

Supercharging Omnichannel

Batteries Plus Bulbs transitioned signature in-store service into an all-channel experience

by DEENA M. AMATO-McCOY

As consumers' adoption of digital technology accelerates, so does their access to information — a factor that makes retailers hard-pressed to stay relevant. To respond to these increasingly information-driven consumers, Batteries Plus Bulbs transitioned its marketing-heavy website to one that could truly engage omnichannel shoppers.

Hartland, Wisc.-based Batteries Plus Bulbs operates more than 660 stores, both corporate-owned as well as franchisee-owned locations that are managed through 281 ownership groups. Known for knowledgeable associates, the chain has built a reputation on the premium-brand batteries it

sells, the national warranties it offers on all purchases and the expert service delivered in every location. This business model translates into 1.6 million batteries and bulbs sold weekly, according to the company's website.

The chain launched its omnichannel operation in 2006, but such a diverse company presented a fair share of challenges. One of the hardest was centralizing operations to deliver mission-critical consistency for consumers.

"We have a go-to-market business model, but it is not easy to corral [franchise owners]," says Jayson Serrault, the chain's senior vice president of digital marketing. Most of the company's franchisees had a difficult time

executing an omnichannel strategy because each wanted to present their own identity and drive their own business. The challenge was exacerbated as the company tried to deliver personalized experiences through a basic "cookie-cutter" website.

In hopes of bolstering omnichannel, Batteries Plus Bulbs revamped its e-commerce site in 2010, though the update "was more cosmetic than functional," Serrault says.

The site "did a great job of attracting shoppers through pay-per-clicks and search engine optimization, but it lacked the feature set needed to convert browsers to shoppers," he says. "Meanwhile, the world has dramatically changed since then."

For example, three years ago a limited number of mobile users accessed the retailer's website. Today, "50 percent of our online traffic comes from mobile users," Serrault says. "However, conducting an online-designed experience on a mobile device's tiny screen is not a practical or satisfying user experience. As we watched our mobile traffic increase, we knew we needed to engage them in a better way."

This brought the chain to another omnichannel crossroad: Should it develop a separate mobile site and maintain its existing desktop e-commerce platform, or should Batteries Plus Bulbs redesign its entire platform to become more responsive to the ever-evolving mobile channel? After a thorough evaluation, the latter choice was clearly the better decision to stay relevant in a mobile-driven, omnichannel marketplace.



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MAKING MOVES

Armed with a lengthy prerequisite list, Batteries Plus Bulbs hit the marketplace in search of the best operating platform. A high priority was a

platform that would enable shoppers to connect directly to local stores — and knowledgeable associates — as easily as possible.

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From a logistics perspective, Batteries Plus Bulbs wanted to support a variety of procurement options, including buy online, pick up in-store — an option that more easily connects customers to available inventory. This is especially true since, unlike other omnichannel retailers, not all of Batteries Plus Bulbs’ inventory is available online, but rather in different locations.

“If a shopper is looking for a battery for a 2008 GMC Yukon,” Serrault says, “it may be easier to pick up the battery at a store as opposed to waiting for it to be shipped.”

The company’s vast inventory required other functionality; for example, a product information management system was critical. Further complicating the issue was how to apply the information management system, as well as coordinate customer profiles and databases and pricing across the many point-of-sale systems supported by its diverse ownership groups.

“A successful omnichannel model depends on how well we can individually interact with customers,” Serrault says. “This depends on bringing all of the best technology together.”

To get the most ideal platform in place, the chain decided to develop and manage it in-house. The organization’s IT team developed the infrastructure on Microsoft’s .Net framework to support its requirements through web services. The chain also created geolocation services that en-



able customers to see all locations within a 50-mile radius, search functionality that lets shoppers find the right product at the best price, view most-popular products and gauge multi-unit pricing and streamline checkout that piggybacks on existing POS and order management systems.

The system also allows business account customers to tag frequently ordered items as “favorites” and create custom descriptions based on how or where they use the merchandise in their own enterprise. Items are put into a “quick order pad,” allowing business customers to go back to the site to reference past orders and easily reorder products without creating a new search.

“These newly supported options create a more holistic and streamlined shopping experience that merges our digital and bricks-and-mortar operations,” Serrault says.

RISING CONVERSION RATES

Following nine to 12 month of programming, the new platform went live in July. Within the first two months the company saw “a 10-fold increase in mobile conversion, and a seven-fold

jump in desktop conversion,” he says.

The new platform supports buy online, pick up in-store, a service which now accounts for 90 percent of omnichannel order fulfillment; it has also helped increase conversion rates overall.

“Our conversion rates are between six and 10 times higher, and our average tickets are as well, increasing from an average of \$62 to \$87,” Serrault says. “We attribute this to our consumers’ ability to better connect with categories and more easily find their desired merchandise.”

Even with all of the enhancements, Serrault believes the key to a successful omnichannel experience is creating a strong in-store connection across all

channels. By adding “click-to-call” functionality, shoppers are immediately given the numbers and addresses of the closest Batteries Plus Bulbs locations. This enables shoppers to “save” their preferred location and dial it directly from their mobile device. Twenty percent of mobile visitors use the click-to-call functionality.

The new site is also supporting a more interactive and discovery-based experience. Relying solely on SEO and pay-per-click methods that previously brought shoppers to product detail pages “still forced them to re-find merchandise — this does not promote a good shopping experience, and only increases bounce rates,” Serrault says.

“With new URL structures, we are better redirecting their search, and driving them deeper within the site to what they need to find,” he says. “We are finally moving forward in the right direction.” **STORES**

Deena M. Amato-McCoy is a New York-based freelance journalist who covers retail technology. When she’s not writing about retail, she is often testing her theories “in the field.”