If you connect the dots, will the bigger picture be clearer?

The better the question. The better the answer. The better the world works.
Every boardroom has an elephant ... or two

They’re the looming issues everyone would rather discuss another time. The questions yet to be asked – by a person willing to ask them. Where’s the elephant? focuses on vital business issues that are not being openly discussed in terms of their urgency and impact. Whether in the room, on the horizon or thundering in a massive herd toward the C-suite, this is where elephants get talked about.

Want to learn where the elephant is when it comes to connecting the dots in your organization? Take five minutes to find out.

Innovation requires purposeful change at scale – not incremental approaches. If you want to thrive, it is time to break down the silos and connect the dots across your enterprise and broader ecosystem.

Only 12% of the companies listed on the Fortune 500 in 1955 remained on that list in 2016. It’s a story you already know. American Motors. Eastman Kodak. Curtis Publishing. Fairchild Engine & Airplane. Studebaker-Worthington. Where are these companies today? They’re gone. These and 435 others on that 1955 list have either gone bankrupt, merged with or were acquired by another company, or have survived but no longer sit among the Fortune 500.

The 12% that continue to maintain their Fortune 500 status year over year are there because they’ve adapted their organizations to become more customer centric. They have a clear understanding that even their B2B customers want a B2C experience and they are connecting the dots among their functions, business units, partners and vendors to deliver it. They’re providing consistently exceptional experiences, one interaction at time, across the entire value chain, realizing that business may be driven but technology but is fundamentally about human experiences.

These companies also understand that they need to move at the speed of change. The more connected companies are with their internal capabilities and the external ecosystem, the more likely they will be able to anticipate where customers and competitors are going next so that they can design for the future instead of today. To move quickly requires us to challenge current constructs and use technology to build more agility into the way information and intelligence flow.
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Digital technology is exponentially accelerating the pace of change, for both customers and organizations. Direct-to-consumer approaches are connecting supply and demand with unprecedented speed. At the same time, evolving customer experiences combined with increasingly anticipatory data signals are changing the expectations of what customers want. They expect organizations to connect the dots—across physical retail, digital commerce, customer services, and interactions with employees and anyone else who forms part of the organization. As expectations and preferences keep rising, so do the pressures on organizations to meet those demands. Maintaining relevancy has never been more important—or more challenging.

Digital-first companies have a distinct advantage over legacy companies in their ability to reach their customers directly and far more quickly. A new generation of companies puts customer data at the core to tether together strategy, product, experience, supply chain and marketing.

These companies operate in dramatically different ways relative to incumbents, and the entire model is both dynamic and variable. Large-scale incumbents must fight the urge to remain as they are and truly challenge their operating model.

Incremental approaches today will only take incumbent organizations as far as they needed to be yesterday. Sustainable success requires fundamental organizational changes—reimagining what the organization wants to be. These organizations have to connect the dots to encourage collaboration, maximize business intelligence, leverage data effectively, and build an infrastructure that scales and operates with agility. They need to challenge themselves to adopt some of the playbook that smaller disruptors are using to grow quickly and threaten traditional companies in every sector, where first-party data sits at the core. And they need to do it quickly, before they are not positioned to drive growth in a digital world.
Leadership is critical to connect the dots.

Connecting the dots is about putting the customer at the center. Customers increasingly expect an organization’s brand promise to be cohesive across all touch points. It is expressed through brand marketing, supported by enterprise strategy and operations, and realized in the customer experience. In a new world where brands can reach their customers with few intermediaries, such as traditional physical retail channels, the game is different: it’s direct, personal and anticipatory.

To make that connected customer vision a reality requires a concerted effort from the top of the organization. The C-suite must build its own connections across the agenda for marketing, digital, technology, information and finance. Beneath the C-suite alignment, the machine that drives the operation must also be tightly tethered together across data, technology platforms and processes.

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Make the commitment to connect the dots faster.

Making connections takes a deep commitment to transformation. By focusing on one area at a time, organizations can introduce change in a way that allows connective tissue to form.

To lead the charge, organizations need to consider who will serve as chief dot connector. This can be any C-suite executive responsible for connecting customers to the organization’s products or services. It may be the CMO or the CEO, for example. As chief dot connector, the goal is to begin connecting the dots through the customer’s eyes so internal silos are not obstacles. The best way to begin is to connect the dots within the organization.

1. **Change your culture, nest your purpose.** Imagination and digital innovation aren’t the responsibility of one person. They need to permeate every facet of the organization. If a company defines itself around a customer-centric purpose, each functional silo within the organization can determine its nested purpose to align with that higher goal. Consider creating purpose statements for every part of the C-suite, every function and every business unit to prioritize what’s important to your customers and motivate people to drive those goals.

2. **Break down the divisional and brand silos.** The imperative isn’t new, but it remains a key source of friction. People are competitive, but that drive may be misdirected. They may still be focusing solely on their own KPIs or on a digital agenda that doesn’t align with your organization’s broader and integrated agenda. Leading practices can only emerge with better collaboration, especially around customers and data.

3. **Dismantle the data and technology silos.** When an organization implements technology, it often views it as a series of point solutions that could solve specific issues – ERP, CMS, CRM, etc. Technologies need to more seamlessly speak to each other, and intelligent automation removes prior barriers around system integration. And, then, there’s the issue of data. There’s data from physical premises, digital sources, third parties and more, all of which tends to live in silos. Drive analytics across all of the available data sources so that the organization can see the customer holistically and drive actions to scale the business.

4. **Connect to the external ecosystem.** In addition to connecting the dots internally, consider making connections across the broader ecosystem of partners, suppliers, agencies, media companies or vendors, and other organizations. External partners contributing to the business will drive more value if they understand the context of their relationship.
So many organizations have been focusing their energy on technology in an effort to keep up with the pace of change – the Internet of Things, automation, artificial intelligence, blockchain and machine learning, among others. But these technologies are deployed as a means to an end: they enable the business strategy, which, ultimately, must focus on the customer.

Organizations looking to survive – and thrive – 10, 20 or 50 years from now, will need to rally around innovation and technology to serve their company’s higher purpose and deploy them with conviction. They’ll want to understand all of the underlying dynamics of their current and future customers to make the right connections and create the synergies that will drive the future of business.

Most of all, they need to have the courage to lead. Are you that leader?
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EGY no. 010035-18Gbl
CSG no. 1805-2708135
ED None

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Authors

Janet Balis
Advisory Principal, Strategy
Ernst & Young LLP
janet.balis@ey.com

Kris Pederson
Americas Advisory Strategy Leader
Ernst & Young LLP
kris.pederson@ey.com

For more information

Consulting Hub
ey.com/consulting

EY Advisory Twitter
@EY_Advisory