Putting data in the driver's seat

Reinventing automotive sales: A new era for smart

Rethinking e-commerce in a new era

As car brand smart prepared for a relaunch, the company faced a major opportunity: the chance to entirely reinvent the approach to auto sales.

The company, best known for its revolutionary two-seater, was ready to reposition itself as a source of fully digitized and electric vehicles. It needed a data-driven e-commerce experience to bring its new, fully electric SUV smart #1 and other products to market. But its ambitions went beyond the usual online sales platform tied to a traditional dealership model. E-commerce has become a standard fixture in consumers' lives, so smart wanted to create something innovative, flexible and hyper-personalized that could respond to changing habits. Instead of forcing users through a traditional linear journey, smart wanted a solution that could keep up with the more circuitous reality of how people actually make their purchases. The company saw value in a direct sales model built around online purchase options with access to agents across European Mercedes-Benz dealerships, which would allow customers to switch seamlessly between online and offline experiences.

Call for change

Beyond the customer journey, smart also sought to put data front and center. Most car companies have a wealth of data—from marketing, sales, even the cars themselves—but lack ways to access, analyze and activate it efficiently. Now smart wanted to develop an ecosystem that could tap into those insights to drive innovation, deliver new products and ultimately help it become a data-driven company.

What it needed was a marketing platform with commerce at its core that offered a true end-to-end digital customer experience as well as the data capabilities to fuel future growth and innovation. Instead of adapting outmoded legacy platforms, it would start from scratch to create something entirely modern—both a dream opportunity and a massive challenge. Plus, getting to market within two years was critical, so time was of the essence. With an open-minded approach to both technology and product strategy, and Accenture as its partner, they started down the road to a new business model.

Designed for a data-driven future

Existing car sites typically display the models and help people review their options. But smart's platform goes further, putting commerce at its core.

Users can customize their preferred car across the site's content pages, to provide a consistent user journey. Then they can see similar vehicles ready in stock, or can search stock directly to choose from cars currently available.

The product complexity is low, so there is no feeling of missing out on an equipment option or not understanding differences in the equipment lines. Customers can check tech specs, compare variants, plus save and share their favorites. When they are ready to do more than browse, they can book a test drive, explore finance options or buy directly online. No paper contracts are needed – even for leasing options. Help is available via smart's Customer Engagement Center (CEC), with easy contact through phone, e-mail, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or even iMessage or WhatsApp. The experience is immersive, with users in control of what, where and how they interact with the brand.

When tech meets human ingenuity

These features reflect how people really think and what they expect from their purchasing experience. Instead of a predictable, linear route, car buyers will go back and forth as they sort their options, get input from friends and family, do online research and weigh their budgets. The goal of smart's new digital eco-platform is to serve this buying style. No matter where users are in their journey, they can trigger a purchase at any point and complete it entirely online via a digital sales or lease contract and payment of fixed, predictable prices.

What users see is a smooth, seamless experience. What they don't see is the technology that makes it possible. Weighing buy-versus-build decisions, smart and Accenture worked together to create both the back-end—leveraging solutions from reliable platforms such as Adobe, SAP and Salesforce—and a custom, serverless, cloud-native front end. Accenture's knowledge and experience in creating and implementing multi-platform solutions ensured the success of this approach. This set-up also allows for greater flexibility and customization. A decoupling layer future-proofs the ecosystem, making it easy to add or remove features over time, while a design system helps create consistency and allow for quick development of new assets. The beauty of this approach is that agents in the dealership, the call center and fleet team, as well as the customers on the website, all use the same central platform capabilities and same processes. The only difference is that the interface user experience is adapted to the respective audiences and their needs.

The team also wanted to prevent disconnected data from being siloed or slipping through the cracks. By taking a greenfield approach, they were able to implement the technology to capture all of their data from marketing, sales and elsewhere in one place. With a robust architecture that puts data at the core, the system will help smart understand its customers and anticipate their needs.
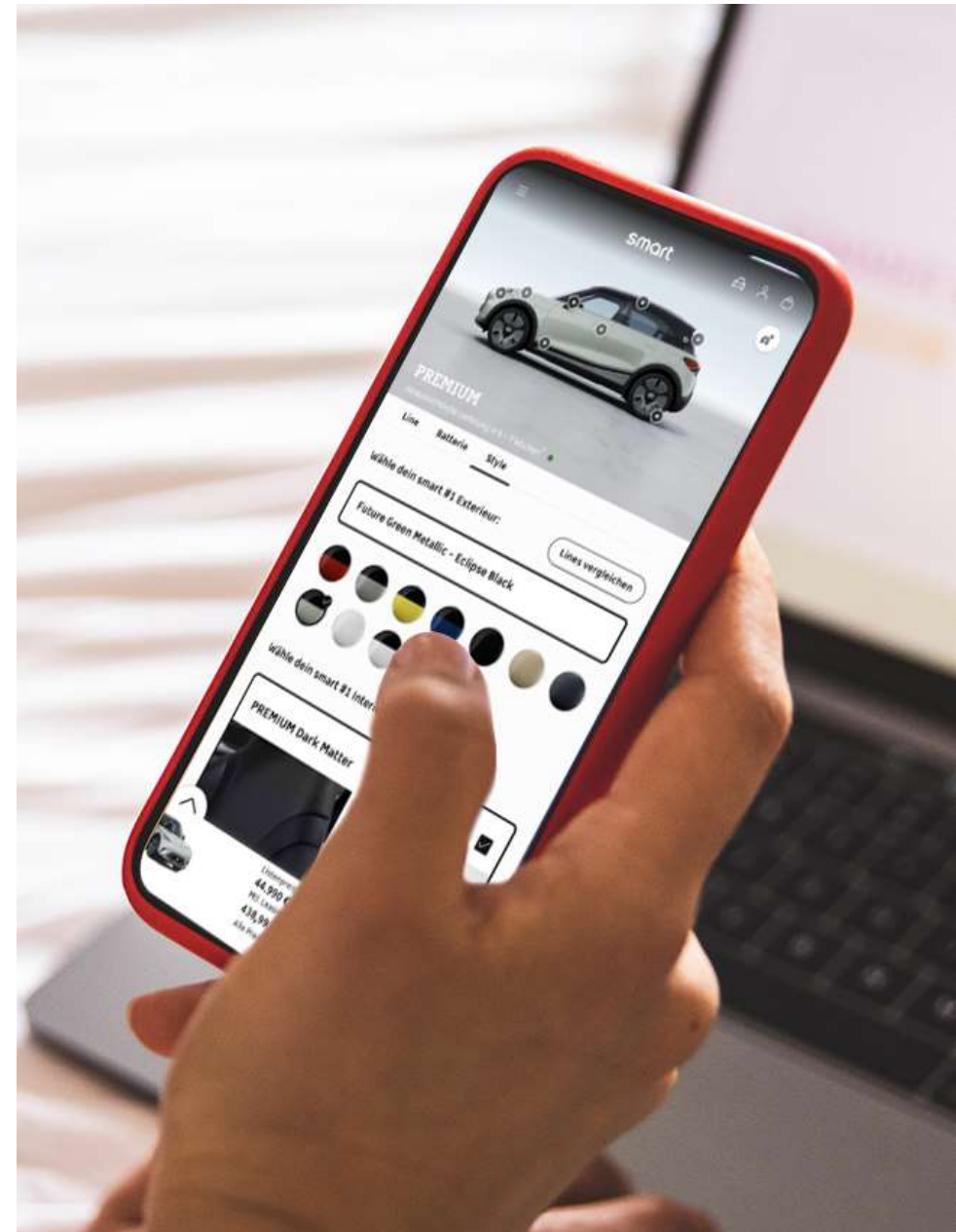
A business model built in tech

Now, smart has a central platform for lean operations internally and a smooth customer journey externally. More than just a platform, however, the company also has a new direct sales business model and the groundwork for a future built around data.

Accenture and smart took the platform from idea to launch in 2.5 years—a fraction of the time an engagement of this magnitude would typically require—and within 24 hours of launch in Germany, an entire line of cars sold out. With infrastructure built to accommodate future needs, the platform and entire ecosystem will continue to evolve and constantly improve.

The platform will be integral to getting smart's cars to consumers. But going forward, it won't be about vehicle sales alone. The data-centric approach behind the platform will fuel future growth. Insights can be used to expand offerings (for example, offering extended insurance coverage for travel) and services, as well as to help make key decisions about marketing, sales, supply chain and distribution, lead management and production.

Moving forward, the team plans to roll the platform out to 10 additional markets across Europe and will continue to optimize the platform and the products. Building both platform and business model from the ground up is no small feat—but with a hyper-personalized approach, and a new vision for direct sales, smart is making a big leap into the future.