Customer Goals Online

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing managers charged with developing effective e-marketing strategies need to understand the implications of goal-directed behavior online. Traditionally, the marketer’s job has involved capturing the customer’s attention and communicating a message about products or services. The customer is essentially a passive receiver of the marketer’s message with little control over the marketing messages they are exposed to. Contrast the traditional approach to marketing with a Web site. Online the customer arrives at the marketer’s Web site with a goal. The customer has something that he or she wants to accomplish, whether it be to acquire information about a product, to make a purchase, or to just be entertained. By understanding the customer’s purpose for a Web site visit, the Web marketer is in a position to develop a Web site that provides significant value. Furthermore, a failure to deliver a Web site that enables customers to accomplish their goals is likely to result in dissatisfaction and defection to other more useful Web sites.

Understanding customer online goals is critical because it gets at the heart of what the Web site should or could “do.” The challenge for e-marketers is that for most businesses, there are likely to be multiple goals that represent the “reason why” customers could come to the Web site. For example, an e-tailing site might be very effective for customers who already know the specific product they want to purchase. However, there are likely to be many other goals that could lead people to visit the site, such as selecting the appropriate product from a large product line, selecting an appropriate gift, or perhaps receiving customer service. If important customer goals are not supported by the Web site, the firm is at risk of losing a significant amount of business. Other times businesses compete in markets where there may be little apparent reason for a consumer to visit a Web site. As a result, and because firms feel they should have an online presence, many e-marketing sites are created that offer little more than online reproductions of the marketer’s off-line advertising. The purpose of this article is to help e-marketers better understand the nature of customer goals online so that they may be prepared to create the types of Web site experiences that provide value to their customers.


**KEY TERMS**

**Customer Services Life Cycle (CSLC):** A framework that describes the stages (requirements, acquisition, ownership, and retirement) that a customer goes through when purchasing and using a product or service.

**Goal-Directed Behavior:** The concept that individuals are motivated to expend time and energy to achieve some desired objective (the goal). A significant amount of online consumer behavior is goal directed.

**Means-End Theory:** A theoretical framework based on the idea that consumers seek out or prefer specific products and product attributes because they serve as *a means* to achieve desired *end* states.

**Online Customer Value:** A customer’s perceived preference for and evaluation of those Web site features and functions that facilitate (or block) the performance of the tasks that are instrumental in achieving the customer’s goals associated with the Web site visit.

**Online Goal:** The customer’s objective or purpose of the Web site visit.

**Tasks:** “The activities undertaken to achieve a goal” (Maguire, 2001).

**Usability:** “The extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use” (ISO, 1997).

**User-Centered Design:** An approach to the design of system interfaces that seeks to ensure technology matches users’ needs and supports the tasks that users would like to perform.
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