The customer experience engine comprises the people, processes, and systems needed to provide targeted, consistent content and experiences across all touch points throughout the customer lifecycle.

The customer experience engine involves a number of departments or teams and roles in most organizations; each having unique needs and wanting the best possible solutions to those needs. Moreover, there are a large and growing number of dimensions that must be addressed including channels, devices, media and delivery models, timing of delivery, location, and task, to name a few.

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The ability to create consistent and compelling experiences for customers throughout the customer journey requires:

- Detailed and expanding knowledge of the prospect or customer—not just the usual suspects of industries and roles, but their demographics, psychographics, technographics and behaviors for finding and using information.
- Knowledge of customer behaviors across all channels and touchpoints that is dynamic and actionable.
- Empowered employees who have access to easy-to-use systems that supply customer knowledge and access to the content and information they need to attract, engage, and support prospects and customers. In an earlier white paper, *Beyond Customer Experience Management: What Your CMS Really Needs to Deliver*, we described how a CMS that delivers a great user experience to those employees is essential for the creation of great customer experiences.

The graphic below is a depiction of the customer journey, along with the actions that could or should be taken by the company to attract, engage, convert and support that customer. Note that all of those actions involve content, specifically the ability to supply the right information to the right person at the right time and in the right channel and context.

The variety of activities across the journey makes clear, as noted earlier, that a number of different departments are necessarily involved. The challenge is that, in many companies, those departments are siloed and there is some confusion over roles and responsibilities—a Forrester study found that 60% of those surveyed said that dividing roles and responsibilities among departments was their top challenge.⁶

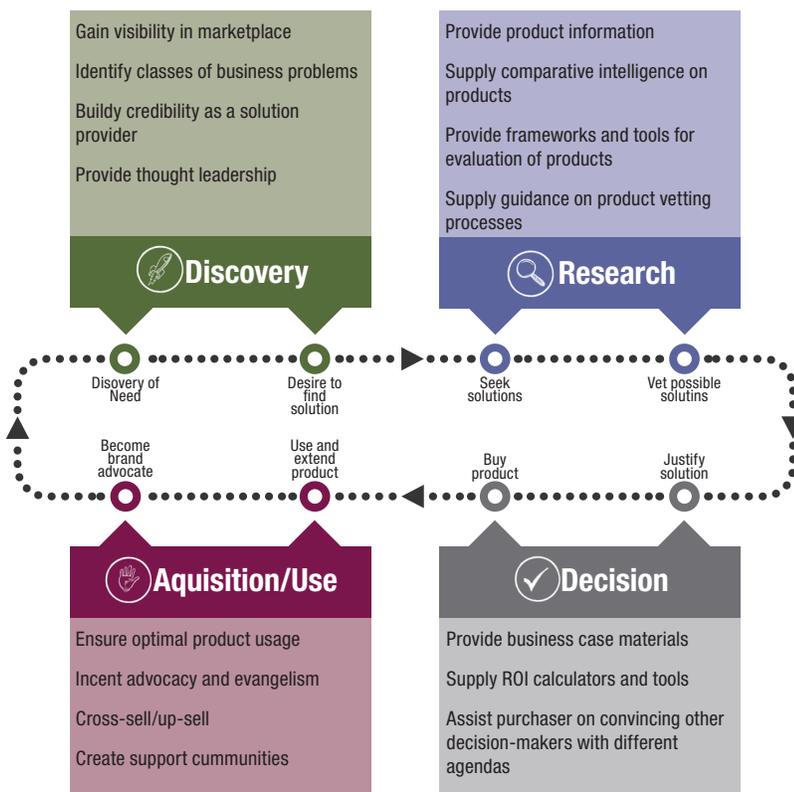


Figure 1: Customer Journey and Vendor Actions

The best of breed strategy provides a solution to this challenge; enabling the content management system hub to ensure consistency and accuracy of content across departments and customer touch points, while the various departments and users can use tools that meet their needs and are comfortable to use. The CMS is the hub of the customer experience—it connects all of the components needed to provide seamless experiences to customers as well as to the employees who have to create and deliver those experiences. In other words, a BoB solution helps provide a unified view of a company's customers while letting users use the best tools to perform their jobs.

The CMS is the hub of the customer experience—it connects all of the components needed to provide seamless experiences to customers as well as to employees who have to create and deliver those experiences.

The next section takes this framework a step further to show how it can be used to identify the range of technology solutions needed, in conjunction with a CMS, to build an “engine” capable of supporting the customer journey.

Delivering the Customer Journey: The Customer Experience Engine

Historically, organizations have relied on a combination of technology and human resources to get targeted content to prospects and customers. Think of marketing campaigns, sales staff sending product sheets, and web sites that offer canned support information along with access to live representatives as examples.

The web has, however, fueled ever-increasing expectations on the part of prospects and customers to be communicated with and supported in the fashion they desire. One size fits all approaches are not only ineffective, they can provoke customers to find other vendors that will engage with them as individuals with unique interests and needs.

Automated solutions that handle the heavy lifting of managing and deploying content to the right person at the right time in the right context are not just desirable they are essential. The graphic below is a simplified view of some of the technologies used to support a customer journey content strategy and illustrates the need for well-integrated technologies to deliver seamless, consistent customer experiences across the lifecycle stages, devices, and channels.

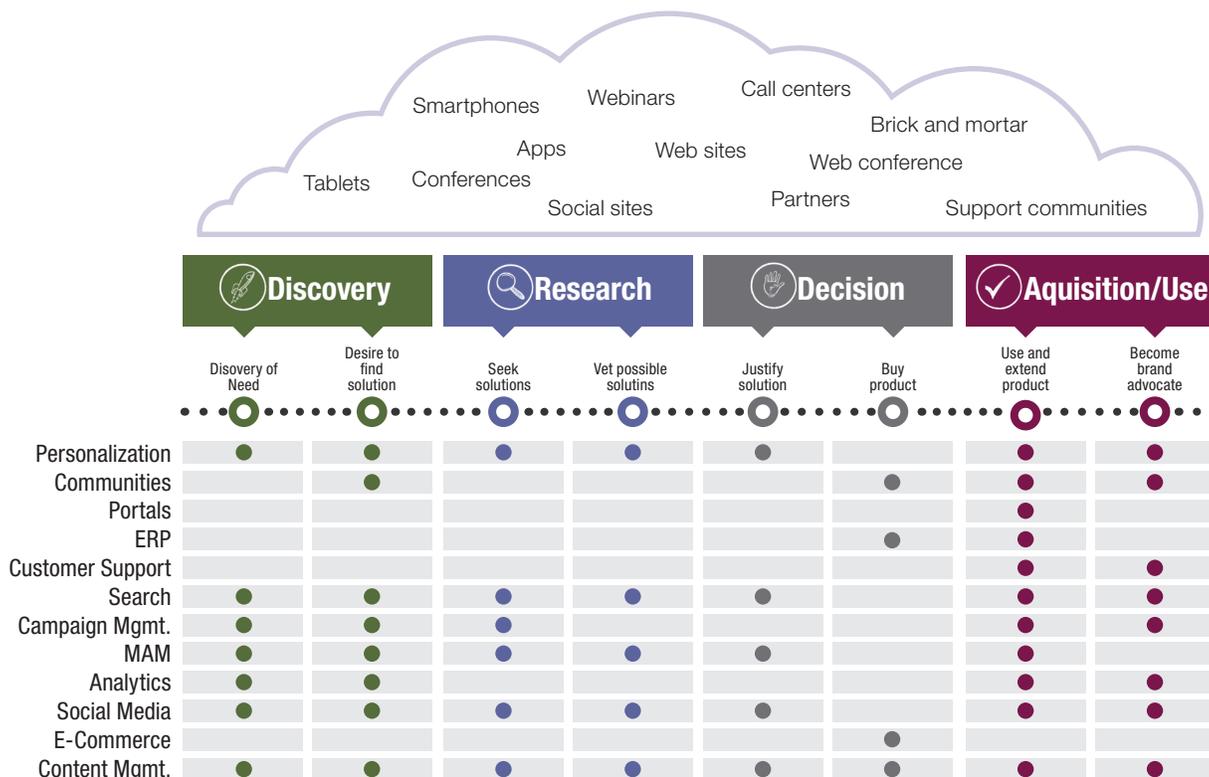


Figure 2: Components of the Customer Experience Engine

The graphic makes readily apparent the number and variety of systems and applications needed to support the customer journey, and in fact, there are many more possible components that are omitted here to reduce complexity. It also makes clear that fact that despite claims from suite vendors, no single vendor could hope to supply all of the pieces which is why best of breed CMS strategies are not only preferable, but essential in creating a customer experience engine.

Comparing Best-of-Breed and All-in-One: How do they Stack Up?

True all-in-one solutions are like Unicorns—much talked about but difficult to find in reality. Yet there are some large and successful vendors who trumpet their advantages, so it is important to understand how best of breed and all-in-one strategies really stack up.

At first blush, CMS suites have great “curb appeal,” promising the delivery of most if not all of the functionality that an organization needs, all from one vendor, in one package. But let’s peel that onion a bit. We noted earlier that a true customer experience engine involves a number of departments and roles, from sales and marketing, to finance, product development, IT and service and support. That spans a lot of application needs, shown earlier in Figure 2.

The reality is that suites can't offer that total range of applications, especially those that support the latter stages of the customer journey; hence some level of integration will always be required. Forrester analyst Anjali Yakkundi stated that *"Many vendors promise a comprehensive customer experience management technology suite. But supporting customer experience is a broad discipline that includes everything from your contact center to your marketing suites, to the technologies that power your web site. Right now, no one vendor has every single component."*⁷

Moreover, most organizations will already have some applications in place that overlap with a suite, requiring either integration or replacement of the application with the dislocation and retraining that that entails. Convincing staff to learn new systems that replace ones they already know how to use is difficult and often leads to utilization problems. Harder still is convincing management to spend money to replace systems that were costly to acquire and difficult to implement and are performing their jobs.

It is also important to realize that most suites were not architected and built from the ground up. Instead they are constructed from a variety of applications that the suite vendor acquired and has stitched together. That means that the underlying technology will be of varying ages and pedigrees and the pieces may not function well together. In making a purchase decision, it is important to understand the age and lineage of all parts of the suite. Beware of aging technology that has just gotten a facelift using AJAX and other rich Internet application technologies to give the appearance of youth.

Also important is the fact that new and innovative applications are being created more and more rapidly, often by startups new to the market. Suite vendors can't advance all of the components of their solutions at that rate and so will always be lagging the best of breed solutions. They simply can't amass the resources and expertise to provide cutting edge solutions across all of the components needed to support the customer journey.

Finally, many suite vendors talk about the need for consistent UI and UX across all of the components of a suite and the fact that it is difficult to achieve with a BoB approach. There is some truth to those claims, as a consistent UI across applications can make it easier for users to work across multiple applications or modules.

But the same goal can also be accomplished with a well done integration. Single sign on (SSO) tools and dashboards can provide seamless usage across BoB components. In fact, as we noted above, since many suites are composed of parts acquired from different vendors, the suite components may not play well together, making a well-integrated best of breed approach a better strategy than weakly integrated suite tools.

Having discussed the ins and outs of suites, let's look at some core reasons that favor a BoB approach for your content management strategy, including:

- BoB solutions not only enable, they are built with the premise that many organizations already have systems in place they will want to use, and will also need third party systems to provide functionality that the CMS does not,
- BoB vendors have invested time and money in developing advanced integration capabilities. Since most organizations have to integrate their CMS with existing or new systems, those capabilities will reduce time to operation, risk, and cost of implementation,
- IT organizations have invested significant time and effort in creating modular flexible technology architectures for their enterprise systems and will prefer or even insist on modular, flexible content management solutions,
- Users that support various aspects of the customer journey want and need highly sophisticated tools optimized for their needs. A BoB approach lets them either continue to use systems they know and love, or pick whatever third party applications they wish to use. In the latter case, they can choose from hundreds of cloud based solutions that can be easily deployed,
- A BoB approach mitigates risk by eliminating the possibility that a total solution might have to be removed and replaced. Buying a suite is, on the other hand putting all of one's eggs in one basket and hoping that the vendor can continue to meet the businesses' needs today and in the future.
- No single vendor can be as fast or as innovative as the market itself. A best of breed approach allows companies to participate in this fact by allowing them to pick and choose from what's available and not from what's provided by one vendor.

In other words, a best of breed strategy eliminates the need for “rip and replace” disruptions and expenses, and provides increased agility to keep up with changing technologies and market conditions. If a component of a best of breed solution fails to meet changing or new needs it can easily be replaced—a sort of “nip and replace.” The best of breed strategy provides a “security blanket” in a world of change.

That's important because as already recognized by Heraclitus some 2500 years ago “Change is the only constant in life”—think how fast tablets moved from curiosity to main-stream platform and device of choice for many. Ditto mobile shopping and commerce, and coming on like a freight train, cross-channel in-store experience management. Most if not all of these were unforeseeable even a few years ago and are likely to come and go and be replaced by yet more unforeseeable trends.

As a result, you can't reliably predict what customer journey and content management functionality will need to look like in even a few short years. That means that you need a modular approach to content management and deployment technology that allows you to “snap in and snap out” pieces of technology to meet those changing needs.

CMS vendors need to co-exist and integrate with a wide variety of tools in order to support a customer journey strategy. Visit the kitchen of any serious chef and you'll find pots, pans, knives, and other tools from an assortment of vendors—each the best at what they do. Ditto doctors, dentists, and any professionals that need top-notch functionality to perform a variety of tasks.

The Heart of the Matter: Selecting the Best of Breed CMS Vendor and Solution

Once you've decided that a best of breed approach fits your strategy, the next significant question is which CMS vendor and solution to pick. The CMS is the hub and the “heart” for the customer experience engine—it both connects and powers the engine. Starting with CMS vendors, there are many that lay claim to having best of breed solutions, but in fact there are some signposts that signal true capability, not just marketing prowess. A true best of breed CMS vendor should exhibit the following characteristics:

The CMS is the hub and the “heart” of the customer experience engine—it both connects and powers the engine

- A strong vision for, and commitment to the BoB strategy—BoB should not be a fallback or secondary strategy, but core to the mission of the vendor,
- Powerful integration tools and APIs, and an app store with product extensions that help solve integration needs,
- A strong partner network with solutions that provide the needed functionality not supplied in the core CMS *and* with pre-built integrations,
- Partners that can assist with change management and process-redesign, not just technology needs,
- Strong and relevant BoB reference accounts that have similar needs to those of the buying organization,
- An ability and willingness to assist customers in developing and refining a BoB strategy and architectures for the hub and all of the other constituent components.

The vendor is your partner and must be able to bring the expertise, technology, and guidance to bear to help ensure your success. Think about how you are trying to improve your customers' experiences and expect the same from your vendor.

Integration: The Key to Success With the Best of Breed Strategy

When vendors are asked about integration, they often reply “we have an API for that.” Unfortunately, APIs are necessary but not sufficient for true integration. And integration is much more than just being able to pass content back and forth—it has to provide a great and seamless experience for the internal user, whether content creators; developers; or marketing, service, and support staff.

And, as we've noted, providing an all-encompassing and engaging user experience for prospects and customers requires integration with many different enterprise and third party systems and repositories. Far from the old days of mailing lists and e-mail campaign, the creation of personalized digital experiences requires knowledge of a customer's purchase history, demographics, web site behaviors, contacts with support centers, social media habits, and, if all goes as planned, e-commerce and financial systems to complete a purchase. That spans a lot of applications that need to be integrated quickly and easily.

To accomplish that, the CMS needs to be architected from the ground up to support integration with a wide variety of applications using standards-based technologies and mainstream development languages and tools. The tools and interfaces for integrating common applications such as e-commerce, analytics, video, enterprise databases, portals, or CRM systems should be pre-built and easy to understand and use without extensive customization. Likewise, UI integration should enable consistent and seamless interfaces for users.

Excessive reliance on customization is a warning sign that a vendor has not really focused on integration but is instead making the customer pay to create on-the-fly solutions that are risky, expensive, and brittle. The integration tools and approach should clearly show that the vendor understands how the user will actually use the integrated systems.

Working with IT to Create the Customer Experience Engine

It is not uncommon for business units, most notably marketing departments, to avoid working with IT in selecting and implementing content management and marketing technology solutions—a trend that cloud computing has accelerated. But failing to make IT a partner in a BoB CMS strategy engenders high risk of poor results or even failure.

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We noted earlier the need for architectures to describe the mosaic of customer Experience engine components and interactions. IT organizations understand architectures and can figure out how the new applications fit and should be integrated with what is already in place. As we already noted, most if not all CMS implementations will need to be integrated with both new and existing applications—something that can't be done without IT support.

It's important to note that the vendor and its partners are equally important. They must be able to supply deep technical knowledge, but also have the ability to assist in creation of new processes and making other organizational changes needed to accommodate new content applications. Here again, the IT organization brings valuable skills in managing relationships with solution providers.

In short, IT needs to be a full-fledged partner in CMS selection, deployment, and use. Developing a BoB strategy and solution set without IT participation is unlikely to provide a viable much less superior solution. Selecting a CMS that not only supports a customer journey strategy, but also meets IT's needs and fits well with their environment and work methods will enhance the likelihood of success.

Implementing the Customer Experience Engine

While the actual design and implementation of a customer experience engine may seem challenging, the complexity can and should be managed first, by having a big picture view of what needs to be done, and second, an iterative “bite sized” approach to implementation, based on a road map. The overall goal is to architect and implement a BoB CMS and accompanying technology that supports the customer journey by providing uniform and high quality cross-channel content designed to attract, engage, retain customers; and ideally create advocates or evangelists that drive growth and revenue.

Some tips for creating a customer experience engine:

1. Crystalize business goals—specifically what does the organization want to achieve with respect to customer experiences? Clear goals are important as they not only guide the selection of content and technologies but also provide the basis for metrics to measure success. Hint: at least some of the goals should focus on customer benefits and satisfaction.
2. Identify and document all customer touch points, both on and offline. Test touch points, focusing on response times, consistency of answers and information, quality of interactions, and follow through. Remedy any deficiencies before, or in parallel to implementation of a customer experience engine.
3. Create “architectures” for the customer experience engine. Architectures are documents that describe all of the component parts, their organization, and interactions. In this case, those components include not only technology solutions, but also the people, organizations, content, and processes that help fuel the engine and provide the customer experiences.
4. Consider creating cross-functional customer facing teams that oversee all customer touch points, as organizations such as Sephora have done. The point here is that great customer experiences come from the combination of empowered people with the right skills and personalities coupled with powerful tools and information. Getting it only half right by selecting great technology will result in a sputtering engine that can't pull its own weight.

5. Create and use a road map that defines the timing and sequence of technology deployment and accompanying process and organization changes starting with the BoB CMS. It is important to start with the CMS as it is the hub from which most if not all other engine components will be connected.
6. Have a formal process for evaluating CMS (and other technology component) options. Use the business goals and architecture documents to communicate with vendors and remember that the more the vendor knows about you and your needs, the better they can respond. Live demos are important—start with general overview demos, and then schedule in-depth demos that focus on specific users and aspects of the CMS including integration. Canned demos show what the vendor wants to feature, but don't help organizations decide if the solution will meet their needs.

In closing we'll leave you with three thoughts: first, a buyer's journey content marketing strategy is not sufficient to build long term, profitable relationships with customers. Quality, contextualized content is needed across the entire customer lifecycle or journey. Second, suite solutions promise a quick solution to the buyer's journey, but don't provide the flexibility and modularity to support the best available components across the entire customer journey. Only a best of breed solution can fill that bill.

And finally, if you are seeking a CMS to create your own customer experience engine, you are embarking on your own customer journey. That provides a great opportunity to evaluate how well the vendors under consideration understand and can support the creation of a superior and effective customer experience engine.

Footnotes

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