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BIG PICTURE

Best Face Forward

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Most companies serve customers through a broad array of interfaces, from retail sales clerks to Web sites to voice-response telephone systems. But while the typical company has an impressive interface collection, it doesn't have an interface *system*.

That is, the whole set does not add up to the sum of its parts in its ability to provide service and build customer relationships. Too many people and too many machines operating with insufficient coordination (and often at cross-purposes) mean rising complexity, costs, and customer dissatisfaction. In a world where companies compete not on what they sell but on how they sell it, turning that liability into an asset is what separates winners from losers.

In this adaptation of their forthcoming book by the same title, Jeffrey Rayport and Bernard Jaworski explain how companies must reengineer their customer interface systems for optimal efficiency and effectiveness. Part of that transformation, they observe, will involve a steady encroachment by machine interfaces into areas that have long been the sacred province of humans. Managers now have opportunities unprecedented in the history of business to use machines, not just people, to credibly manage their interactions with customers. Because people and machines each have their strengths and weaknesses, company executives must identify what people do best, what machines do best, and how to deploy them separately and together.

Front-office reengineering subjects every current and potential service interface to an analysis of opportunities for *substitution* (using machines instead of people), *complementarity* (using a mix of machines and people), and *displacement* (using networks to shift physical locations of people and machines), with the twin objectives of compressing costs and driving top-line growth through increased customer value.

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