Part 5

Bringing customer service closer to the customer

Findings from the 2020 Global Buyer Values Study for Chemicals

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About this report

The Accenture 2020 Global Buyer Values Study for Chemicals assessed and compared the perspectives of chemical companies (sellers), their customers (buyers, including converters and manufacturers), retailers and end consumers. The study identified areas where seller and buyer perspectives are aligned and where they differ, and where sellers have an opportunity to do a better job of meeting buyers' needs. This is the fifth in a series of reports that explore the study's findings, along with potential actions that chemical companies can take to drive growth and competitiveness through customer centricity.

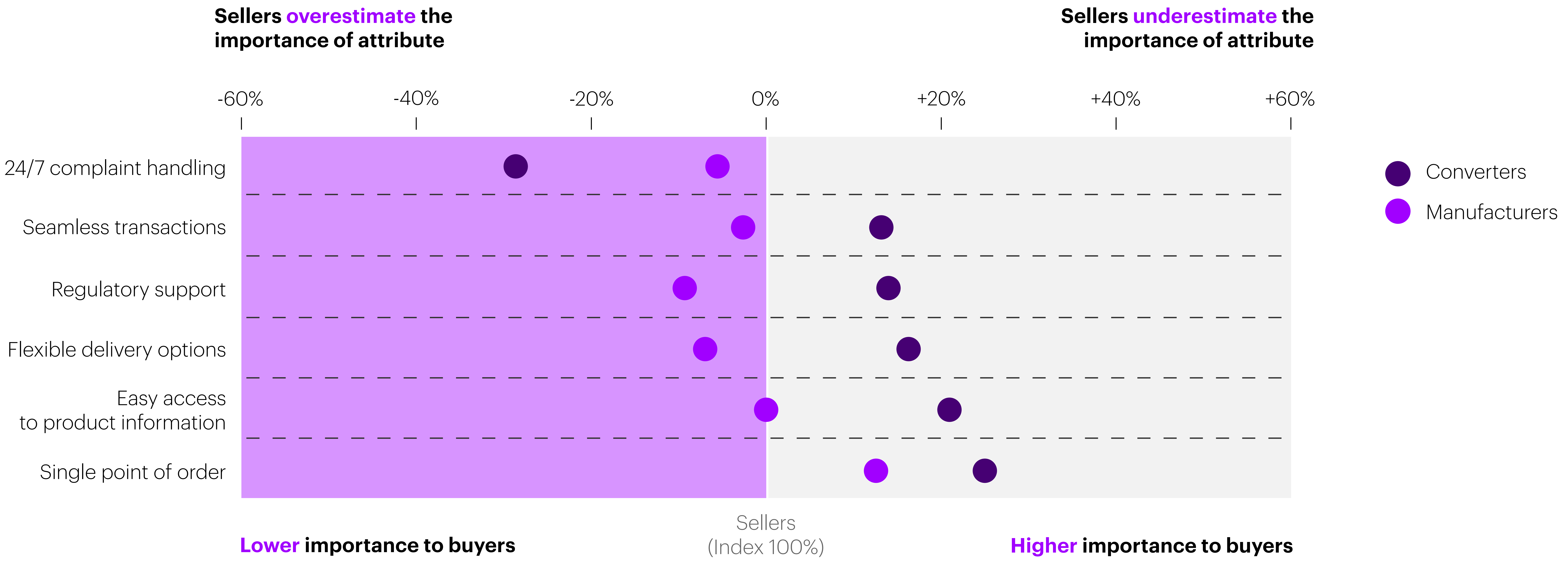
For chemical companies, customer service plays a central role in forming the “face” to the customer, and in understanding, shaping, fulfilling and even exceeding the expectations of buyers.

Often, however, its contribution is underappreciated, and it is something of an untapped resource. But Accenture’s Global Buyer Values Study for Chemicals shows that there are key areas where improvements can help chemical companies make better use of this function to drive increased customer centricity.

Customer service in the industry typically involves a wide range of customer interactions and touchpoints. It includes taking orders, helping set up commercial terms and delivery dates, managing shipping and order changes, and providing customers with information about product quality, specifications and REACH compliance. The customer service function is also the first point of contact for dissatisfied customers, making it the “troubleshooter” that handles complaints and resolves problems. Altogether, customer service involves numerous, frequent interactions that play a large role in shaping the customers’ overall experience.

Accenture’s research examined the importance that customers place on a variety of factors, compared to what chemical companies think that their customers find important (as discussed earlier in this series). The study included two types of buyers—*converters*, who transform chemical products for manufacturing segments and end-use markets, and *manufacturers*, who produce finished products for industrial sectors and consumers. The findings show several key differences between seller and buyer perspectives when it comes to factors related to customer service. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Perception gaps between sellers and buyers for customer service attributes



Source: Accenture 2020 Global Buyer Values Study

For example, the study found that sellers' perceptions are fairly well aligned with those of manufacturers. The most significant gap is that this buyer group is more interested in having a single point of ordering than sellers think. At the same time, sellers slightly overestimate manufacturers' interest in flexible delivery options and support for regulatory compliance.

Sellers are less in sync with converters. The largest gap for this buyer group—as with manufacturers—was their relatively higher interest in having a single point for ordering. But sellers also significantly underestimate the importance that converters place on having easy access to product information, flexible delivery options, regulatory support and seamless transactions. On the other hand, converters value 24/7 complaint handling far less than chemical companies think.

Considering the essential role that customer service plays in customer interactions and the customer experience, the extent of overestimated and underestimated attributes seen in the research is a clear call to action for making improvements in this functional area.

Buyers are essentially looking for efficiency, ease and flexibility when it comes to customer service

Moving from insight to action

These findings point to several steps that chemical companies can take to bring the customer service function into closer alignment with customer expectations:

Use technology to streamline interactions: Because both buyer groups (converters and manufacturers) are interested in a single point of contact for ordering, sellers should create customer portals that give them a full range of ordering capabilities, including automated transactions. These portals can also be used to give customers easy, self-service access to product information, flexible delivery options and even regulatory support. These types of approaches will be especially effective for sellers serving converters—a group that is especially interested in the "independence" that portal-based, self-service options offer.

Create faster electronic "conversations:" Often, electronic interactions simply involve buyers filling out an online request form that is then routed to customer service representatives, who may take hours to respond. Instead, companies should allow customers to access up-to-date information and receive immediate feedback about requests online. For example, buyers should see accurate product availability and delivery time options. When they place an order, they should then quickly receive an online confirmation with a set delivery date—much as they would in a live conversation with an agent—without having to wait for the order to work its way through customer service.

Enable a multichannel customer service experience: While customers—and especially converters—seem open to the increased use of electronic interactions, companies should think in terms of offering both human-agent and digital customer service channels, and allow for easy movement back and forth between them. That's because different companies—and different individual buyers within those companies—will have different preferences, and those preferences may change depending on the specific situation. Thus, sellers should integrate data and create a consistent experience across channels, making the commitment to invest in training customer service reps to work with online tools and support the multichannel strategy.

Increase automation in after-sales service: Buyers place relatively low importance on having human reps handle their issues on a 24/7 basis. Thus, sellers can complement their rep-based complaint handling with automated self-service capabilities. These capabilities are increasingly sophisticated, and there are now a range of bots, widely used in other industries, that can automatically handle customer interactions through a variety of channels. The increased number of digital interactions in customer service could also enable chemical companies to more systematically gather and understand customer complaint data—which would help identify broken processes and systems that are causing recurring customer issues.

Both human-agent and digital customer service channels are needed to satisfy buyer preferences

When it comes to customer service, buyers are essentially looking for efficiency, ease and flexibility in their interactions with sellers. As a result, chemical companies should balance the traditional "high touch" of human agents with online, self-service interactions. This will allow them to focus their investments on things that have the greatest impact on the customer experience and improve their ability to tap into their array of customer-service touchpoints to get closer to customers.

This report covers only a portion of the extensive findings in Accenture's 2020 Global Buyer Values Study for Chemicals, which can be used to provide an in-depth understanding of a range of factors affecting customer centricity—for specific companies, as well as the industry as a whole. The next report in this series looks at what the research means for the sales function of chemical companies.

References

All data points included in this report are from the Accenture 2020 Global Buyer Values Study.

About the research

The Accenture Global Buyer Values Study was conducted in March-April 2020. The methodology involved a preference analytics tool developed by TrueChoice Solutions and a standard survey. With a total of 2205 participants, respondents included: 345 materials suppliers (approximately 100 of which were chemical companies); 760 industrial buyers (converters and manufacturers across 15 sectors); 100 retailers; and 1,000 consumers. The following three regions and 12 countries were represented in the study: Americas (Brazil, Canada and the United States); Asia Pacific (China, India, Japan and South Korea); and Europe (France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom).

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to Accenture's Michelle Ganchinho for her help in executing the 2020 Global Buyer Values Study.

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