CONCEPTUAL ARTICLE

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE PARADIGM: THE DISCONNECT EXPERIENCE
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ABSTRACT: Customer Experience has been in focus of all marketers for many years by now. Customer experience remains on the marketing strategy table with due importance and guides the strategies at the end of the day. The customer experience is viewed in this article based on the “connect” established by the brand with the customer and viz. in this context the model of “connect” is derived conceptually to deliver the relevance and importance of customer experience. The paradigm of customer experience is conceptually extended with several possibilities horizontally and vertically to arrive at a dynamic experience model not with-standing the current framework in which such experiences are dealt with. In this context the relevant conceptualization of customer experience at the time of “disconnect” is highlighted in the light of drawing an experience dimension around the customer in this context. The article conceptualizes the dynamics of a customer brand interaction at various levels of connect and the varied dimensions of experience factors that ranges in a wide spectrum resulting in several challenges posed before a marketing person.

KEYWORDS: Experience, customer experience, customer connect, disconnect experience.

INTRODUCTION: Customer Experience has been the buzz word for most of the businesses that aims at sustainable growth and which thrives to make a difference every year progressively to the merit of its existence and to its stakeholder expectations. The term customer experience is studied with great passion by many and, further exploring its derived meaning, the depth of its understanding broadens with possibilities extending wide to research further. Thus the definition is still evolving to contain its meaning in hard business practices. Consumer and marketing research has shown that experiences occur when consumers search for products, when they shop for them, when they receive service and when they consume them. (Arnould, 2002) (Brakus J Josko, 2008) (Holbrook, 2000) This traditional view on consumer experience describes it containing the space where the consumer search for products, shop for them, when they receive service and while they consume the product carries narrow application while the experience extends much beyond this scope. Based on most popularly cited studies the experience framework could hold the product related experience, shopping and service experience, consumption experience and brand experience.
**Product Experience:** Product experience occur when consumers interact with products i.e., when consumer search for products and examine and evaluate them (Hoch, 2002). The product experience can be direct when there is physical contact with the product or indirect when a product is presented virtually or in an advertisement (Hoch, Consumer Learning: advertising and the ambiguity of Product experience, 1986).

Shopping and Service experience: Occurs when a customer interacts with a store’s physical environment, its personnel, its policies and practices. This establishes the influence of atmospheric variable and sales people on the customer experiences. (Kerin, 1992)

**Consumption Experience:** Experience also occurs when consumers consume and use products. Consumption experiences are multidimensional and include hedonic dimensions, such as feelings, fantasies and fun. (Morris B Holbrook and Elizabeth C Hirschman, 1982). Much of the interpretative research on consumption experience has analyzed hedonic goals that occur during and after the consumption. For examples studies on museums, river rafting, baseball and skydiving (Arnould Eric, 1993) (Celsi L Richard, Randall L Rose, Thomas W Leigh, 1993) (Holt Douglas, 1995) gave an outlook of consumption experiences from various perspectives.

**Brand Experience:** Traditional marketing views consumers as rational decision makers who care about functional features and benefits. In contrast, experiential marketers view consumers as rational and emotional human beings who are concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences. Five different types of experiences, or strategic experiential modules (SEMs), that marketers can create for customers are distinguished: sensory experiences (SENSE); affective experiences (FEEL); creative cognitive experiences (THINK); physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (ACT); and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE). These experiences are implemented through so-called experience providers (ExPros) such as communications, visual and verbal identity, product presence, electronic media, etc. (Schmitt, 1999).

Consumers are also exposed to various specific brand related stimuli such as brand identifying colors (Bellizzi, Joseph A, Robert E. Hite, 1992) (Gorn, Gerald J., Amitava Chattopadhyay, Tracey Yi, and
Darren, 1997), shapes (Veryzer, Robert W. and J. Wesley Hutchinson, 1998), typefaces, background design elements (Mandel, Naomi and Eric J. Johnson, 2002) slogans, mascots and brand characters (Keller 1987). These brand related stimuli appear as part of brand’s design and identity (eg. Name, logo, signage), packaging and marketing communication (eg. Advertisement, brochures, websites) and the environment in which the brand is marketed and or sold (eg. Stores, events). This brand related stimuli constitute the major source of subjective internal consumer responses, which is referred to as “brand experience”.

Customer Experience and the “ Touchpoints “: The trouble with understanding customer experience is phenomenally important for business of contemporary times and one of the critical elements in focus when considering customer experience as a value generating tool is the “touchpoints”. Touch points in marketing language refers to the many critical moments customers interact with the organization and its offerings on their way to purchase and afterwards. (Alex Rawson, Ewan Duncan and Conor Jones, 2013). The hard truth is that, for a corporate that values customer experience, it becomes difficult to design and develop critical moments which is controllable to provide desired experience for the customers who interact with or within these touch points. The hard fact is that most marketer could develop the notion around customer experience as the corporate who engages the touchpoints and the customer on the other side who recognizes these moments as experience generating. The narrowness of this vision is that there are separate point of recognition for the said “critical moments” where the moments are designed, developed and executed by the corporate purposefully recognizes this as a touchpoint for the customer to engage wherein the role of the customer gets initiated only when the customer perceives this as a moment of experience.

For example, a TV manufacturing company running a sales promotion campaign in a multibrand retail showroom engages with the touchpoints which is created for the customers the moment it was ideated and the customer who visits the showroom is engaged with the touchpoint at the time he/she recognizes the touchpoint. But this “moment” is relatively non-critical for the customer as he/she is focused with another brand from another manufacturer. The attention given to the campaign is given less importance relative to the brand in focus and hence this does not get identified as a real” touch point“. Suppose the customer engages with his/her choice of the brands and later returns to engage with the sales promotion campaign being run then this engagement is more of importance for the customer as he involves in deriving a value relative to the perceived value of other choice of brands already he/she engaged with. This builds the criticality of the said moment creating a “touchpoint” for the organization doing the campaign. Over-emphasis on managing the touchpoints could hamper the realization of concrete results both in terms of ROI and ROO.

The plotting of touchpoints in the end-to-end journey of a customer is hard to implement Corporate with overemphasis on touchpoints resort to plotting several touchpoints with a claim of sticking customer to one or the other touchpoints. When the touchpoint portfolio increases in breadth the complexity arises in managing and monitoring results of each individual touchpoints at a given period of time. From a customer’s point of view several touchpoints from several categories of the product and several corporate in action at the same time in variety of ways is far more complex to demystify and focus. Hence the optimum touchpoint and touch point differentiation has strategically becomes more important than before. This has been prioritized by several business entities as part of their competency development and source for competitive advantage.
Customer Connect and the Customer Experience: Many literatures on the experience concepts in marketing assumes a beginning and end to the experience journey thereby mentioning it is an end-to-end experience journey. How will we recognize the beginning and the end of the experience journey? Does the experience journey initiated by the corporate or the customer? Who decides to break or discontinue the experience journey? How should the length of the experience journey determined? Is it possible to account the inputs and the results of an experience journey? Who is responsible for the experiences in this “experience journey”? Can the experience journey be choreographed—the controllable and uncontrollable possibilities of experience management? Several questions arise when we start envisaging the experience concept in a hard business reality framework.

The Customer Experience Paradigm: Conceptualizing customer experience paradigm on the basis of customer connect could reaffirm the “connect” spectrum. The customer “connect” spectrum ranging from a “no-connect” to “disconnect” and possibly a “reconnect” possibility could be conceptualized as the variety of possibilities where customers encounters an organization, its marketing communication, brand, products, reviews, social opinions, peer group citing, self-image concepts and various other links, on a continuum, where the customer is yet to link with the organization or to a stage where customer delinks himself and when he reconnects by himself or through organization’s effort.

No-Connect: The stage where the organizational touchpoints remain irrelevant or has not reached a specific market.

Pre-connect: the stage following a no-connect stage where the organizational touchpoints are active but the market is still staying away from including them in their consideration set and while the involvement with the touchpoints is negligible.

Connect: The stage where the touchpoints activates customer recognition, involves the customer and engages the customer until the connect is converted into a revenue share for the organization.

Post Connect: The stage in which the organization is active in maximizing the Customer Life Time Value (CLTV), Customer Perceived Value (CPV) and Customer Advocacy by minimizing the cost to maintain the customer while employing the customer to remain an advocate for the organization’s product and brand resulting in revenue generation through the customer. This is a stage where the customer sticks to the organization’s product and brands and advocates among the customer contacts acting as a self-regulated touch point generating positive claims favorable to brand building in the market.

Disconnect: The stage where the customer decides to delink himself from the organization and its products and/or its brand(s).
The Disconnect Experience: The necessity of following up a customer who have seized to remain with the product and services of the organization has great relevance in many ways in the modern marketing scenario. The volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity that exist in managing customer base is challenging for every marketer or market oriented organization as a whole. The need here is not to maintain a customer database but to analyse the database and check on the disconnected customers as well. Why is disconnected customer important for an organization? Does disconnecting from an organization, its products, services or brand(s) generates experience? Does this experience remain relevant both for the customer and the organization? Is disconnect experience conceptualized to identify the variables that it comprises of?

Disconnect Experience begins much before the actual disengagement of the customer. This is a challenge for the corporate as such a stage in the customer connect continuum could not be easily detected. It usually becomes evident when there is a direct response related to the disconnect attitude is exhibited by the customer.

In this stage, customer acts indifferently to the brand and its products, shows dislike to the even minutest non-compliances and reacts to every cost born in the course of connecting with the brand or its products. Where, at this stage, the customer may not be conscious about his disconnect attitude with the brand while he continues to remain connected and continues to experience a cognitive dissonance for every deviations from the expectations about the product or the brand. This will generate a negative opinion among the social networks the customer engages with. This poses a great challenge for the corporate businesses. Such partial disconnect is yet not discovered by the customer but has already formulated a negative aura around. Further, the customer may linger to the brand for a substantially longer period depends on the switching possibility available.

An immediate switch reduces the propensity to accelerate negative image while a delayed switch is damaging. The customer recognises the disconnect when the post connect experience continues to generate a negativism around the product or the brand resulting in finally claiming that the brand or the product, customer connects with, is inferior. In the mean time there is a chance for the customer to switch to the competitor.

The brand owner or the product manufacturer seldom figures this disconnect and hence this remains completely out of the strategic framework. The disconnected customer could be tracked, the customer who responds with a notion to disconnect could be followed, a customer who is likely to disconnect could also be detected by an efficient marketer during a conversation, but the difficulty remains where a customer who by himself has not recognized a disconnect, yet accumulates a negative image of the brand or product, continues to exist anonymous. The question is there a way ahead to find this anonymously disconnected customer and revitalize his/her experience?

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