

IDC PERSPECTIVE

N Brown: Leveraging a Progressive Approach to Platform Transformation

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EXECUTIVE SNAPSHOT

FIGURE 1

Executive Snapshot: N Brown – Leveraging A Progressive Approach to Platform Transformation

This IDC Perspective analyzes how apparel, footwear, and homeware retailer N Brown embarked on a comprehensive process of modernization of its retail commerce platform to improve inventory visibility and customer experience. This report highlights the initial challenges the company faced, the steps in the transformation journey, and the goals achieved as a result of the successful platform upgrade.

Key Takeaways

- N Brown partnered with IT services and consulting firm TCS to overcome its stock visibility issues and improve operations.
- The retail commerce platform modernization project aimed at integrating new technology with the existing IT architecture to leverage customer data and increase operational efficiency.
- The project adopted an iterative replatforming approach based on a blend of cloud migration and modernization services using microservices, API, and DevOps to deliver real-time inventory data services.
- The platform upgrade enabled N Brown to improve inventory visibility, conversion rates, customer satisfaction, and customer data analytics capabilities.

Recommended Actions

- Create a solid partnership with technology providers to address your transformation requirements.
- Innovate strategic approaches and internal processes during the transformation process.
- Be clear on the key goals and objectives to achieve with the transformation project.
- Put the customer at the center of digital transformation.
- Involve business partners and key personas across your organization in the transformation process.

Source: IDC, 2020

SITUATION OVERVIEW

This IDC Retail Insights study focuses on U.K.-based retailer N Brown Group PLC (N Brown). The company has been modernizing its retail commerce platform to improve inventory visibility and customer experience. This transformation, which started in 2019, is ongoing and expanding. IDC interviewed Bruce Smith and Peter Madigan, head of engineering and lead product manager at N Brown, respectively, on the retailer's transformation program.

IDC Retail Insights' case studies series comprise fact-based, consistent, and independent views on insightful projects implemented by retailers. It focuses on new business models, IT solutions implementations, and, more broadly, retail technology initiatives that contribute to innovation and enhancements in customer experience and commerce. Collaborating with retail companies and technology providers personnel directly involved in such projects, IDC Retail Insights analysts gather all relevant information, analyze the approaches taken, and assess the solutions' success in meeting stated goals.

Company Overview

N Brown is an apparel, footwear, and homeware retailer that predominantly sells online. The company's brand portfolio includes JD Williams, Simply Be, Ambrose Wilson, and Jacamo. The retailer mainly targets specific segments of the consumer base, including plus size and seniors. The company is headquartered in Manchester, U.K.

N Brown has historically enjoyed a solid customer base, particularly within its domestic market. Over time, the company built a reputation for the quality of its products range and the customer experience it offers.

Project Background: Frictions in the Shopping Journey

In recent years, rapid changes in consumer behavior and fashion trends, as well as the increasingly competitive online fashion retail environment, put pressure on the commerce services capabilities of the company's retail commerce platform.

The retailer's legacy infrastructure was struggling to support the level of customer experience the company wanted to offer shoppers at the front end, creating issues with stock visibility across the shopping journey. For instance, some shoppers could find out only at checkout that the product they selected was out of stock. A marginal yet noticeable year-over-year revenue decline started to materialize due to issues with conversion generated by checkout abandonment, with shoppers dropping off at different points of the online shopping journey.

Poor stock visibility was affecting customer experience and loyalty, with frustrated customers posting negative reviews and feedback on social media. Moreover, the legacy retail commerce platform – unable to provide accurate, real-time customer data – was causing poor customer analytics and forecasting accuracy. "We were sitting on a gold mine of data, but we could not leverage it effectively to improve our operations," said Smith.

Project Objectives and Implementation: Upgrade Through Gradual Transformation

N Brown has been working with IT services and consulting firm TCS to overcome its stock visibility issues and improve operations. Starting from the company's legacy technology, N Brown aimed to integrate new technology with the existing IT architecture to leverage customer data and increase operational efficiency across interfaces including mobile.

For this purpose, N Brown decided to leverage TCS' support in upgrading its legacy infrastructure through a microservices-based platform that enabled modernization by changing small parts in isolation without a complete system overhaul. The platform TCS implemented enabled headless services accessible across operations by all applications used by customers, including mobile apps. This enabled real-time access and updating of inventory data to ensure that information across the enterprise is always relevant and accurate.

The project adopted an iterative replatforming approach based on a blend of cloud migration and modernization services, using microservices, API, and DevOps to deliver real-time data service for inventory. The approach focused on singular issues and consisted of building services in the cloud and making data available at the API endpoint. This enabled straightforward implementation of new applications and automated execution of changes.

Through a data orchestration platform, information is continuously loaded from the legacy platform to the new cloud-based microservices infrastructure. The system enabled real-time data and analytics to be used by applications, including product detail pages (PDPs), external AI-based search engines, ecommerce services and platforms, merchandising applications, and analytics hubs.

N Brown adopted a gradual implementation for the platform. It first launched a mobile app to enable customers to see inventory levels in real time and improve the checkout experience. Following this initial launch in November 2019, the company expanded its capabilities across the organization to include numerous releases that provide incremental value to the services implemented.

The iterative replatforming approach enabled N Brown to implement the platform relatively quickly and without changing its legacy IT estate through a non-invasive methodology. It also helped significantly contain implementation costs. This enabled N Brown to move from up to 24 hours stock status refresh time to real-time inventory visibility and generate a single source of stock information. The system enabled shoppers to see what items are available at any time and produced additional insights on customer behavior and metrics, including product sales performance.

Business Value: Enhanced Customer Satisfaction from Greater Visibility

As a result of the platform upgrade, N Brown achieved greater inventory visibility, conversion rate improvement, and increased customer satisfaction with improved Net Promoter Score (NPS). Moreover, the upgrade strengthened the retailer's customer data analytics capabilities – including demand forecast accuracy, which enhanced N Brown's ability to meet customers' requirements and generated customer experience improvements.

Lessons Learned: Gradual Approach, Clear Goals, and Strong Collaboration

The success of this project showed how a strategy of gradual upgrade of the legacy IT infrastructure – as adopted by N Brown – can be a winning approach to digital transformation, as it enables a progressive and agile process that can lead to faster business return on investment (ROI).

Being clear with the objectives and goals of the transformation journey is a key success factor for the implementation of similar programs, according to N Brown's feedback, as this approach provides a clear focus on the scope of the project and facilitates its assessment. The retailer also reinforced how important it is to involve from the beginning of the project all parties that utilize data

across operations, including business partners and internal IT teams, to ensure they can leverage improvements in data availability resulting from the implementation of the project.

Next Step: Continuous Improvements Across Operations

Going forward, N Brown plans to further upgrade its legacy retail commerce platform through microservices implementation and gradually include additional capabilities to improve customer experience, such as providing more product information to customers at the front end to increase engagement.

"We will continue to review product performance and look for continuous improvements. We are already planning further integration of the service to other product pages on our websites to improve the customer experience and conversion," said Madigan.

ADVICE FOR THE TECHNOLOGY BUYER

Greater visibility across retail operations and analytics capabilities are increasingly important for retailers to succeed in implementing a Commerce Everywhere business model to deliver real-time, contextual customer experience at any time and across multiple interfaces.

To ensure the success of similar transformation projects, retailers should consider the following:

- Create a solid partnership with the technology provider that demonstrates the relevant capabilities and experience to address your company's transformation requirements.
- Take advantage of digital transformation and of the implementation of new technology to innovate strategic approaches and internal processes.
- Be clear on the key goals and objectives you aim to achieve with the transformation project. Align the development of technology-enabled capabilities to a clear business strategy.
- Put the customer at the center of digital transformation and focus on the customer experience you aim to deliver.
- Involve business partners and key personas across your organization in the transformation process and encourage their active participation in the project.

LEARN MORE

Related Research

- *The Status of Retail Customer Experience in the Next Normal: Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Customer Experience at Scale* (IDC #US46598721, October 2020)
- *Commerce Everywhere Business Models and the Path Toward Retail Innovation Excellence* (IDC #EUR146908220, October 2020)
- *How European Retail Can Win the Next Normal: Foundation Capabilities and Enabling Technologies* (IDC #EUR146949720, October 2020)

Synopsis

This IDC Perspective analyzes how apparel, footwear, and homeware retailer N Brown Group PLC upgraded its legacy retail commerce platform by leveraging a strategic partnership with IT services and consulting firm TCS. The program, which gradually transformed the retailer's IT infrastructure through cloud, microservices, API, and DevOps integration, enabled N Brown to strengthen the shopping experience for its customers.

"The need to provide a better customer experience while streamlining operations is quintessential to retailers operating in today's challenging environment," said Filippo Battaini, head of IDC Retail Insights Europe. "This case study shows how N Brown's gradual legacy IT infrastructure upgrade can be a winning approach to digital transformation in retail."

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