

Chapter 5

Understanding Fluency and Friction in Customer Experience Management

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ABSTRACT

Customer experience management is a relatively new research field. Although past literature has studied certain aspects and elements of customer experience, major questions are still unanswered, including how to integrate touch-points across the customer journey and how to measure customer experience in a way that takes its multidimensional nature into consideration. This chapter attempts to provide a framework to study how customers perceive touch-points as a holistic experience and proposes an integrated approach to measuring the experience of challenges that result in what we call “friction.” The framework is based on the concept of “fluency” from the engineering and omni-channel literature and suggests survey items which can be used for future empirical studies. Insights from this research can be used by various types of organizations to better identify problems in the customer experience in regard to the process and dynamics of touch-points through time and across channels/platforms, thereby enhancing value for customers and businesses.

INTRODUCTION

Optimizing customer experience is essential due to an increasingly complex network of touchpoints and peer-to-peer interactions that can magnify both positive and negative perceptions. Customer ability to quickly spread word-of-mouth and access information not vetted by the company via a variety

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of channels and media allows little room for errors. It is therefore necessary to provide a seamless and consistent brand experiences that emphasize positive brand impressions and counteract negativity. While fragmented communication and globalized business models have made it difficult to measure, predict, and solve problems within multifaceted customer experiences, this paper will suggest a more holistic model for evaluating and measuring customer experience, focusing on making interactions smooth and painless as a whole rather than on individual “pain points” or “sticking points.”

Established research covers areas such as buying-behavior process models, service quality, and relationship marketing, but fewer scholars have focused on the challenges companies experience when trying to create a seamless brand experience from the customer’s point of view. Both practitioners and scholars often highlight individual aspects of experience as if they are operational bottlenecks rather than part of a broader system. Because customers do not necessarily think of the brand or base loyalty and feedback on fragmented elements of the experience, such an approach does not address important areas of conflict that might reduce satisfaction. Attempts to improve individual touch-points can even lead to perceived dissonance or difficulty. For instance, a customer searching for a television might rate information-gathering as satisfactory in the pre-purchase experience, but if that information is redundant and time-consuming during the purchasing process the experience as a whole might suffer. This is a critical problem even for companies that offer a well-designed experience, as friction in brand experience and the research/purchasing/onboarding processes is often hidden, as customers are more likely to remember specific challenges and negative experiences than ease of use or seamless transitions. Therefore, while engineering focuses on fluency in order to maximize efficiency, in customer experience it makes more sense to study frictions.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) suggest that while seamless integration, measurement, and improvement of touch-points would create stronger customer experiences, how to effectively do so is still a key point of debate. Customer satisfaction scores (CS) and net promoter scores (NPS) have been widely supported as valid forms of measuring service quality, but there is not yet agreement on robust measurement approaches to evaluate each aspect of the customer experience in and of themselves, let alone as a unified experience. Moreover, with few exceptions (e.g., Payne & Frow, 2004; Stone, Hobbs, & Khaleeli 2002; Cassab & MacLachlan 2009), researchers rarely discuss how multiple channels of communication might function within each touchpoint (sometimes in a contradictory way), or how they function over time. Hence, there is a clear gap between current measurement methods and the need of a holistic and dynamic view across all touch-points that change over time (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). For example, while overall experience might be positive in the pre-purchase experience of a new car, that might be because an excellent website or salesperson overshadowed negative online reviews or social media commentary. Similarly, the pre-purchase process might be extremely positive, but even a customer happy with their car might not recommend their brand if the experience with the dealer or salesperson during the purchasing process is extremely time consuming or negative, and those latter elements might be the focus of their subsequent communication about the brand.

As Dixon, Freeman, and Toman (2010) argued, a complex system for “delighting” or “wowing” customers might not have the intended impact on customer behavior, and it might even backfire. Increasing complexity in the process can result in more opportunity for negative touchpoints and is a reflection more of the *company’s* desire to have a positive impact than on effective and efficient delivery of a product or service from the customer’s point of view. Indeed, points of friction and disfluency might stem as much from the desire to “fix” problems by adding layers of interaction (e.g., new channels of communication, staff, services, or a menu of options) rather than considering a change in perspective from the company

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