# Why customer experience has become the **primary battleground for brands**

How we have moved from an Age of Information to an Age of Experience in which the traditional four Ps of marketing have given way to drivers of brand differentiation.

## Introduction

**Customer experience is now firmly established as a strategic priority in most businesses. CX is no longer an adjunct of operations, a 'poor cousin' to marketing. It has become the battleground on which a majority of players have realised they need to compete in the coming decades. We have moved from an Age of Consumerism (which spanned the 60s, 70s and 80s) through the Information Age (when many of today's most valuable global brands matured) to the dawning of an Age of Experience (when customer experience will become the key differentiator for brands).**

**Jerome McCarthy's marketing mix of Product, Promotion, Price, and Place has been undermined by technological advances to the point where it has had to be expanded to 7 Ps. Today's consumer is looking for a deeper, more emotional bond based on the unique and differentiated experience that the brand can provide.**

**In this paper I'll consider the decline of the traditional drivers of brand reputation and differentiation, explore four strategic pillars that help differentiate brands and identify seven steps that will help you deliver a truly branded experience.**

## Acknowledgements

Thomas Cowper Johnson began his career in the research team of the London office of ad agency Doyle Dane Bernbach. After 14 years on the agency side of the fence he joined Norwich Union (now Aviva) where he established and ran their brand marketing team. He has since advised UK companies on their brand and customer strategies and is an Insight Director at Davies.

Davies is the leading solution for post-transaction IVR, SMS, Web and Email surveys in the UK, capturing immediate and actionable 'Voice of the Customer' feedback. Davies is used by many of Britain's leading businesses to: gather objective feedback metrics that are used to manage and reward call agent performance; track and benchmark KPIs such as Customer Effort, NPS and Customer Satisfaction at key points on the customer journey in order to improve the customer experience; re-engage in real time with disenchanted customers to improve brand advocacy and reduce complaints; fulfil regulatory and compliance obligations.

## From the information age to the age of experience?

“Never make predictions; especially about the future”. Casey Stengel, one-time manager of the New York Yankees baseball team offered many a wise word including this judgement on predicting the future. But we are all creatures of habit, particularly in the world of business; and one of the most consistent themes of recent ‘crystal-ball’ reports is the acknowledgement that customer experience is now firmly established as a strategic priority in most businesses.

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### The Age of Consumerism

The age of consumerism was shaped by a generation (and their children) who had lived through the shortages of the war years. The succeeding decades of stability and economic growth meant that the ‘baby boomers’ were able to buy their first house, car, fridge, TV set. The UK consumer became intent on acquiring ‘stuff’. In 1948 only two percent of households in Britain owned a fridge; forty years later ownership was almost universal. By 1990 one in 5 UK households owned 2 or more cars; and by the year 2000 UK households owned an average of 2.14 TV sets.

Attention switched from buying items never before owned to replacing old models for newer versions. For brands the focus throughout this period was on manufacturing products that were better or cheaper (or both).

### The Information Age

By the 1990s the age of consumerism was being overtaken by a new phenomenon - the Information Age. The World Wide Web (and devices used to access it) are now such a part of our daily lives that it’s easy to forget how new they are. Tim Berners-Lee wrote the first web browser computer programme in 1990 while employed at CERN in Switzerland. In the 1990s the number of websites grew from 1 (August 1991) to just over 3 million by 1999. By 2015 the world had 863m active websites and the way businesses operated had changed irrevocably.

Products and prices could be compared at the swipe of a finger; shops rendered unnecessary and mainstream media displaced by social media and ‘post-truth’ journalism. More importantly the Information Age gave birth to truly global brands. In 2016 Forbes was able to rank 4 global technology/ information brands in the top 5 of its list of the world’s most valuable brands. Two of these brands, Google and Facebook, were less than 20 years old. (Apple, Microsoft and Coca Cola were the other three).

### The Age of Experience

In two generations we have moved from the austerity of the post-war years to a society where many of us own all we need and have instant access to the ‘world’s information’. What we now seek is authenticity – in terms of experiences (holidays to far-flung places) and relationships. Nielsen’s annual study on Global Trust in advertising showed that, in Europe, we are significantly more likely to trust what our friends say about the brands we buy than what those brands themselves say. For brands who want a strong relationship with their customers building on a strong product, price or positioning option is no longer an option. Successful brand relationships will be forged in the experiences the brand has to offer and the quality of service they provide for their customers.

## Why customer experience has replaced the four Ps as the essential ingredient of brand management?

In the past 30 years we have seen a seismic shift in the way brands build lasting relationships with their customers. Jerome McCarthy's marketing mix of Product, Promotion, Price, and Place has been undermined by technological advances to the point where it has had to be expanded to 7 Ps. Today's consumer is looking for a deeper, more emotional bond based on the unique and differentiated experience that the brand can provide. So why is it that the four Ps have become less relevant?

### Product differentiation – an exercise in futility?

The exponential increase in the power of new technologies and the globalised marketplace that marked the Information Age has led to a scale and pace of product development unimaginable even 20 years ago. (I recommend Thomas Friedman's new book – "Thank you for being late" for a perspective on this phenomenon). This accelerated development process has simply overwhelmed some long-established, product-based brands. Kodak dominated the market for photography and even invented the digital camera; but this could not stop a company that once employed 170,000 people being overtaken by more nimble competitors with less history to confuse their strategies. Remember Polaroid? Blackberry? Nokia? All fell prey to a business environment they could not keep pace with.

Product survival is one thing but product superiority has become increasingly elusive as globalised manufacturing processes, speed of bringing products to market and the internet marketplace have commoditised much of what we buy. Genuinely differentiated products (those with a Unique Selling Proposition) can expect no longer than 6 months exclusive access to markets before 'copy- cats' emerge to challenge. There may be a handful of mainstream brands that can claim to be different – Google's algorithms, Apple's design or Dyson's bag-less vacuum cleaner. But these are rarities and brands have had to find other means of setting themselves apart from their competitors.

Even more remarkably we have seen the emergence in the past few years of brands that neither create nor own the products they sell. Online intermediaries pair product owner and purchaser and, in the process have established significant brand presence. Uber, Airbnb, Insurance aggregators have overturned the concept of product-based brand differentiation in favour of an entirely new model.

### Positioning – 'We won't make a drama out of a crisis'

Broadcast advertising and sponsorship was the mainstay of branding throughout the latter part of the 20th century. Brands sought to create a relationship with their customers by establishing an identifiable position generated through advertising or sponsorship, through socially responsible behaviour or by cultivating a reputation for continuous and dynamic development. Some have succeeded:

- Nike have consistently sponsored the very best athletes in their discipline – Carl Lewis, Michael Jordan, Roger Federer, Brazil's football team, India's cricket team – and in 2016 were ranked the world's most valuable sports brand by Forbes magazine.

- From its inception Ikea has been focused on delivering 'a better everyday' for everyone involved in their business. Their strong sustainability strategy and mission to have a positive impact on people and the planet led to them being recognised as one of the top three brands for 'Corporate Social Responsibility' in the UK in 2016.
- Amazon has continuously evolved its offer to create an impression of a strong, dynamic brand. From books and CDs it has expanded to include e-readers (Kindle), tablets (Fire), web services (AWS), TV streaming (Prime) and now a home assistant (Amazon Echo).

The secret of success for these brands is long-term, consistent investment in a message that is authentic (i.e. rooted in a brand truth and matched by the brand experience). But this level of alignment is rare and out of reach of the multitude of brands. Too often brand-building that tries to shape a perception in the mind of customers leaves itself vulnerable to the vagaries of the market, human nature or just plain bad luck:

- 'We won't make a drama out of a crisis' is a slogan that has far outlived the brand that created it. Crafted in 1978 (for insurance company Commercial Union) it survives while the brand has disappeared, merged with General Accident and then Norwich Union to become Aviva.
- The IPA suggested in 2013 that the average client-agency relationship tenure had dropped in length from seven years and two months in 1984 to just two years and six months. Marketing directors come and go and advertising campaigns are seldom given the time they need to establish themselves.
- In 2016 two global brands with reputations built on technical ability suffered major set-backs. Samsung (with the Note 7) and VW (emissions software) both felt the wrath of the consumer who feels deceived. For VW the scandal resulted in a fall of 13.2 points in its CSR score and a position outside the top 100 companies for CSR.
- Sometimes brand disasters can be self-inflicted. Gerald Ratner famously described the products sold in his eponymous stores as 'total crap', managing to wipe £500 million from the value of his company and single-handedly destroy the brand he'd built up. Senior executives can 'Do a Ratner' in many ways: personal behaviours failing to match those expected by the brand they represent; rubbishing your own customers (Abercrombie and Fitch CEO suggested "A lot of people don't belong in our clothes."); putting your own problems ahead of those whose lives you've ruined (BP's CEO Tony Hayward after the Deepwater Horizon disaster suggesting "I would like my life back".)

What these examples demonstrate is how fragile a brand position or perception can be. Not least because of the spread and impact of Social Media. Gone are the days when brands could control what was said about them through broadcast advertising messages and press releases. Lobby groups and disgruntled customers have been given new force through Facebook and Twitter. Nielsen's annual "Global Trust in Advertising" survey shows how 'recommendations from people I know' and 'consumer opinions posted online' are now trusted more than branded websites, TV ads and even 'editorial content such as newspaper articles'. A sign of the times.

### Can you build a brand on a platform of price?

As a trainee adman I was taught that price was uncertain ground on which to build a brand position. Low price promises are dependent on cost of goods, market demand and subject to frequent out- flanking by competitors. Brands that offer low price risk painting themselves into a corner from where they can only escape by improving the quality of their product. Tesco founder, Jack Cohen

(nicknamed 'Slasher Jack') built a retail legend on the simple strategy of 'pile it high, sell it cheap'. While low prices may have helped in the early years, Tesco's domination of the UK retail trade was achieved by diversifying its offer, expanding its retail presence and implementing one of the most successful customer loyalty schemes the UK has ever seen. In recent years Tesco has been outmanoeuvred on low price by new discount retailers and has had to reinvent its offer. Meanwhile, the likes of Aldi and Lidl have been using Price as a tactical tool to gain entry to the lucrative UK market. Longer term their brand strategy is almost certainly to move the brands away from the perception of low price (as suggested by Lidl's new ad campaign "Big on quality, Lidl on price"). Almost one in three Aldi & Lidl shoppers are now "upper middle" or "middle class", lured by award-winning wines and high quality products including lobster, sirloin steak and smoked salmon. The move to mainstream has already begun.

High price has also been a platform on which brands have sought to differentiate themselves. Luxury brands (Rolex, Louis Vuitton, Harrods, Bentley) can charge a premium because they have created a product perception of quality and exclusivity which justifies the higher price. But building a brand proposition based solely on premium price is not easy.

Beer is one of the most brand-driven categories of FMCG. A recent blind tasting of lagers highlighted how consumers struggle to tell them apart on taste alone. "Results suggest that brand loyalty in this market is likely to be driven largely by marketing and packaging, and not by the underlying sensory properties of the competing products" is how the researchers put it. In 1982 Frank Lowe's agency introduced one of the best known and longest- running ad campaigns for a lager - the 'reassuringly expensive' campaign for Stella Artois. The campaign set out to make price the guarantee of quality rather than the result of quality. ('It's expensive therefore it must be good; as opposed to its good so it's expensive'). The campaign ran for

25 years and spawned many famous ads. But price alone could not sustain the brand as it too was outflanked by more expensive lagers with more exotic provenance (Belgium, Canada, Japan, and Thailand). The truth is that value (the combination of product features, benefits and worth) rather than price is the key determinant of how a brand is perceived.

### Place – a marketing tool rather than a brand strategy

Jerome McCarthy's fourth P, Place, described the importance of effective distribution in the marketing mix. But, like Price, Place has only a supporting role in building a strong brand. For many brands the objective is to make their products as accessible as possible. Once this meant chasing shelf-space now it includes cyberspace. (By 2016 online's share of the retail market in the UK was forecast to reach 16.8% meaning one pound in every six spent is spent online). Other brands chose a selective or exclusive approach to Place limiting the opportunities to buy a brand and thus adding to its sense of rarity. (Think Christmas runs on Hatchimals, Tamagotchis, Tracy Islands, Furbies and Sylvanian families as well as luxury brands available only in retailers that match their brand aspirations.)

Distribution strategies have also presaged the rise of peer group reviews and social group endorsement as marketing tools. In 1948 Tupperware introduced its 'Party Plan' approach to distributing its products. Housewives were recruited to display, demonstrate and sell products to their social circle from the comfort of their own home. (Avon, Amway, Neal's Yard, Herbalife have all used a similar approach). Over the years the format has evolved in order to drive growth. Key to Tupperware's recent success is the transformation of their events from polite gathering to 'immersive experience'. Tupperware parties are now just as likely to include a Mexican themed event and be held in 'an experience studio'. The emphasis is no longer on simply putting the product in front of the customer but immersing the prospect in a deeper brand experience. Tupperware has also recognised that a recommendation from a friend is always likely to be more persuasive than one from a company.

For Tupperware and increasingly for all brand managers it is the experience that counts. Product, promotion, price and place all have a part to play, but the influence they have in shaping a brand is more than matched by the people and processes that make up the physical experience customers enjoy. Dyson may have invented and patented the bag-less vacuum cleaner but you can now buy a similar product from over a dozen different manufacturers. So Dyson has turned its focus to providing first class customer experience and product support to retain their market edge (even opening a Dyson shop in Oxford Street). Similarly Apple have created an in-store customer experience that is second-to-none in order to maintain the sense of product superiority. Brands encouraging loyalty by developing the customer experience.

## The four strategic pillars that help differentiate brands in the age of experience?

In the last four decades we have witnessed the greatest change in brand management we have ever seen. Forty years ago there was just one commercial TV channel in the UK, the internet wasn't even a gleam in the eye of Tim Berners-Lee, there were twice as many bank branches, three times as many bookshops and 'social media' meant a pin-board in the pub. Seismic change (fomented by the explosion of new technologies during Information Age) mean that brands must now focus on creating a differentiated and authentic customer experience. People and Processes have overtaken Product, Place and Positioning in the brand manager's arsenal.

While the mechanics of brand management may have moved on the principles remain the same; and it is these same fundamentals that will guide your People and Processes in delivering a unique customer experience. Brands will succeed because they have: a core ideology; strong leadership; engaged employees; and a customer-centric culture.

### Core ideology?

A clear purpose and set of values will guide your people and inform your processes. When a brand has a clear sense of what it stands for and what its values are so do all its employees. There exists a common understanding across the organisation of the behaviours that are expected and of the experience that customers should have when they encounter the brand. The purpose and values will shape the kind of products that are developed, the way the company markets itself, the type of people it recruits and, crucially, the service it delivers. All the company's strategies will be consistently aligned with the purpose and values. In its 2016 report on Human Capital Deloitte's estimates that 84% of the HR and business leaders it interviewed believe that "culture is a potential competitive advantage".

But corporate cultures are not easy to come by. In his 2016 letter to Amazon shareholders Jeff Bezos writes: "A word about corporate cultures: for better or worse they are enduring, stable, hard to change. You can write down your corporate culture when you do so, you're discovering it, uncovering it - not creating it. It is created slowly over time by the people and by events - by the stories of past success and failure that become a deep part of company lore." Bezos is clear that corporate culture is not some shiny wrapper to be applied by an expensive consultancy. His words explain why programmes to overhaul company culture are so seldom successful. Too often culture programmes focus on how executives like to see themselves (innovative, dynamic) rather than the reality of the company (staid, inward-looking) or the characteristics that customers want (reliable, trustworthy). Anyone can dream up a snappy little acronym of five or so buzz words but it's only by acting true to their brand story in everything they do that the likes of First Direct, John Lewis and Amazon successfully deliver a differentiated customer experience.

### Strong Leadership

You can have the best blueprint for business in the world but, without effective leadership, it will only ever be a blueprint. The best leaders mix a number of skills and attributes but will demonstrate their ability to be:

- **Visionaries** – inspiring the people they work with
- **Interpreters** – identifying the role that every employee has to play in delivering the core ideology
- **Coaches** – encouraging performance in good times and bad
- **Communicators** – with the gift of talking everybody's language.

In companies that deliver great customer experience, leaders can be found at every level of the organisation. Brands like Amazon and John Lewis - who regularly top the Institute of Customer Service's (ICS) CSAT index top 50 - practice leadership 'upwards and downwards'. They have brand guardians throughout the company who are prepared to challenge their managers if they identify a process or experience that is not true to the brand's core ideology. They have employees who are invested in the brand and daily engaged in delivering the best possible experience.

## Engaged employees

At the start of 2017 the ICS identified 8 trends in customer service; in at number three was Employee Engagement. The report suggested that “Employee engagement has become both more important to business performance and more challenging to achieve..... the business benefits of employee engagement - discretionary effort, empathy and connection with customers, innovation and new ideas, consistency of performance - are crucial to sustainable success and will become even more so as the next 12 months unfold.”

Happy employees are more likely to deliver a good customer experience and create happy customers; happy customers are more likely to be loyal customers; loyal customers are more valuable to your business (they cost less to acquire and tend to buy more). Happy employees are also more likely to stay in their jobs for longer, getting better at what they do and making customers even happier. Deloitte, too, identifies lack of engagement as an issue with only 37 percent of UK organisations believing they understand their culture well and only ‘21percent’ believing they are very ready to change it. Much remains to be done.

## Customer-centric people and processes

A differentiated customer experience starts and ends with the customer. Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, understood this: “There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else.”

Customer centricity is about putting the customer at the heart of your business with the result that: products begin life as a proposition shaped by customer input; positioning is built around a customer perspective; product placement is guided by customer convenience; people and processes are focused on the way your customer behaves and the journeys your customers take when they interact with your brand.

In his 2016 letter to Amazon shareholders Jeff Bezos identified the elements that made up the brand’s ‘distinctive organisational culture’. Top of the list was ‘customer obsession rather than competitor obsession’. It’s a tip that many brands, who struggle to create a unique customer experience, would do well to observe.

## Seven steps to help deliver a branded customer experience?

Each year Interbrand, Forbes and Brand Finance publish a list of the strongest brands in the world. Although never in quite the same order the same brands pop up in the top ten of all three lists - Apple, Google, Coca Cola, Amazon, and Disney. They are brands that have lived by the four principles of brand management that I outlined last week - remaining true to a core ideology; enjoying strong leadership; benefiting from engaged employees; and pursuing a customer- centric culture. But how do successful brands bring such principles to life. Here are seven steps (top down and bottom up) that many of them take:

- Strategies aligned with core ideology - The best brands ensure all their strategies are fully aligned with their core ideology. They recognise that vision, mission and values are not worth the paper they are printed on unless they are enacted throughout the organisation. Steve Jobs made design the primary ideology for Apple strategy and this simple, strategic mantra has shaped Apple success for the past three decades.
- Leadership by example - All strong brands have, at some point in their history, been led by a strong, visionary personality who evidenced the company's core purpose in the actions they took. Walt Disney, for example, understood how litter could destroy the ambience of an attraction and decided that cleanliness become a permanent characteristic of the Disney experience. Disney himself would pick up litter and, by demonstrating that this menial task was not beneath the man in charge, he set an example that is followed to this day. Show me a company where there is a sign by the front door reserving a parking space for the CEO and I'll show you a company that is not committed to a great customer experience.
- Hire for attitude. Train for skills – make sure that you hire employees who have the right mind-set - people who match the values and behaviours that your brand wants to exhibit. Southwest Airlines consciously seek out people who want to: "have fun; don't take themselves too seriously; enjoy their work; and are passionate team-players". Having found them, they then teach them how to do the job. First Direct, who regularly top the charts for great customer service, ask potential recruits to take a personality quiz to ensure that they are right for First Direct (and First Direct is right for them).
- Make sure your staff understand (and buy into) your brand promise – All your employees should know and be reminded regularly of why they come to work. Especially in a service industry your people are the front line of your brand management programme. It's their interactions with customers that will determine the way your brand is perceived - regardless of how brilliant your product or advertising is. Some years ago the Insurance company Commercial Union ran an award-winning advertising campaign that has since passed into the language (even though the company no longer exists).

  The slogan, "We won't make a drama out of a crisis", summarised the core proposition of their offer - to pay up when a claim was made. But the people who mattered most, the company's claims teams, hadn't bought in to the concept. They were still operating under the rules of an old culture that sought to protect the company's interests. The result was a disenfranchised workforce who felt they had been hung out to dry.
- Freedom within a framework - While it's important that your people enact your brand promise it's equally important to allow them to express their character. In the thousands of pieces of feedback that Davies gathers on behalf of its clients one of the consistently loudest customer complaints is about service agents reading from a script. By and large customers do not like to interact with automatons. Ethical cosmetics brand Lush (a regular top performer in customer experience) understands this need for 'freedom within a framework'. The brand regularly campaigns on ethical issues but every Lush shop has the right to opt out of a window campaign if the local staff have strong personal reasons.

- Put the customer at the heart of the experience - Customer experience is the perception that your customers have of their relationship with your company. It is NOT what you have decided they need. Customer centricity means operating as a business without silos. Customer centricity means engaging in regular dialogue with your customer - listening rather than telling is a good default mode. Customer centricity means putting your customers' interests first. For me this is non-negotiable. The rise of social media has empowered customers and switched the balance of power away from brands. Companies that ignore this shift will not long survive.
- Personalise your service delivery - Customer centricity also means treating every customer as an individual with their own set of circumstances, wants and needs. As customers we respond well to being addressed by name, to being recognised as a regular customer, to dealing with people who have time to chat (sometimes). Allow your customer- facing staff the freedom to recognise and respond to a customer's mood. Give them a framework within which they can build confidence by taking initiative. Treat them like intelligent people and they will respond with intelligent behaviour.

  My favourite example of this is a Twitter conversation between O2 and one of its customers. The customer had written to complain that his broadband service wasn't working using street slang. O2 had the wit to respond in kind "Have you tried to reset the router ting fam, so mans can use the Wi-Fi and dat?" Choosing to speak the language of the customer resulted in a happy customer who spread positive feedback to his circle of friends.

## In closing

The 2017 edition of Edelman's Barometer of Trust suggests the UK's level of trust in business is at a record low; the credibility of CEOs has plummeted by 12 points in the last year; and people are three times more likely to believe leaked documents than company press statements. Edelman found that, for Britons, trust is being undermined by public fears about immigration and the erosion of societal values; but also by the pace of technological change; and this poses a serious dilemma for brands seeking to improve customer experience. In the field of customer experience the talk is of chat-bots, artificial intelligence, machine-learning, big data, cashless society, apps and omnichannel.

At the same time strategies for building a strong brand are undergoing a sea-change. Traditional brand approaches such as advertising, sponsorship, distribution and product differentiation are no longer as effective as they once were. Instead we are entering an 'Age of Experience' where brands will become stronger by demonstrating authenticity of experience and establishing a personal relationship based on mutual trust.

## Using voice of the customer to provide a robust framework for reward and remuneration

Customer feedback offers significant advantages for measuring individual agent performance but should not necessarily be the only type of metric to be applied. For a fully rounded picture customer feedback should be used alongside other contact centre metrics to create a 'helicopter view' of performance.

The ideal is to create a basket of KPIs that drive improved performance but do not suffer from the law of unintended consequences. Human nature being what it is agents will perform in a way that drives up the score of whatever measure they are being evaluated against. Measured on sales, they will sell more. Measured on Average Handling Time they will seek to trim the amount of time they spend listening to and understanding customers' issues. Measured on First Call resolution they may spend too much time trying to resolve a query. There will always be occasions when these metrics work against the best interests of the customer.

Similarly, observed behaviour (such as is used in quality monitoring) may lead to a false impression of agent performance. If they know they are being monitored agents will make greater than usual efforts to present a good telephone manner, to follow the agreed script or procedures or to demonstrate professionalism.

Whatever metrics you use to manage agent performance be sure that they are within the gift of the agent to influence. Efficiency measures such as system availability and cost per call are clearly not within the scope of agents to influence. Channel measures such as first call resolution or transfer rate may offer a recognition of agent knowledge. Feedback measures focused on the agent performance will certainly be a reflection of agent performance.

The aim will be to build a scorecard that works for your business and the same rules cannot be applied across all sectors. However you make up that scorecard please remember the golden rules that go into a successful agent

Remuneration programme:

- **Make sure your samples are robust** – each agent needs to have sufficient pieces of feedback across a given period to ensure a single voice does not unduly influence the result. This may mean rolling up surveys and results over a longer time period.
- **Make sure your sampling points are fair** – different touchpoints produce different results. Ensure each agent has an even or weighted representation by customer journey touchpoint.
- **Make sure your survey works** – keep it short and clear. Avoid questions that ask about two behaviours and focus on those behaviours that matter to you and your business.
- **Make sure you bring your agent teams with you** – don't impose a solution from above. Work with your agent teams to find a solution that they are happy to engage with.

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Davies Group Limited (Company Number 6479822). Registered office: 7th Floor, 1 Minster Court, Mincing Lane, London, EC3R 7AA

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**Kate Burton**
**Commercial Director**
Kate.burton@davies-group.com
+447968 819 147

Davies Group

@Davies_Group

davies-group.com