But, for a business any bigger than a corner café, knowing your customer presents some significant technical challenges – and the more customer touch points you have, the more complicated the task becomes. Matching up data from places as disparate as a point-of-sale system, loyalty scheme, marketing database, call centre, website, smartphone app and kiosk network is a major project.

Worse, the project is potentially never-ending. Every time a new kind of service pops up, there is pressure to include it on the menu offered to customers – it's a rare retailer now who doesn't offer airtime, and bill payments and vouchering are headed the same way. And, if you're offering it at the till, why not also via your website and mobile app? How do you keep up without crippling your systems – and your information technology (IT) budget – with endless integrations?

At Innervation, we believe there are massive gains to be made by separating out the nuts-and-bolts infrastructure that enables a business to operate, from the things that make it unique. Utilities and buildings fall squarely into the first category; branding, product development and service fall clearly into the second.

To give yourself the most room to manoeuvre when it comes to what you do with your technology, we believe it's increasingly important to implement platforms – not individual services – that support a customer-centric architecture. You should be able to identify your customer at every touch point – from the till to your website or mobile app, to your call centre. This is the only way to consistently offer relevant new products and services that genuinely offer value and will keep customers coming back.

The technical challenge is to integrate value-added service providers on the one hand and customer touch points on the other into a single platform that talks nicely to both your enterprise resource

Bed down the Plumbing for a
Customer-centric
Business

Anton Gaylard, Managing Director of
Innervation Value Added Services

Getting to know customers better is more than just a popular buzz word – it's become a key strategic driver for many of the retailers and other consumer-facing businesses we deal with at Innervation. The better you know your customers, the more easily you can boost turnover by crafting offers that appeal strongly to particular subsets of those customers.

planning (ERP) and customer relationship management (CRM) systems. This is why there is value in implementing an independent platform layer: if the platform provider is already integrated with all the value-added service providers, adding a new service becomes as simple as flicking a switch. And, if your point-of-sale system, loyalty programme and kiosks are all connected to the platform on the other end, then every service can in theory be offered across every channel.

It won't always make commercial sense, of course – which is precisely the decision that every retailer needs to make for itself. This is where the real competitive advantage for retailers lies – in working out what their customers want, and negotiating the commercial contracts directly with the primary service provider to deliver it at an attractive price. Everything else should be geared to making that possible.