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Customer Experience Management: Asking the Right Questions

Purpose: Customer experience is more critical than ever to firms' successes and future growth opportunities. Typically measured through aggregate satisfaction scores, businesses have been criticised for oversimplifying what experience means. The article provides a new perspective on experience management and offers a novel way forward for customer-centric strategizing.

Design/methodology/approach: Mapping the current digital technologies being used across businesses in all sectors to engage and connect with customers more effectively, this article outlines some of the fundamental challenges of experience management as well as future opportunities to enhance business practice.

Findings: Businesses are capturing what they know about customers, rather than what a customer thinks and feels about the firm. Many experience management initiatives create customer pains (not gains), while for businesses, decision-making can be jeopardised by fake customer data. A framework based upon the five experience dimensions is presented for optimal customer-driven decision-making.

Originality: Businesses are seeking to grow intelligent customer experience analysis capabilities to disrupt traditional business models towards greater customer-centricity and to track the digital spread of positive and negative experiences. Examining how this is being done and where the weaknesses lie by bridging management practice and the scientific literature, this article provides new knowledge to advance customer-centric strategies for growth and profitability.

Practical implications: Going beyond aggregate satisfaction scores that serve as an output rather than an input into businesses strategizing, the article presents an actionable framework for targeted investments and enhanced experience management practices.

Keywords: Customer experience, digital technologies, decision-making, customer-centricity, social media, fake data.

Introduction

How a customer experiences a product or service, from their early engagement with a brand right through to after-sales care, plays a pivotal role in customer retention and acquisition. Digital experience management initiatives have subsequently become a mainstay of business practice across sectors. While some are much more advanced than others, navigating the digital arena for enhanced customer–brand encounters is a challenge faced by all organisations.

Customer experience is more critical than ever to firms' successes. Tata Communications recently claimed that businesses leading on this front will exceed revenue growth of those that do not by almost 15%. It is not surprising that firms are pursuing growth opportunities in customer centricity to generate competitive advantages in increasingly competitive marketplaces. Capturing what customers experience and shaping the experience in a way that favours profitability and sustainable growth is no simple feat, with many of the existing methods adopted by businesses falling short in achieving these goals.

Although the significance and importance of the “customer journey” is appreciated within companies, there appears to be a mismatch between advancements in the scientific literature versus the actions of practicing managers (Keiningham *et al.*, 2020). Focusing on the customer experience requires a new management perspective, where the variety of touchpoints in which customers engage with a product or service, directly or indirectly, are recognized as comprising multiple experience components. When these components are targeted effectively by the organization, managers can increase the perceived value customers attach to their product(s) and/or service(s). This article describes how firms currently attempt to accomplish this end through various digital technologies. By mapping these technologies and understanding the outcomes for customers, as well as the pitfalls for businesses, it is possible to identify where new strategic opportunities might lie for enhanced customer-centric strategies.

The experience management problem

Becoming a customer-oriented business was a common goal of the 2000s, where the emergence of the net promoter score to gauge customer-centric performance was adopted. A buzz phrase used by many Chief Marketing Officers to show their added value, the net

promoter score is based on the responses to a straightforward survey question: “Would you recommend us to a friend or colleague?”. As Ipsos Mori commented in 2007, global firms such as General Electric and American Express adopted the score as a predictor of firm growth and customer loyalty. Can such a simplistic measure accurately capture the complexities and varieties of customers’ experiences?

While it is still a common approach used across sectors to assess “customer performance”, commentators from the business arena point to the limited usefulness of such data. Ipsos Mori (2007) challenged the relevance of the net promoter score and similar aggregated measures of customer satisfaction for oversimplifying customer experience and being very poor indicators of customer-centric performance. The core of this criticism is the limited usefulness of the data for decision-making, which has been an enduring issue, as reported by Meyer and Schwager (2007, p. 2):

The problem is that measuring customer satisfaction does not tell anyone how to achieve it. Customer satisfaction is essentially the culmination of a series of customer experiences or, one could say, the net result of the good ones minus the bad ones...Because a great many customer experiences aren’t the direct consequence of the brand’s messages or the company’s actual offerings, a company’s re-examination of its initiatives and choices will not suffice.

Furthermore, it would appear that existing customer performance indicators used by businesses cannot lead to actionable customer driven strategy. This is a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed given that satisfying customers is widely regarded as essential for key performance indicators such as growth and profitability.

A customer focus is typically understood to mean holding customer needs central to all business activities. In a recent survey, McKinsey&Company explore what this means in practice and observe how firms are seeking to grow digital capabilities for two purposes: (1) to disrupt traditional business models, and (2) to track the digital spread of positive and negative customer experiences. The first approach marks a business model shift from selling products, under traditional *make and sell* business models, towards selling services around products, which can be described as *sense and respond* strategies. The second approach is driven by the operational requirements of businesses’ marketing functions that seek to focus on ways to collect and analyse customer feedback, with the aim of providing customer driven solutions to problems and opportunities as they emerge. The irony of course with this latter

approach is the potential of creating dissatisfaction among the customer base, through requests for feedback on product features, experience received and service quality, which can frustrate some customers (particularly if no observable changes result).

What digital technologies are available?

Location-based and Wearables: Accenture (2016) report that the use of location-based technology (e.g. Beacons, GPS, Wi-Fi) to improve the experiences of their customers is a means to both drive revenue and increase operational efficiency. With the prevalence of location service enabled devices, increasing access to 4G, 5G and Wi-Fi, and openness of customers to receiving real time reviews and scores of items as they browse, the technology services can provide new opportunities to engage customers. Key “value-adding” activities the firm can pursue, as highlighted by Accenture (2016), include location-based offers and vouchers, mobile checkout, in-store navigation, targeted communications (to address a dissatisfied customer real-time) and “checking-in” in-store. Similarly, wearable technologies are highlighted by Forbes (2018) as means to improve the customer experience through three specific ways: (1) Tracking customer desires (e.g. through tracking orders and purchases of products to learn more about customers' preferences); (2) Improving security without diminishing the customer experience (e.g. biometric authorization to provide a higher level of security against the threat of fraud); and, (3) Use with internal staff to address customer expectations (e.g. identifying where physical interactions with front-line employees occur) so physical touchpoint experiences can be improved.

Virtual Reality (VR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) / Machine Learning (ML): In a recent survey of sales and marketing leaders conducted by Oracle, approximately 40% cited VR and 34% cited AI / ML as technologies that will most improve the customer experience. Current examples include VR dressing rooms in the retail sector and the use of chatbots in service portals. Linked to the latter, the use of ML to create a system that remembers customers' preferences, can understand speech and text and that learns patterns of behavior by experience is highlighted by Oracle (2016) as a tool to enhance the customer experience. Forbes (2019a) outline a number of examples of how these technologies are being used in practice, from BMW who employ ML to adjust automatically the systems and cabin experience for each driver, to Amazon whose website tracks the viewing and purchasing history of each individual customer in order to make future recommendations of products.

Neuroscience: Neuroscience methodologies can offer businesses new opportunities to understand customer behavior better. Such methods include Electroencephalography (to measure electrical brain activity in response to external stimuli), eye tracking (to determine the order and intensity of visual focus points), facial coding (to measure changes in facial expressions to identify emotional reactions), galvanic skin response (to monitor physiological arousal in response to external events) and the implicit association test (to measure reaction time when associating words to brands) and are suggested to help determine how consumers are responding at different touchpoints (The Wall Street Journal, 2018). The data generated through these methods can then subsequently be used to adapt or tailor touchpoints for different types of customers, with the goal of maximizing customers experiences with the brand.

Social Media: Businesses are increasingly aware of the value of customer data that can be accessed in real-time from social media platforms. Firms that mine social media are expecting to determine customers' preferences, opinions and buying intentions. However, in 2016, less than half of businesses surveyed by Oracle were utilizing these data even though when used, the analytics were reported as providing relationship management information. The fact that of those surveyed, only 42% felt confident that they were able to extract customer insight from the data, suggests either a significant volume of data noise is present preventing effective data use or a lack of confidence in the analytical processes adopted. This serves to demonstrate the problems associated with social media data and effectively building strategies from such sources. As an example, when asked by Oracle (2016) which data sources do businesses most struggle to use to inform marketing/sales, 38% cited their social media activity.

Digital Twins (DTs): According to Forbes (2019b), DTs are being employed in customer service contexts with the aim to deliver a more "personalized, anticipatory and differentiated" level of service, potentially powered by cloud computing resources. Specifically, through integrating the Internet of Things (IoT) technologies (i.e. embedded sensors and services) into products, information can be sent back to the organization to provide on-the-ground insight into how products are being used, how well they're performing and the status of the (product) operating system. From a customer service perspective, this information can enable operators to understand malfunctions and determine the measures that must be taken to restore expected performance levels (Forbes 2019b). The black-box model for vehicle insurance is an example of how customer data can be effectively integrated into an organization's

operating system. By collecting real-time, telematics data on individual driver's performances enables simulations to be generated and risk-managed in the calculation of personalized insurance quotes.

Relationship management is not experience management

When discussing experience management initiatives, it is essential that the distinction between customer relationship management (CRM) and customer experience management (CEM) is made. The two are quite different, since CRM "captures what a company knows about a particular customer—his or her history of service requests, product returns and inquiries, among other things—whereas customer experience data capture customers' subjective thoughts about a particular company" (Meyer and Schwager, 2007, p. 5). It is noted by Meyer and Schwager that CRM systems are a common feature of most businesses while CEM systems are not well embedded in business practices.

In most instances, the implementation of digital technologies typically reflect CRM initiatives, with firms seeking to capture and distribute what they know about customers, but not what a customer thinks about the firm (e.g. Meyer and Schwager, 2007). As Oracle (2016) highlights, most of these digital technologies are developed and implemented by single functional groups within a business, with little intra- and inter-departmental collaboration and thus, in most cases experience management is not an organization-wide strategy. This is echoed by McKinsey&Company (2016), who flag the siloed nature of CEM initiatives in practice, which reduces the impact such initiatives might have. A common pitfall is that businesses adopt a narrow focus on a single specific customer interaction or touchpoint, rather than identifying, analysing, and managing all points of customer interaction (e.g. Meyer and Schwager, 2007).

The issue appears enduring as firms typically do not adopt CEM technologies and services with the firm's operating systems (e.g. Enterprise-, Financial-, Facilities-, Equipment-, Employee-, Information-, Operations-, Service-, Improvement-, Management and Customer-, Product-, Supplier-, Development systems), but instead seek to use technologies as an add-on to the marketing/sales function of the firm. As the Senior Director of Customer Experience Applications at Oracle stated in 2016, "By 2020, the customer experience will largely be defined by two-way discussions between 'intelligent' software rather than by a unidirectional flow of promotional content". Though great strides have been taken to move beyond the

unidirectional flow of the business–customer interaction, current technologies fall short of targeting the full spectrum of CEM.

Causing pain, instead of gain

When customers sign-up to a service or purchase a product, they must accept the terms and conditions that seem to go on for hundreds of pages. Most customers never read the details, and even if they did, if they disagreed with them, what can they do if they really want or need that product or service? Furthermore, to what level can customers expect privacy considering the level of data analytics currently supporting online purchases and browsing? In 2018 the world got the first glimpse of digital background services, as Cambridge Analytica were accused of selling psychological profiles of American voters to political campaigns. To determine this information, they had to access the Facebook data of tens of millions of users and then run their algorithms to determine which user was going to vote for which party. As reported by The New York Times, campaigns were then run to influence certain users to change their perceptions and potentially vote for a different party. This behavioral manipulation performed without the knowledge of social media users, or indeed without consent, may have changed the outcome of the 2016 US Presidential election.

Customers may feel in control of their privacy as many on-line sites present this impression. For example, customers are frequently asked to opt-in to complete a short survey following an on-line interaction. Businesses push for this information to ensure they are ranked highly in various tables that can influence consumer behavior and search engine rankings. The influence of and need for improved customer ratings was illustrated recently when agricultural suppliers from China sent seeds for free to US customers to gain good reviews about their products on leading e-commerce websites and boost their sales (Independent, 2020).

Most customers are unaware of how their data are being collected and analysed when using on-line platforms. Every time an on-line site is visited, each click and page viewed on the website is analysed and stored (via cookies). Staying on a web page for pre-determined numbers of seconds could indicate interest in a product(s) or product genre(s) that is logged and sometimes shared with, or sold to, other companies. When more generic web sites like Google and YouTube are visited, it is no coincidence that customers will often find adverts for the specific product that they were previously studying.

Many customers do not like taking the time to provide feedback that can help businesses to entice future purchases, so organizations are using more sophisticated methods to understand what potential customers want to purchase. This has led to the increased utilization of open social media platforms where analytical tools are used to gain insights into customers' experiences of products or services to understand if they can be enhanced or replaced to improve sales. This type of mining can potentially aid in the appreciation of faults with the operation of product(s) / service(s) and the modification of design features / manufacturing processes / testing protocols to reduce global recalls or returns, for example. Organizations now have access to structured and unstructured information ranging from (free) open platforms (e.g. Twitter) to paid access platforms (e.g. Facebook). There are communication services (e.g. Gmail) that have the potential to mine email content to determine what customers might like to purchase next, through to video platforms (e.g. YouTube) that could be used to model customer personas to understand customer motivations in purchasing their next product(s) or service(s).

Customer privacy is still supported as the terms and conditions are agreed, but customers need to think outside of the box in terms of what organizations and service providers can do with these data. Of course, there will always be rogue systems, for example Google Incognito, which has allegedly at the time of writing, tracked the web sites users visit in conflict with the "private" mode advertised by this service (BBC News, 2020). Nevertheless, data are transforming business and operating models. As an example, manufacturers are investigating the capabilities of next generation digital, distributed manufacturing supply chains and systems that can deliver personalized products to customer segments at mass production, based on extensive customer data mining that is invisible to customers. In a data-centric digital world, it is clear to see why organizations want access to customers' data, but as customers we also need to reflect on how this can benefit purchasing experiences in the future in terms of the value that data provide to designers, manufacturers and product/service providers.

Beware the "bot"

Businesses face different but equally significant issues in the digital world. For example, chatbots have been effectively used by businesses to increase the efficiency of customer service through the completion of tasks such as responding to customer requests or

communicating directly with customers. But many businesses ignore (or are not aware of) bots that are not created by the firm for the firm, but are designed and deployed to take the guise of potential and actual customers. These computer applications adopt the identity of a supposed real individual (e.g. @jondoe), mimicking the social messaging of real people via tweeting, re-tweeting, and liking, and are suggested to be highly active across social media platforms.

Social media is heralded as an openly available source of spontaneous feedback about what customers want and how they feel about a brand, product, service, feature, market, and so on. Across the business arena, hundreds of millions of dollars are invested in harvesting these data to inform customer-driven decision-making, with many thousands of social data analysts working for the major global players across automotive, retail, manufacturing, and hospitality sectors. Whilst social media data can be valuable resources in CEM, many businesses will not routinely consider the authenticity of the data they are presented with. For instance, imagine you are head of product development and the firm's marketing team excitedly present a new product feature concept based on overwhelming demand across the firm's social media platforms. In seeking to be customer-driven in product design, you green light the investment for a full product face-lift. In this scenario one may deem you a customer-centric business, but are you really? A large proportion of the data used to justify your decision could in fact have been generated by individual bots or even a bot network. The implication being that the substantial investment in product adaptation could be based on fake customer data and, hence, the likelihood of a much lower return on investment, simply because this is not what the customer base wants.

Not only is social media one of the digital technologies that firms most often target, it is also one which presents the most challenges to mine effectively for customer insights as reported by Oracle (2016). Bots make this challenge even greater and pose a significant threat to the customer-driven decision-making of businesses. Knowing who your customers are is a business fundamental, but this is more complex than ever in the social media domain. In a recent article published in The New York Times, bot activity was identified in the social messaging linked to COVID-19 and around the Black Lives Matter hashtag, but the volume of this activity is contested due to the variability in bot detection capabilities. That said, awakening to the fact that bots will influence (both positively and negatively) customer insights data is a new reality confronting businesses.

What the science says

A traditional business philosophy is based on the premise that customer value is embedded within an organization's offering of products and is referred to as a goods-dominant logic. Value is subsequently created in the transaction between the customer and the provider of the product or service. With the rise of a customer-centric mentality in the pursuit of enhanced market offerings for growth and profitability, this traditional goods-dominant perspective has been superseded by the customer-oriented, service-dominant logic (SDL). SDL positions value as something that is co-created with consumers and results not from single transactions, but over the course of multiple encounters with different touchpoints. Used to inform CEM, SDL emphasizes the customer journey and the multiple interactions or touchpoints that can influence customer perceptions of value. For instance, Meyer and Schwager (2007) note how Amazon's 1-Click ordering uses touchpoints to advance the customer to a subsequent and more valuable interaction, which is the product purchase.

The scientific literature frames customer experience as raw data, i.e. an input rather than an output (e.g. overall satisfaction), and which can be used to drive business processes to shape consumer behavior to the benefit of the business (e.g. De Keyser *et al.*, 2015). De Keyser *et al.* (2015) highlight the three customer journey phases that interact with the expected and actual experience of customers: (1) Anticipation: consumer choice for a specific path to goal attainment, driven by anticipated experience and its resulting value estimates; (2) Realization: the actual experiencing unfolds and the raw experience data get shaped; and, (3) Reflection: every event that leads up to goal attainment is followed by individual reflection upon its actual value realization (i.e. "am I better off?"). Therefore, according to De Keyser *et al.* (2015, p. 28), rather than businesses focusing on the question "How can we increase sales?" an experience-oriented firm will seek to answer the following strategic questions:

- How does the firm integrate within the lives of the customer?
- What capabilities are possessed that the customer wants to use to his/her own advantage?
- How can these capabilities be utilized to the highest benefit of the customer?
- Can the way the customer gets a job done given the context he/she is embedded in be improved?

There is broad agreement that CEM should cover all interactions between the customer and (product / service) provider and that the experience comprises multiple elements (Bolton *et al.*, 2018). As Keiningham *et al.* (2020, p. 432) describe:

The first basic tenet of CX [customer experience] is its interactional nature, meaning that a CX always stems from an interaction between a customer and a (set of) market actor(s) through various interfaces, both human (e.g., frontline employees) and non human (e.g., self-service technologies). The second basic tenet holds that a specific level of uniqueness marks every CX. The third basic tenet of CX relates to its multidimensional nature.

While businesses are focusing on designing and delivering an experience for the customer through digital technologies such as mobile, location-based, virtual reality, digital twins, blockchains, AI, wearable technologies, neuroscience, robotics, machine learning and the IoT, there remains “little theoretical and empirical work that explicitly connects the digital, physical and social realms” (Bolton *et al.*, 2018).

An experience management framework

For an actionable experience management framework, Keiningham *et al.* (2020) identify the need for customer experience to be disaggregated into dimensional elements: *Cognitive* (What people think), *Physical* (How people interact), *Sensory* (What people experience), *Emotional* (How people feel) and *Social* (How people share), as shown in Table I.

...Insert Table I About Here...

By disaggregating customer experience firms can map their performance against each dimension relative to direct competitors to target actions in key areas for enhanced competitive differentiation (e.g. Keiningham *et al.*, 2020). Table I with an accompanying illustration from industry provides an exemplar of survey questions that could be adopted to gather data to quantify and qualify each dimension. Though the questions may appear straightforward, which is of benefit to ensure that customers do not become pained, they represent a significant advance beyond the net promotor score question: “Would you recommend us to a friend or colleague?”. Specifically, each question provides insights on a specific dimension of customer experience, allowing for a disaggregation of experience to enable specific inputs into customer-driven decision-making, such as: What dimension

requires investment? Which areas of our business are impacted? and, Where is value created and value lost?

Going beyond analogue methods of data collection (e.g. survey questions) to the digital realm, social media data can be used to evaluate current performance against each dimension, through a categorization of the content of social messaging relevant to the firm and their competitors. Core strengths to defend and critical weaknesses to address and develop can then be identified. An illustration of how this could be deployed in practice is presented in Figure 1. Interpreting the findings in the diagram would suggest that *Firm A* has advantages across three customer experience dimensions relative to *Competitor #1*, however, there are opportunities to invest in Social (How people share) and Cognitive (What people think) dimensions of experience, where performance is worse relative to *Competitor #1*.

...Insert Figure 1 About Here...

By disaggregating the experience of customers into these five dimensions, businesses will be able to focus on the key organizational elements such as strategies, processes, and employees associated with each experience dimension, in order to seek out opportunities for improvement (e.g. Keiningham *et al.*, 2020). This approach marks a step-change from attempting to reverse engineer strategy from an overall customer satisfaction score, where cause and effect is impossible to decipher, to an actionable framework for experience management.

The way forward

According to a recent survey by Oracle (2016), half of manufacturing and high-technology businesses claim to examine customer data regularly to develop a better understanding of their audience. Yet, given the data limitations and narrow perspective taken in commercial applications of experience management, the reality may not match this claim. Current CEM technologies are used to identify and address customers' major pain points in a reactive rather than proactive manner.

CEM initiatives are advancing the use of digital technologies, but often in a piecemeal way and usually focused on a single touchpoint within the complete customer journey.

Consequently, most commercial applications do not reflect the unique, multidimensional, and

interactional elements of the experience of their customers, despite its relevance for differentiation advantages and performance gains.

This article presents a novel way forward for businesses striving to become customer-centric or wanting to enhance their existing CEM practices. Recognition of the customer pains experienced when seeking out customer data as well as the potential of misdirecting efforts towards relationship management, or in response to misinformation and “fake customer data”, are key advances. Disaggregating customer experience into the five dimensions provides a novel actionable framework for businesses to determine the experience of their customers more accurately. Mapping core strengths and identifying areas of weakness across the dimensions relative to direct competitors, should enable more accurate and useful inputs into customer-centric strategizing.

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Figure 1. CEM dimensions versus competitor: An illustration

Table I. Operationalising customer experience through survey questions

Dimension	Definition	Operationalisation [Example]
Social	How someone shares or relates as a result of their interaction(s)	Which [supermarket] is best for encouraging you to communicate with other people (be they staff members, other customers, or friends and family)?
Physical	How someone acts as a result of their interaction(s)	Which [supermarket] helps you [shop] in the best way?
Emotion	What someone feels as a result of their interaction(s)	Which [supermarket] makes you feel the most positive [when you're shopping]?
Cognitive	What someone thinks as a result of their interaction(s)	Which [supermarket] best meets (all of) your needs?
Sensory	What someone senses as a result of their interaction(s)	Which [supermarket] provides the best atmosphere? OR Which [supermarket] provides the best environment?

Source: Keiningham *et al.* (2020)