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 form 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.

BACKGROUND

A growing number of Web design professionals, committed to the principles of user-centered design, seem to truly understand how to create highly usable, customer-centered Web sites. User-centered design (UCD) is an approach to designing computer interfaces that places the user of the system at the center of the design effort (Karat & Karat, 2003). UCD practitioners strive to improve the usability of a system by focusing on the various tasks and activities users would like to perform when interacting with a system. Focusing on users is critical in design because systems appropriate for one user group may be completely inappropriate for another set of users. For example, a travel Web site created for frequent business travelers wanting a fast and easy way to schedule business trips would not be appropriate for a person planning a vacation and wanting to learn about various vacation package options. By emphasizing users and their tasks, UCD aims to create systems that provide the appropriate functionality and are easier to use (Henneman, 1999).

Usability is the ultimate goal for Web designers who are practitioners of UCD. Creating a highly useable Web site means that the Web site matches what the site visitors need and want. Usability as defined by the ISO 9241 (ISO, 1997) standard is "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." As can be seen from this definition, the concept of user goals is central to understanding usability.

Customer value (Levenburg, 2005; Adelaar, Bouwman, & Steinfield, 2004) is a concept from the marketing literature that is conceptually similar to usability when considered within a value-in-use perspective. The value in use perspective (Woodruff & Gardialm, 1996) emphasizes the instrumentality of products in achieving the customer's goals. As a result, value in use involves an evaluation of the effectiveness of a product within a particular usage context. The work of Woodruff (1997) on value hierarchies is particularly relevant for understanding customer behavior online. Web sites are used by site visitors to accomplish their goals. Thus using a means-end approach to conceptualize online value provides a way to explain how online customers derive value from their usage experiences. Building on the work of Woodruff, Porter (2005) defined online value as:

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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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