Global Podcast Europe – Ep. 6

Business Beyond Covid-19: Tech reshapes the customer experience

Introduction:	Welcome to Business Beyond COVID-19, HSBC's podcast series about embracing business unusual through the global pandemic and beyond. We talk to industry leaders and experts to understand how they are adapting, reshaping and innovating through these extraordinary times.
	A quick note that we have recorded this remotely, so apologies in advance for any sound issues. Thank you for joining us.
Roland Emmans:	Hi, I'm Roland Emmans, HSBC UK's Tech Sector Head. Thanks for taking the time to join us. Over the last six months of lockdown firms have needed to find new ways of engaging with and supporting their customers as traditional channels have been unable to function. This has resulted in new ways of working and a newfound appetite for self-service.
	Today we're going to spend a bit of time looking at customer and user experience in a post COVID-19 world, where we'll hear some great examples of how firms are adapting to deliver for their customers, be it business-to-business or business-to-consumer. This is a subject that I see as being relevant to all firms, no matter their route to market, customer base or size.
	I am delighted to welcome my two guests, Stewart Smythe, CFO of Ascent Software, and Stu Dorman, Chief Innovation Officer of Sabio. Please could I ask you to introduce yourselves and your respective firms. Stewart, if you'd like to go first please.
Stewart Smythe:	Yeah, Roland. So, Stewart Smythe, Chief Executive of Ascent. Ascent is a software and data digital consultancy, so we build and implement digital plans and technologies for our clients, and we support them through the years.
Roland Emmans:	Thank you, Stu.
Stuart Dorman:	Thanks Roland, thanks Stewart. So, Stu Dorman, I am the Chief Innovation Officer for Sabio. So, at Sabio we are a customer and experience focused technology company and we help our clients across Europe and, actually, across the world to leverage technology in the call centres and across their websites to deliver great customer experiences.
Roland Emmans:	OK, thank you for that. If it's okay, we're going to move on to just starting to think about customer experience and user experience. So, what do these terms mean to you? I'm going to go to Stewart first, but it's a two-part question, so

	what does CX and UX mean to you? And what's been your view on these big themes changing during COVID-19?
Stewart Smythe:	Yeah, I mean, I think they are interchangeable. I think for me it's all about customer experience and, certainly in our business, the customer experience that we're able to give to our clients is all enabled through technology. So, through this whole COVID experience the ability to interact with your customers physically has largely diminished, and so the prominence and the profile of how you can achieve the same or an improved level of customer experience digitally has completely kind of gone up in everyone's priority list. And I think, you know, deep, deep brand loyalties are being tested at the moment by organisations who cannot give their customers, who might have been loyal for many, many years, the same level of experience in a digital way compared to how they might have delivered it in a number of different ways previously.
Roland Emmans:	Stu, I'll fire the same question to you. What's your take on that?
Stuart Dorman:	Yeah, I mean, I definitely agree with Stewart. I think from our perspective customer experience covers the entire joined up touch points that a customer can have with your brand, so it includes everything from, you know, the way that they might use one of your face-to-face or your retail outlets, through the experience on the website, through to how that then transitions into the contact centre through to how they interface with your products and services. So that's the kind of all-encompassing things. And then the, kind of, user experience is a subset of that, almost. You know, it's the touch point that the customer has with your products or your websites and I think what we tend to find at the moment is that quite often these things are quite disjointed and, you know, many organisations have different teams looking at different aspects of the customer journey, not necessarily joining it together. And, I think there's a huge opportunity and one of the things we really focus on at Sabio is to join the dots and help to create a much more joined up journey that's much more personalised and, you know, less fragmented and is able to kind of deliver a much more cohesive experience across all of those different aspects of the user journey.
Roland Emmans:	Thank you. So, I'm going to take a slight tack in a different direction. How do you make digital friction free? How do you make it simple? How do you make it fit for purpose?
Stewart Smythe:	Yeah, I think the whole digital friction free, yeah, to me that question is just how do you make your business strategy work as an organisation. If you look at Dominos, 60 per cent of their orders in the US last year were given through their app. You know, at Ascent the most recent project that we've gone live with is to enable one of our customers to raise their investment through crowd funding platforms around the world and in the first two weeks they've raised 50 per cent of the money that they'd previously taken six months to raise. So, I think that there are many, many examples as to how digital, if it's not friction free, it just won't work as a kind of a business strategy.
Roland Emmans:	So, there's a contradiction in that, though, because one of the things that I've seen through COVID is people, consumers and businesses, are much more willing to accept things that are sub-optimal but facilitate self-service or allow you to do

	things quicker and easier. How do you square that with what you've just said about friction free?
Stewart Smythe:	I think that's a really short-term phenomenon. And that's one of the most interesting things about this whole period is that I think that the relationship between a business and its customers is all up for grabs, based on can they digitally interact with them and make it all super easy for people. So, I agree with you Roland, but I think that's really short-term.
Roland Emmans:	Fab, I love that, great opinion. So, Stu, so same question about friction free, good examples of change delivery and feel free to shoot holes in my consumers and businesses being willing to accept sub-optimal positions today.
Stuart Dorman:	In terms of making it friction free, you know, from our perspective at Sabio, it comes back to service design and looking at the entire customer journey, right from the moment where that call to action is triggered.
	The analogy that I often use, which I think works quite well is, you know, you need to start thinking about your website a bit like you would treat a shop, maybe, or a retail outlet, where if you imagine you go into a department store, or, you know, even a local shop, the shopkeeper or the retail assistant in that store will constantly be looking around and trying to figure out, okay, that person there, I think they need help, or they're rifling through trying to find a price or that person's just browsing, we don't need to help them, they're just wondering through eating their lunch, or maybe this person here is looking around trying to find the customer service department.
	Using technology to drive that interaction in personalising the journey, in the way that you would do in the physical world, I think is something that, again, you know it's a great opportunity, not many people are doing it that well, but that's how we need to start thinking of digital assets, particularly with this new cohort of people coming online that don't have that experience and need that safety net there.
Roland Emmans:	So, what I've heard you good gentlemen say around friction free is basically if it's not friction free it doesn't work. Are there any other big themes that you think people should be really thinking about at the moment?
Stuart Dorman:	Well, I think there's this ongoing drive for, you know, migration to Cloud technology, which we're right at the forefront of, I'm sure Stewart's business is as well and that's definitely accelerating as a trend. And I think what that enables is an entirely different way of working, particularly in relation to the way that IT intersects and interacts with the rest of the operations. It enables, you know, firstly a much more agile way of approaching where you have continuous deployment and continuous innovation where you're constantly, you know, driving change throughout the business. And we've seen that in the digital world for the last decade, but we're really now starting to see that work across the entire business and particularly in the contact centre.
Roland Emmans:	Okay, fab. Stewart, do you want to add anything to that before I move on?
Stewart Smythe:	I mean just a last point from me, so data so, you know, all of our projects are operating at the kind of intersection of software and data and, you know, a

massive theme that we're seeing is that the ambition for what an organisation can achieve by understanding its data better and the insights that its data can give them about its market or its competitors or its customers is huge.

Roland Emmans: Okay, I like that. Stewart I'm going to come back to you on the next question. We always try and leave with some tips for our listeners to think about that will help them with their business. So, if you were talking to somebody what sort of tips would you be giving them to think about in terms of their digital channel, their customer, their user experience.

Stewart Smythe: I think I would say, yeah, first tip I'd say is this is how you are going to interact with your customers now. So, I think stop thinking about it as one of five or six channels, it is the way in which your business will compete and drive its kind of brand recognition and its experience into its clients.

I think the second major piece of advice is there's a massive, kind of, reality that people will focus on the pragmatic side of it and almost worry about some of their processes and how they make life easier and I'd encourage people to start with the data and the insight that they want to learn about their business and their customers and their consumers then bring that back into more pragmatic kind of improvements that they can make.

And then, the third bit of advice I would give is that they have to have ambition for total consistency between, you know, how they're physically interacting, how they're interacting in Stu's business, through call centres, how they're digitally interacting with people, you know, they have to achieve a level of consistency across all of these areas that represents the combined experience that you want your business to be able to kind of push out there.

It's a really exciting time for everyone to become more competitive as a business than they were in this digital world. So, there will never be an easier time to win or lose a customer than in the next 12, 24 months.

Roland: I love that. So, Stu, you've got a slightly harder task because Stewart's already gone first, you've got to pick up some other ones now.

Stuart Dorman: Yeah, and very wise words, once again. First of all, I would say don't try and boil the ocean, start small and iterate and learn and be prepared to fail but, you know, try and deliver change in small incremental bite-sized chunks, as opposed to the historical way of doing things which was to, you know, spend a load of money and hopefully 12 months later come back with an answer to the problem and that's going to fix everything. I think the world has changed completely now and all of the successful deployments that we see are organisations that are prepared to start small and, you know, deliver things through continuous challenge.

The second thing I would say is don't be scared of AI. I think people hear about AI and it sounds quite daunting and it sounds really technical when you talk about machine learning and, you know, deep neural networks and all these complicated things, but it doesn't have to be that way.

The third thing, I think, probably comes down to design, and it goes back to the

first question that you asked, Roland, which is, you know, looking at UX in particular. And paying attention to the design both with the entire customer journey, joining those dots together to make sure that you think about what happens if I generate this call to action? How does that flow into the next step and the next step? And, making sure you're able to join those dots together, because not many organisations do that very well and obviously, again, that generates data to make better decisions from.

Roland: It now falls to me to try and summarise what we've talked about, which is quite hard. So, a few things that particularly jumped out at me from today. There is no other option, it's digital. It is the channel, it's not A – another channel, it is the channel. You need to make sure you have a joined-up customer journey. Use your data, use your insights from your data, don't be scared of AI. You can go and buy it off the Walkers, Google, and there are other people who have done all the hard work for you. Consistency is really, really important. Customers will give you a bit of leeway and a bit of slack at the moment, but there's an expectation that's going to disappear in the near future. There's never been an easier time to win or gain customers. A good digital strategy could be a real advantage in this world and join the dots together. Have one approach. I love all of that. I'm incredibly appreciative to both of you for your time today and thank you very much.

Conclusion: Thank you for listening to Business Beyond COVID-19: Embracing business unusual through the global pandemic and beyond. We hope you have found the conversation useful and informative. If you'd like to follow on with anything you've heard today, please visit business.hsbc.com or contact your Relationship Manager.