A JOURNEY-CENTRIC APPROACH TO BUSINESS GROWTH: ENHANCING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE FOR COMPETITIVE EDGE

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Abstract:

Grasping the customer journey is essential for creating business strategies that not only foster innovation but also improve customer satisfaction and cultivate long-term loyalty. This conceptual research introduces a detailed, stage-oriented framework that captures the full spectrum of customer behaviors, emotions, and cognitive processes during their interactions with a brand. Through this comprehensive lens, companies can systematically pinpoint and optimize crucial touchpoints, allowing them to consistently surpass customer expectations and secure a sustainable edge in competitive markets. The paper expands the ongoing conversation on customer experience management by emphasizing the strategic importance of viewing the customer journey in an integrated manner. It highlights how a deeper insight into this journey can guide more precise business decisions, resulting in significant improvements in performance. The study underscores the need for businesses to adopt a unified, journey-focused strategy that aligns their operations and resources with customer expectations, driving both growth and competitive distinction.

Keywords: Customer Journey, Customer Experience Management, Business Strategy, Competitive Advantage, Touchpoint Optimization

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's complex and competitive business landscape, understanding and optimizing the customer journey has become a crucial determinant of organizational success. The customer journey encompasses the full spectrum of interactions between a customer and a brand, from initial awareness and consideration to post-purchase engagement and long-term relationship building (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009). Rather than a series of disconnected transactions, the customer journey represents a continuous, interconnected process that significantly shapes customer perceptions, satisfaction, and loyalty (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Ho, Lin, & Chen, 2012). As businesses seek to differentiate themselves and create value, adopting a comprehensive approach to managing this journey is imperative (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Effective customer journey management enables companies to anticipate and respond to evolving customer needs, adapt to market dynamics, and foster deeper, more meaningful relationships with their customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This approach supports the delivery of personalized, consistent experiences across multiple touchpoints and channels, enhancing customer engagement and loyalty (Batra & Keller, 2016). Importantly, the customer journey is not a linear trajectory but a dynamic, multidimensional process that encompasses cognitive, emotional, social, and physical responses at various stages, including search, purchase, consumption, and post-sale interactions (Verhoef et al., 2009; Carreira et al., 2013). Despite the growing recognition of its strategic importance, there remains a need for practical tools that enable businesses to systematically capture and analyze the complexity of the customer journey. Existing research has predominantly focused on isolated aspects of the journey or specific touchpoints, often neglecting the holistic and evolving nature of customer experiences (Court et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This fragmented approach limits the ability of businesses to fully leverage customer insights for strategic decision-making. The primary objective of this study is to address this gap by developing a comprehensive customer journey tool—a questionnaire/grid—that integrates the diverse elements and touchpoints of the customer journey into a unified framework. This tool aims to provide businesses with a structured methodology for capturing the full range of customer experiences, enabling a more detailed and actionable understanding of the journey (Figure 1). By compiling information across various stages and channels, the proposed tool will help organizations identify critical moments of truth, optimize customer touchpoints, and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Specifically, this research seeks to: 1. Develop a robust, multidimensional customer journey tool that captures key aspects of the customer experience across different stages and channels.; 2. Validate the tool through empirical research, ensuring its applicability and effectiveness in real-world business contexts and; 3. Provide actionable insights for businesses to improve their customer journey management practices, thereby fostering stronger customer relationships and achieving a sustainable competitive advantage.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 A holistic approach to understanding the customer journey

A holistic approach to the customer journey offers a comprehensive understanding of every touchpoint between the customer and the brand, beginning with the initial interaction and extending through post-purchase engagement. This approach goes beyond mere transactional exchanges to highlight the emotional, psychological, and experiential dimensions that define a customer's relationship with a brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009). Given the dynamic nature of modern customer behavior, particularly in service-driven sectors like hospitality and tourism, a more integrative perspective is needed to capture the multifaceted experiences of customers. The Customer Experience Theory (Verhoef et al., 2009) serves as the primary framework for this analysis. It emphasizes that customer experiences are cumulative, shaped by both controllable factors (e.g., service interactions, physical environment) and uncontrollable factors (e.g., social influences, emotions). This theory also argues that each touchpoint should be managed cohesively to maximize customer satisfaction, which in turn leads to increased loyalty and brand advocacy. This holistic view is particularly relevant in industries where emotional and relational elements strongly influence customer behavior (Carreira et al., 2013). To effectively manage the customer journey, it is essential to adopt a customer-centric approach that encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses at each stage of the journey. As highlighted by Burns and Neisner (2006) and Busser et al. (2022), emotional connections are pivotal in shaping customer satisfaction, especially in sectors where the service experience is personalized and memorable. These connections are key drivers of long-term loyalty and advocacy, ensuring that businesses not only meet but exceed customer expectations.

In addition to customer experience theory, the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) framework (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) complements this analysis by emphasizing the co-creation of value between the business and the customer. The SDL framework posits that value is not delivered to customers but rather co-created through interactions and relationships. In this light, customer engagement is not a passive reception of value, but an active, relational process that strengthens both parties. For example, in hospitality services, customers co-create their experience through interactions with staff, the physical environment, and digital touchpoints, which are all critical in shaping overall satisfaction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The integration of these theoretical perspectives enables a more nuanced understanding of customer behavior throughout the journey, from pre-purchase information search to post-purchase experience sharing. This comprehensive framework can drive strategic initiatives aimed at improving customer satisfaction and loyalty. By recognizing the emotional and psychological complexities of the journey, firms can develop more personalized and responsive services, which has been shown to confer a significant competitive advantage. Effective customer journey management goes beyond improving service delivery; it serves as a strategic tool for achieving sustainable competitive advantage. As demonstrated in the luxury hospitality sector, businesses that can identify and address pain points throughout the customer journey not only enhance satisfaction but also foster innovation in service development and delivery (Lin, Marine-Roig, & Llonch-Molina, 2022). For instance, Michelin-starred restaurants exemplify how managing customer expectations at every touchpoint can result in immersive, memorable experiences that significantly contribute to customer well-being and

satisfaction. The concept of strategic alignment across all customer touchpoints, as explored by Thomke and Von Hippel (2002), suggests that continuous interaction between customer insights and product or service innovation is key to differentiation.

2.2 The stages of the customer journey

The customer journey is traditionally segmented into three core stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Each of these stages presents unique opportunities and challenges for businesses striving to influence customer behavior and perceptions. A sophisticated understanding of these stages is critical for creating a seamless, personalized, and satisfying customer experience. This nuanced approach allows businesses to adapt their strategies dynamically, addressing the evolving expectations of modern consumers.

Pre-purchase stage: establishing awareness and consideration

The pre-purchase stage is where potential customers first become aware of a brand and begin evaluating its offerings. This stage is crucial because it shapes initial impressions that heavily influence subsequent decisions. Key activities during this phase include information searches, comparisons of alternatives, and the formation of purchase intentions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). To effectively capture customer attention and drive brand recognition, businesses must employ targeted marketing campaigns, personalized content, and proactive social media engagement (Bhinde et al., 2023; Castro et al., 2017). As digital media increasingly dominates pre-purchase behaviors, social media platforms—especially visually driven platforms like Instagram—have become powerful tools for influencing the behaviors of younger generations, including Gen-Z consumers who are particularly responsive to visual and experiential content (Bhinde et al., 2023). Predictive analytics and customer segmentation tools further enhance this phase by anticipating consumer needs and preferences, enabling businesses to craft more personalized messaging and product offerings (Van Chau & He, 2024). This targeted approach maximizes engagement during the critical pre-purchase phase, where brand awareness and initial consideration are formed.

Purchase stage: facilitating the decision-making process

The purchase stage represents a pivotal moment in the customer journey, where consumers engage directly with the product or service, making decisions based on their evaluations of quality, service, pricing, and overall value propositions. This phase directly impacts immediate satisfaction and influences the likelihood of repeat business (Schmitt, 2003). Here, the decision-making process is shaped by various factors, including prior experiences, peer recommendations, and the perceived value of the offering (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). It is essential for businesses to ensure that every touchpoint during this stage is carefully managed to foster a positive experience. This includes providing seamless transactions, accurate product information, and excellent customer service. With the increasing reliance on digital platforms, customers are using online resources such as reviews, comparison tools, and social media to guide their purchasing

decisions. Smartphones and digital technologies are instrumental during this stage, enabling quick access to information that facilitates decision-making (Ni et al., 2022). Crucially, decision-making is not purely rational. It involves a complex interplay of rational and emotional considerations (VanBergen, Lurie, & Chen, 2022). For example, while some customers may prioritize price and features, others may be driven by emotional factors such as trust in the brand or a sense of alignment with their personal values. Understanding this balance is essential for businesses seeking to align their offerings with customer expectations, particularly in industries where personal and emotional connections play a significant role in consumer decision-making.

Post-purchase stage: cultivating long-term relationships

The post-purchase stage encompasses various activities, including product usage, customer service interactions, and repeat purchases. This stage is vital for building long-term relationships with customers and fostering brand advocacy. Satisfied customers who have positive post-purchase experiences are more likely to become brand advocates, sharing their experiences on social media and review platforms. This can significantly influence the decisions of potential customers, creating a positive feedback loop that enhances brand reputation (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Effective post-purchase management involves more than just responding to customer inquiries; it requires proactive engagement, such as soliciting feedback, promptly addressing any issues, and exceeding customer expectations through personalized follow-ups and exclusive offers. Businesses that excel in this area build strong emotional connections with customers, resulting in higher levels of customer loyalty and advocacy (Liu & Keh, 2015). Understanding the cognitive and emotional dimensions of customer experience during this stage is crucial for maintaining relationships that drive long-term business success (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

3. The role of moderating variables in the customer journey and the feedback loop: satisfaction, customer delight, and decision-making

Effectively managing the customer journey necessitates a nuanced understanding of moderating variables such as customer commitment, time investment, and the nature of the service being offered. These factors profoundly influence how customers engage with a brand across different stages of the journey and ultimately shape their overall experience. A deeper exploration of these variables reveals critical insights that businesses can leverage to optimize customer satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term value. Customer commitment serves as a pivotal moderating factor throughout the customer journey. Highly committed customers are more resilient in the face of minor service failures, demonstrate deeper engagement with brand communications, and display stronger loyalty—even when faced with competitive alternatives (Bowden, 2009). Customer commitment is particularly important in sectors where relationship-building and emotional connection play a significant role, such as in hospitality or service industries.

Businesses can nurture this commitment by employing personalized marketing initiatives that recognize and reward loyalty. This approach not only reinforces the customer's emotional bond

with the brand but also increases customer lifetime value by promoting repeat business and advocacy (Verhoef, 2003). The stronger the commitment, the more likely customers are to become brand ambassadors, actively contributing to positive word-of-mouth and brand equity. The time investment customers are willing to dedicate at each stage of the journey is another key moderating factor. It varies significantly based on elements such as product complexity, perceived risk, and individual customer preferences. For example, customers who spend substantial time in the pre-purchase stage tend to have higher expectations for transparency, support, and detailed information. These customers are more likely to engage in extensive research, comparison, and evaluation before making a decision (Bolton, Kannan, & Bramlett, 2000). Understanding the nuances of time investment allows businesses to design flexible customer journeys that cater to a diverse range of customer needs. For instance, offering more detailed product information, personalized recommendations, or interactive tools during the pre-purchase phase can enhance transparency and build trust. This approach can improve both customer satisfaction and conversion rates, particularly for customers who invest more time and seek deeper engagement before making a decision (Bitner et al., 2000). The nature of the service offered also plays a critical role in shaping the customer journey. Services can be broadly categorized into high-touch and low-touch offerings, and each category requires different approaches to customer engagement. High-touch services, such as consulting or healthcare, demand personalized interactions and ongoing support. In contrast, low-touch services, like e-commerce or self-service platforms, prioritize efficiency, convenience, and speed (Bitner, Brown, & Meuter, 2000).

3. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Customer Journey Tool provides both theoretical and practical contributions by offering a holistic, integrated approach to understanding and managing customer behavior. This tool is particularly valuable for service-driven industries where emotional engagement plays a critical role in customer satisfaction and long-term success (Table 1). By helping businesses develop strategies that align with both cognitive and emotional dimensions of the customer journey, the tool fosters sustainable competitive advantage and enhances brand advocacy in competitive markets. The Customer Journey Tool offers significant contributions to both customer experience management and consumer behavior, advancing the existing theoretical frameworks and offering a new integrative approach. One of its most notable contributions is the integration of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions throughout the entire customer journey. In terms of practical contributions, the Customer Journey Tool provides businesses with a robust framework for analyzing and improving customer experiences. By capturing the interplay between cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors, the tool enables businesses to develop targeted strategies that cater to both the rational and emotional needs of customers at each stage of the journey. This is particularly important in industries where customer satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy are crucial for long-term success, such as hospitality, retail, tourism, and healthcare.
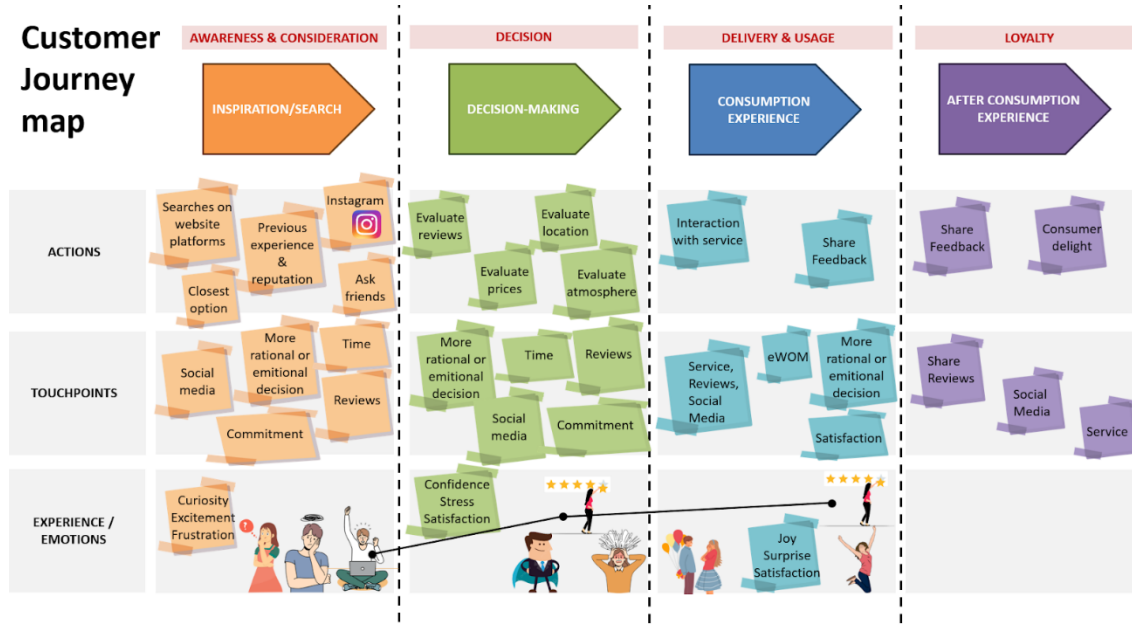
Figure 1. The Customer Journey Tool

Table 1. Constructs and questions inside the survey

Phase	Construct	Question	Items	Authors
Inspiration and search	Inspiration & Attention	Describe what you did to find inspiration or how you got in touch with information that caught your attention about the hotel:	1. A message in Instagram got my attention 2. My friends/family recommended it 3. My previous experience in the hotel 4. I knew because the reputation of the hotel. 5. I was in the area, and I show the hotel 6. It was the closest option given the aim of the tryp 7. I was searching for a hotel in internet	Adapted from Bhinde et al. (2023).
	Information search	Where did you search for information (you can select 3 options) about where to stay?:	1. Google (or another search engine) 2. Recommendation at a restaurant, travel agency or other face-to-face external source 3. TripAdvisor 4. Comments on social media about the restaurant 5. Website (of the restaurant) 6. Instagram or other social media 7. I asked my friends/family 8. I didn't search for information	Based on the study of Ho et al. (2012).
	Rational versus Emotional	In this search you would say that we were:	1. More rational 2. More emotional 3. None of them	Based on the study of VanBergen at al. (2022).
	Commitment	Which was the level of commitment with the search, in a scale from 0 to 5 (being 0 not committed at all and 5 very committed?	1. Not committed 2 3 4 5. Very committed	Adapted from Ni et al. (2022).
	Feelings	How did you feel while searching for information? (multiple options can be chosen):	1. Happy 2. Understood 3. Frustrated 4. Angry 5. Ashamed 6. Guilty	Adapted from studies of Burns & Neisner (2006), and Kim and Fesenmaier

			7. Fearful 8. Proud 9. Pleased 10. Loved 11. Joyful 12. Respected 13. Sure 14. Overwhelmed 15. Worried 16. Unsure 17. None of the previous ones	(2017).
	Time	How much time did you spend in the search?:	1. Less than 10 minutes 2. Between 10 and 20 minutes 3. Between 20 and 30 minutes 4. Between 30 minutes and 1 hour 5. More than 1 hour	Based on the study of Mieli (2023).
Decision-making	Decision factors	Which three factors where crucial to take the decision? (you can select 5 options):	1. The location 2. The restaurant 3. The atmosphere (in terms of other clients) 4. The staff 5. The size of the room 6. The design of the room 7. The luminosity (in terms of windows) of the room 8. The photos of the reception and entrance hall 9. The option of a spa 10. The option of a gym 11. The price 12.The breakfast 13. The local character of the hotel 14. The design 15. The prestige of the hotel 16. The exclusive atmosphere 17. The comments (TripAdvisor or other social media) 18. The comments from family/friends 19. The Parking 20. The photos of the bathroom 21. Available offers 22. The international atmosphere 23. The originality	Adapted for study's purpose from Castro et al. (2017).
	Rational versus Emotional	In your selection you would say that we were:	See *"Inspiration and search"* phase	
	Commitment	Which was the level of commitment with the selection, in a scale from 0 to 5 (being 0 not committed at all and 5 very committed?:	See *"Inspiration and search"* phase	
	Feelings	How did you feel while taking the decision for information? (multiple options can be chosen):	See *"Inspiration and search"* phase	
	Time	How much time did you spend in the taking decision?:	See *"Inspiration and search"* phase	
Consumption experience	Decision factors	Please pick the 3 main positive issues of the experience: Please pick the 3 main negative issue of the experience:	See *"Decision-making"* phase	
	Feelings	How did you feel?:	See *"Inspiration and search"* phase	
	Rational versus Emotional	During the experience, you would say that you were:	See *"Inspiration and search"* phase	
	Satisfaction	How to you evaluate your satisfaction from 1 to 5 (being 1 very dissatisfied and 5 very	1. Very dissatisfied 2 3	Adapted from Busser et al. (2022).

			satisfied):	4 5. Very satisfied	
	eWOM	Did you share the experience?:	1. Yes, online during the stay 2. Yes, online afterwards 3. Yes, online while and after the stay 4. Yes, talking with my family/friends 5. No	Based on the studies of Hysa et al. (2022), Meijerink and Schoenmakers (2021), and Lin et al. (2022).
After consumption experience	Consumer delight	Finally, can you describe your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements?:	1. The experience in the hotel was very pleasant 2. The staff seemed interested in helping me 3. They were really helpful and polite 4. Most services were very satisfying 5. They made me think that I was very important 6. I was treated like royalty 7. The service I received was much more than generally necessary Affective dimension 8. The experience at the hotel was full of wonderful surprises 9. The hotel was a pleasant surprise 10. The stay was very exciting 11. I felt stimulated during the stay 12. My day/s in the hotel is truly a special one 13. I felt that I was exceptionally lucky that day 14. I never thought that I could enjoy a stay at a hotel so much	Based on the study of Liu et al. (2015).

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