

Using Customer Journey Maps to Improve Customer Experience

by Adam Richardson

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Following on the first article on defining customer experience, this second installment looks at the first essential step of improving the experience you deliver, which is mapping out your customer journey.

A customer journey map is a very simple idea: a diagram that illustrates the steps your customer(s) go through in engaging with your company, whether it be a product, an online experience, retail experience, or a service, or any combination. The more touchpoints you have, the more complicated – but necessary – such a map becomes. Sometimes customer journey maps are “cradle to grave,” looking at the entire arc of engagement. Here, for example, is a customer journey timeline that includes first engaging with a customer (perhaps with advertising or in a store), buying the product or service, using it, sharing about the experience with others (in person or online), and then finishing the journey by upgrading, replacing, or choosing a competitor (re-starting the journey with another company):



At other times, journey maps are used to look at very specific customer-company interactions. By way of example, let's look at a customer journey that doesn't work well: home theater.

Anyone who has attempted to research, buy, set up, and use a home theater system knows that this is one of the most frustratingly complicated customer experiences in the consumer electronics realm. It makes buying a car seem trivially easy. Here's a real sample of some questions asked by a prospective purchaser on a home theater forum:

“For HD and Blue Ray DVD HDMI audio I do not understand if any post processing is done on the 5.1 Lossless PCM channels from these players. Will DD PLIIx or THX 7.1 apply to these? What are the limitations?”

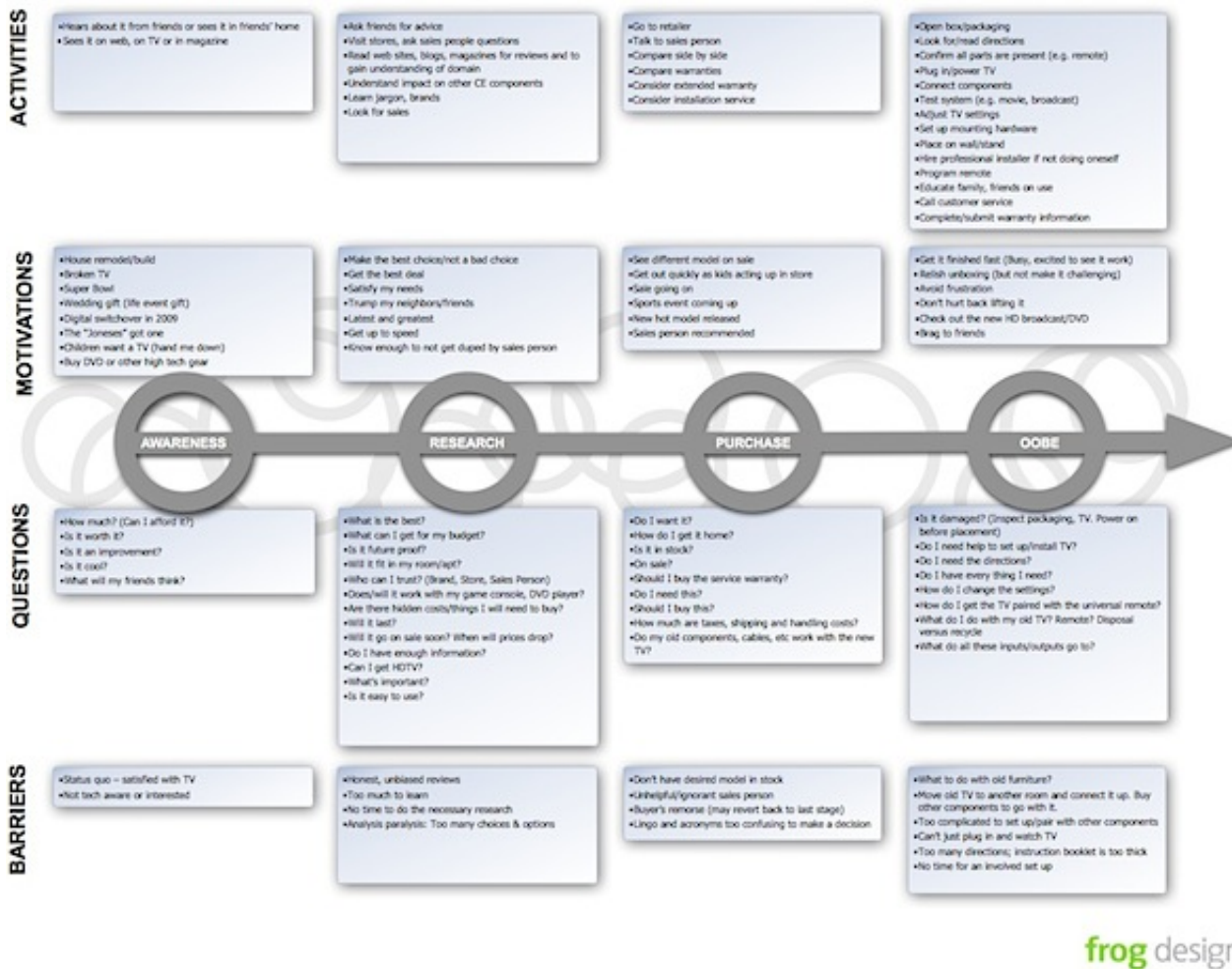
Don't worry if you have no idea what this means – you shouldn't have to. There is no good reason why a layperson just wanting to watch movies at home should be exposed to such complexity and jargon. Yet in home theater, such confusion is rampant. It's a bad sign when there are numerous forums for customers to help each other out, as is the case in home theater, since it means that the manufacturers have utterly failed in creating a comprehensive customer experience. But it's also an opportunity for smart companies: retailer Best Buy bought service start-up Geek Squad to solve exactly this type of problem.

If I were a manufacturer, how would I go about understanding the customer journey so I could improve it? Here is a diagram that shows one way of looking at the home theater journey up to the point of getting the gear home:

The spine of the timeline in this case is based around the conventional sales funnel (awareness, research, purchase), but then adds another step: OOBEx, or out-of-box-experience. This has become an increasingly important step. Do a search on YouTube for “unboxing“, for example, or looking at unboxing.com for many examples of people going through what is now a ritualistic act of opening up the latest gadget.

But beyond the emotional factors, it makes good business sense. A great out-of-box experience is like a little piece of theater. Scripting it well helps guide the customer through the first steps of using their new purchase and minimizes expensive calls into help lines.

The timeline is just the starting point; next we need to look at what's happening at each stage. A framework that I find consistently useful is to look at:



• Actions:
What is
the

customer doing at each stage? What actions are they taking to move themselves on to the next stage? (Don't list what your company or partners such as retailers are doing here.

That will come later when we look at touchpoints)

- Motivations: Why is the customer motivated to keep going to the next stage? What emotions are they feeling? Why do they care?
- Questions: What are the uncertainties, jargon, or other issues preventing the customer from moving to the next stage? As you can from the diagram above, home theater has a larger proportion of questions than almost anything else at each stage, which indicates this is an area that manufacturers and retailers should be attacking aggressively.
- Barriers: What structural, process, cost, implementation, or other barriers stand in the way of moving on to the next stage?

Filling all these out is best done if grounded in customer research, preferably including in-depth ethnographic-style interviews and in-context observations. Surveys and focus groups tend to gloss over too many details that are critical to really understanding the experience. Ask customers to map out their journeys for you, while you are visiting them for the research.

Note that the journey is often non-linear. Someone may jump straight from awareness to purchase if they are not inclined to do research and have a strong recommendation from a friend, for example. Or they may spend a long time spinning through iterations of the research process for an expensive purchase. I remember interviewing a gentleman in Texas who spent six months visiting stores for a big-screen TV, as he didn't want to get it wrong, and he would play sales people off one another to get the lowest price.

This is certainly not the only way to create a customer journey. My colleague Gianluca Brugnoli has a nice Slideshare about a customer journey for digital media (including touchpoints, which is the next installment in this series). You can find some other examples at Service Design Tools (software products also), and at This is Service Design Thinking (PDF download). Interaction designer Hugh Dubberly has also written and diagrammed extensively about customer experience, and looked at the customer journey. Treating the journey as a storyboard, complete with photos or sketches of each stage, is a nice way to add more flavor, but is not necessary to get started.

There is no single right way to create a customer journey, and your own organization will need to find what works best for your particular situation. But the frameworks provided here should give you a good head-start at better understanding the journey that your customers travel through as they engage with your company, brand, products, partners, and people.

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