

CUSTOMERS

Touchpoints Bring the Customer Experience to Life

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DECEMBER 02, 2010

In the first two pieces in this series we looked at [defining customer experience](#), and [using a customer journey map](#) to gain more insight into how customers engage with your organization. A customer journey looks at things entirely from the customers' point of view;; their actions, goals, questions, and barriers over time. In this installment we'll look at a framework for understanding how your organization supports the customer throughout that journey. This is accomplished by orchestrating touchpoints — a touchpoint being any interaction point between the customer and your brand.

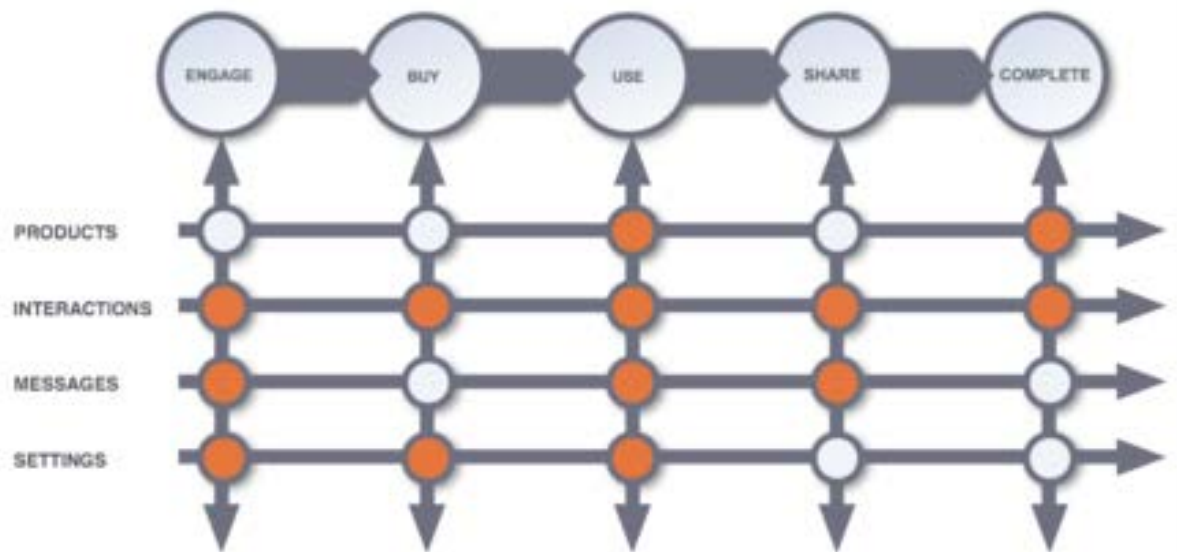
Being creative with how you think about the touchpoints along the customer journey can yield surprising benefits. For example, in the car insurance customer journey, one of the stages — if you're unlucky — is getting in an accident and having to report a claim. With most insurance companies this is a complicated and poorly-defined process that takes place at a traumatic time. And for insurers it is also a time of risk because a significant number of claims are fraudulent — the accident never happened. Progressive Insurance rethought this step of the journey and introduced a new touchpoint — their now-famous white vans show up at the scene of the accident as soon as it's reported. This helps the customer feel taken care of at a stressful moment, and it minimizes the possibilities for fraud because the accident can be verified. (I'm indebted to Frances X. Frei, [who wrote about Progressive in this HBR article](#), and revealed the insights about the dual benefits of its operational choices.)

Once you have mapped your customer journey, you can move on to looking at touchpoints. I generally find that

touchpoints fall into four general categories (you may need some modified categories of course, feel free to experiment):

- **Products:** Using the term “product” loosely here, this includes the hardware, software, and services themselves. In the case of Progressive, this includes its vans and website. (I’m classifying the website as a product as it’s central to every aspect of Progressive’s business, from acquiring to servicing customers. Frei examines how the website’s feature of quoting competitive prices, for example, also has positive business benefits for Progressive. But for company’s where the website is a straightforward marketing tool, it may be better to classify it in Messages, which we’ll see below.)
- **Interactions:** Two-way interactions that can be in-person (such as in a store), on the phone, or virtual (web sites, blogs, social network and user forum presences, and so on). Progressive minimizes in-person interactions to reduce costs and tries to have customers self-serve on the website, but when an accident does occur, the interaction with the agent in the white van is crucial. An interesting contrast is online shoe retailer Zappos, which wants customers to call, as the company sees that as a loyalty-builder for the brand, even if it’s relatively expensive. **CEO Tony Hsieh** says, “We believe that forming personal, emotional connections with our customers is the best way to provide great service.”
- **Messages:** One-way communications that include brand, collateral, manuals, advertising, packaging, and the like. Progressive advertises heavily, with its minor-celebrity spokesperson Flo who works in the Progressive “store” in the TV commercials. In the previous article I mentioned the importance of the out-of-box-experience stage of the customer journey, and that typically falls into the Messages category as it focuses on establishing the brand voice and explaining a complex product to first-time users.
- **Settings:** Anywhere that the product is seen or used: a retail store, a friend’s house, TV product placement, events, or shows. Especially in Big Box retail, we have seen that manufacturers and vendors have less and less influence over how their products are presented, making this a tricky touchpoint to manage.

Chances are that you are already creating these touchpoints. You are creating a customer experience. But what turns this collection of touchpoints into a superlative customer experience? The key is coordinating and integrating the touchpoints so that they seamlessly meld together. There are two ways this needs to happen — longitudinally throughout the customer journey, and with each touchpoint type supporting the others for each stage of the journey.



Look at each touchpoint and ask yourself:

- What specific things are we doing at each touchpoint?
- Are the touchpoints addressing customers' motivations, and answering their questions or allaying concerns? Are they working for your target customers, and for novices and experts alike?
- Are the touchpoints addressing your customers' unmet/underlying/latent needs? Are there needs going unstated that neither you nor competitors are solving?
- Are all the touchpoints speaking with the same tone, the same message, even the same words? Is your brand being communicated effectively and clearly?
- Are there hiccups in the flow from one stage to the next that may cause potential customers to drop off, or cause dissatisfaction for current customers (and perhaps costly product returns or help-line calls)?
- Are the touchpoints differentiating you from competitors and helping retain the customer?

If we visualize this as a matrix as in the diagram, we can see how there needs to be coherence within each touchpoint category “horizontally” over time. And there needs to be coherence “vertically” within each stage. The orange dots represents some example touchpoints that Progressive Insurance customers might experience in their time with the company. It's easy to see that Interactions are present all the way through the journey, and at each stage of the journey multiple touchpoints are in play. Progressive's service is well-regarded by customers in part because it is very consistent in how it engages with customers at all these related touchpoints.

Taking the time and effort to look at your touchpoints not just as isolated mini-experiences, but as a collective whole, will help you shape them for a better customer experience, and perhaps even point to opportunities to invent new types of

touchpoints, as Progressive did. Or, perhaps there are some touchpoints you have been overly reliant on third-parties who are not not upholding their place in the journey. When Apple got fed up with retailers (such as the now-defunct CompUSA) not doing a good enough job demonstrating the Mac experience, it opened up its own stores. At the time it was widely considered foolhardy; today they are considered a retail benchmark and a key reason why Apple has been able to attract a broader audience.

The obvious outcome of taking an integrated look at touchpoints is that it requires multiple parts of a company, and often outside partners, to work together to improve the experience. The web team needs to be in sync with product development, which needs to coordinate with marketing and sales, who need to align messages with the third-party call-center ... and so on. This is not easy to do, and it's why so many touchpoints and customer journeys are more reflective of the company org chart than they are of an ideal experience. But if you can accomplish a measure of integration, you will be rewarded with a customer experience that has a surprising amount of competitive durability and customer enthusiasm and loyalty.

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