

User Experience: An Introduction

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Executive Summary

This paper defines User Experience in terms of traditional advertising and marketing lexicon, in the B2C (business to consumer) environment.

It highlights the traditional nature and function of brands, and how brand building is affected by the rise of the internet and other technology. Specifically, the paper focuses on how traditional marketing efforts must be revised to account for the influence of the internet and the network economy.

Brands are not products, but relationships between products and their users. These relationships are based on the accumulation of interactions between the product (or company, or service) and its users at a variety of touchpoints. The way a user feels about a brand (positive, negative or neutral) after one or more of these interactions contributes to these relationships.

Companies which ignore the fact that consumers have at their disposal more information and communication power than ever before will find that they are unable to build a successful brand and compete in the marketplace. The traditional one-way dialogue (from products to consumers) is no longer appropriate or adequate, and users will respond by abandoning brands which do not engage in a two-way dialogue, or which set up expectations on which they do not deliver. Individuals, not companies, now own the brand and will determine whether a product, service, or company succeeds or fails.

Glossary

Advertising

Generally refers to traditional advertising strategy and vehicles, such as broadcast (television, radio), outdoor (billboards, transit posters), print (magazine, newspaper), collateral (brochures, other printed materials). In relation to User Experience, advertising can be thought of as broadcast communications on a one-to-many model, with little or no interaction required on the part of the consumer or end user.

Brand

What we call a product, service or company which has achieved a certain level of relationship with its users which has transcended its functional benefits.

Branding

The process of creating and maintaining a brand.

Heuristic Evaluation

A method for evaluating the usability level of a website. Generally based on Jakob Nielsen's 10 Usability Heuristics, and includes such things as error prevention, time to complete tasks, and the ease of use of a website.

Marketing

A broad term for all communications initiatives designed to sell a product or service.

Stakeholders

These are all the individuals which have a stake in the relationship between a participant and its eventual users. Stakeholders include purchasers, but also include potential purchasers, past purchasers, current employees, prospective employees, channel partners, investors, advertising agencies, public relations firms, suppliers – in fact, anyone who stands to lose or gain by the success or failure of a company.

Target Audience

The individuals or groups who will be affected or who a company wishes to affect by its communications.

Usability

Generally refers to ease-of-use of something, typically websites. Usability is often measured by such things as time to complete a given task, level of satisfaction with the process of completing the task, and whether the user is able to accomplish his or her goals efficiently. (See Heuristic Evaluation.)

User

In the context of marketing communications, the term 'user' identifies the individual. Users comprise consumers and potential consumers of a product, as well as individuals who have any interaction with the product or its communications.

User Experience

User Experience is the term used to describe an interaction between a product or service and the individual. We use the term 'user' to identify the individual in this interaction, and the term 'experience' to identify that individual's encounter with the product or service in a particular instance, as well as the overall effect of an accumulation of these encounters.

User Experience vs Usability

User Experience is a good term to describe your targets' interaction with a brand at any touchpoint. Usability is a good term to describe the ease-of-use of a website or other interactive product.

Introduction

This paper will demonstrate how User Experience can and will transform the traditional relationship between a 'company' and its 'customers', particularly in the context of brands. While User Experience is applicable to broader communications, and while many of the theories outlined have relevance outside of traditional marketing efforts, the focus is to demonstrate how the User Experience is a more effective way to think about 'marketing'. With that in mind, the paper is written in terms of traditional marketing and advertising theories, and uses that lexicon as a starting point.

It should also be noted that in this paper we discuss User Experience primarily in terms of the business-to-consumer (B2C) relationship. User Experience is, of course, applicable to business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-enterprise (B2E) relationships as well, but are not the main focus. Subsequent papers will examine these relationships in more detail.

When choosing examples in our discussion of brands and User Experience, we have chosen to focus primarily on consumer products to provide examples. This is primarily a function of using the traditional marketing lexicon, and helps us to put brands and User Experience into an existing context. The North American marketplace, however, is more and more becoming a service-based economy, and it should be remembered that brands can be created for not only consumer products (Coke, Tide, Kleenex), but retail stores (Gap, JC Penney, HomeDepot), services (ClearNet, Bell, MollyMaid), and companies (Cisco, Microsoft, BASF) as well.

What Is User Experience?

User Experience is the term used to describe an interaction between a product or service and the individual. The term 'user' is employed to identify the individual in this interaction, and the term 'experience' to identify that individual's encounter with the product or service in a particular instance, as well as the overall effect of an accumulation of these encounters.

User Experience is a broad topic. Much broader than one would be lead to expect by technology types who talk about User Experience merely in the context of websites or other internet-based communications. The fact is, 'users' are having 'experiences' all the time, and most of them have nothing to do with websites.

More importantly, users are really not very concerned with whether they are on a website, in a retail store, talking to employees, buying a company's stock, looking for a job with that company, talking to each other, using a product in their home, seeing it on the television or reading about it in a brochure. Every time they have any kind of interaction with a product, service, or company, they are having an experience. All of these interactions accumulate over time to form a relationship, which we refer to as the 'brand'.

When the User Experiences are consistent and positive, a positive relationship is formed, and the result is a strong brand. When the User Experiences are negative, a negative relationship is formed. When the User Experiences are inconsistent or confusing, no relationship is created at all, and therefore no brand is created. When there is a negative brand identity, not only is the product vulnerable to competition, but it also risks failure, because users will actively reject a brand with which they have had negative experiences. When the brand is non-existent, there is only a product, which is vulnerable to competition, commoditization and low rates of customer acquisition and retention.

With that in mind, it seems a little myopic to think about User Experience simply in terms of websites. User Experience can have a significant impact on the success or failure of a product, whether or not that product has a website.

Further papers will outline methodologies and approaches to developing an appropriate User Experience, as well as the role of User Experience in B2B and B2E relationships.

The Past

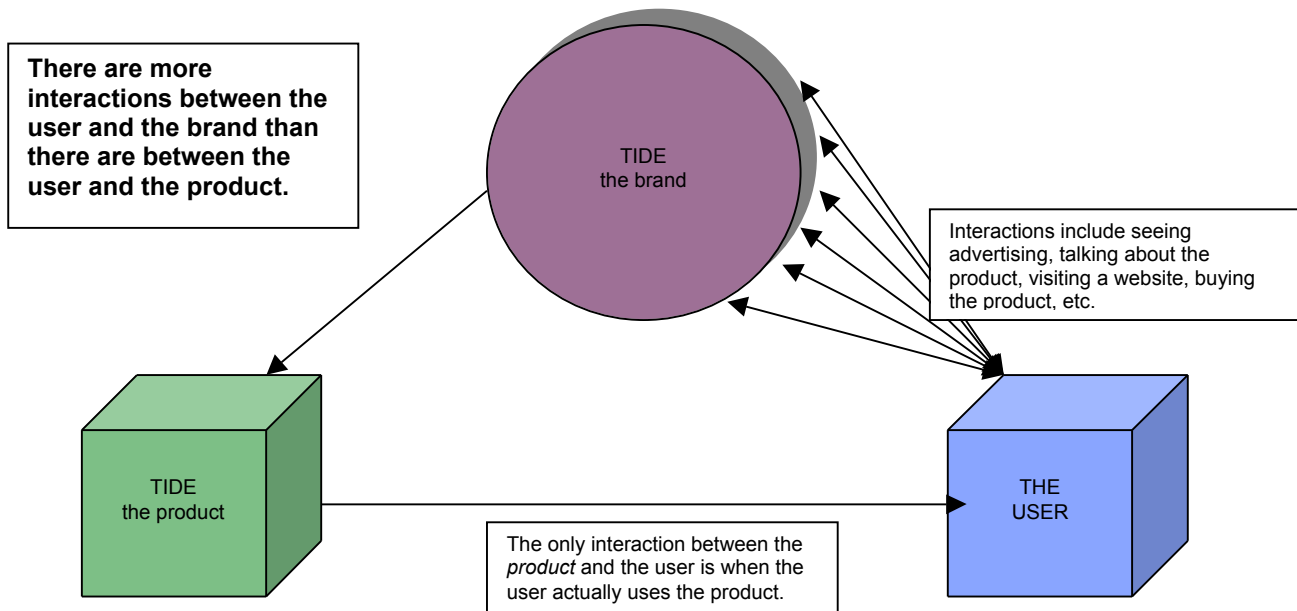
Branding, Historically

Although it has had more attention lately, the idea of a 'brand' has been around for more than 100 years. Traditionally the purview of older, established, primarily packaged-goods companies (the oldest packaged goods brand in North America is Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix, first introduced in the 1890s), brands are now common in most product categories.

In the past 10 or 20 years, the market has been flooded with so many new products and services that consumers can't possibly be expected to know about them all, and 'high-tech' products, which have comprised a significant proportion of these new products and services, are complicated and often confusing. The average consumer simply doesn't have the time – or the inclination – to apprehend and synthesize the differences between, let's say, a digital telephone and a wireless telephone. They simply know that they want a mobile phone to use in their car. At the same time, companies do not have the time or the budget to educate every single potential purchaser of their product.

A brand acts like a shortcut in this education process. A strong brand communicates more than the sum of its parts. A successful brand allows users to make purchasing (or other) decisions which are based not simply on functional benefits, but on certain promises and propositions made to consumers regarding less tangible benefits. These propositions and promises require a level of trust, on the part of the user, that the product will deliver. For example, individuals don't really have to understand what 'New Tide Microfibre Formula' is, as long as they can be made to understand that Tide cleans clothes best.

Tide (for instance) has, over time, made a proposition to consumers: That it will clean clothes really well, and better than competitors. Consumers have received this message, believed it to a greater or lesser degree, and bought the product. When consumers then interacted with Tide, they decided that it lived up to this proposition (whether it did, in point of fact, clean clothes 'better' is irrelevant – only the perception by consumers is important), and 'Tide' became synonymous with 'cleaner clothes'. It's important to remember that the 'interaction' does not refer solely to a consumer's usage of the product to wash clothes. Interactions (see 'Touchpoints', below) with Tide could include such things as talking about it with friends, seeing it featured at the laundromat, reading about it in a home and garden magazine, seeing advertising, and using it at home.



The accumulation of interactions builds a *relationship* between a product (or service, or company) and its stakeholders. Just as an accumulation of interactions between individuals eventually establishes a relationship between them, the accumulation of interactions between Tide and its users eventually establishes a relationship which goes beyond Tide's function as a laundry soap.

Over time, these interactions build on each other, until eventually, there are two separate entities: the *product* Tide, which is laundry soap, and the *brand* Tide, which is something which makes users feel good because they have clean clothes and they are using a product which is used by their friends. The *brand* Tide has transcended the *product* Tide, and now occupies a more complex position in the minds and hearts of its users.

Brands Are Good for Business

Without brands, we have only products (or services, or companies). And a product is product is a product – unless it's a Prada or a Rolex or an Intel, in which case we all recognize it's much more than just a product.

In this way, brands are good for business, because they:

- Protect against commoditization of products
- Reduce price sensitivity
- Increase the ability to attract and retain users at a lower cost
- Protect against competitive threat

(Our focus here is not behavioural or anthropological science, which has produced interesting research into the whys and wherefores of individuals' allegiance to 'brands'. Here we confine our discussion to a brief outline of how relationships (and therefore brands) can positively influence the bottom line.)

Protection against commoditization

When consumers have a relationship with a product, they are less likely to substitute a similar product from a different company. For example, if an individual goes to a store to purchase a Lancôme lipstick,

they are unlikely to substitute a Maybelline lipstick if the Lancôme is not available. Lancôme, it is understood, is a sophisticated, luxury makeup, while Maybelline is perceived as a less sophisticated, serviceable makeup. Lancôme and Maybelline are not interchangeable, even though they are both lipsticks and may even be the same shade.

Reduction of price sensitivity

When users have a relationship with a product, the product is less susceptible to the changes wrought by a typical supply and demand curve. A product with a strong brand identity will find it can raise prices (to a certain extent) without sacrificing customers. In some cases, a higher price actually *increases* brand loyalty, due to a perceived exclusivity (Tiffany's, Rolls Royce, and Tag Heuer are good examples of this phenomenon).

Increased customer acquisition and retention

Customer acquisition is assisted by relationships because of individuals' desire to 'belong' and to communicate 'who they are' to others. Advertising and marketing industries have used the term 'aspirational' to describe some of these propositions made by products to users: "In order to belong to – or because you already do belong to - a particular group or class of people, you should purchase Product X."

American Express is a very good example of this technique: Their tagline "Membership has its privileges" speaks directly to the notion of using brands to identify an individual's belonging to a particular group, and reaping benefits (in addition to the functional benefits provided by the product itself) that are associated with that belonging.

Protection against competitive threat

Strong relationships with users create a barrier to competing products that can be difficult to surmount or break through. The cola industry is a good example of this: between Coke's "The Real Thing" and Pepsi's "Choice of a New Generation", no other cola has been able to gain a significant foothold in the cola market in North America.

While it may be argued that these brands' hold on the market has also to do with their sheer size, the fact is that these cola companies have so successfully achieved loyalty among their users that any new cola would have difficulty gaining the interest or attention of consumers.

Setting Up The Relationship

In order for a relationship to exist, there has to be communication: A product (or service, or company) communicates its functional and emotional benefits to users, who then communicate to the product by purchasing it. In theory, this communication takes place prior to the first transaction, and then continues throughout the life of the relationship between the product and the user.

Advertising is the most obvious method of communication by products to users, and the one that we are generally most familiar with. Products communicate their benefits directly to potential users through television commercials, billboards, direct mail, etc.

Another basic component of communication by products is referred to as the 'Four Ps' by marketers. The Four Ps are *packaging*, *placement*, *pricing* and *positioning*. Each of these communicate specific messages to users, and help to build the relationship.

Packaging is how the product looks from the outside – and this can include not only the packaging, but the label and trimmings. For packaged goods, this means that a gold foil wrapper, for example, indicates a higher-quality product, while a cardboard box indicates a lower-quality, lower-priced product.

Placement tends to refer to where a product is situated physically. This can mean in what kind of place a consumer can find it (in a high-end department store, in a sports store, by mail order), as well as in what location in that place it can be found (by the cash register, in a locked cabinet). The kind of place, as well as its location within that place, communicates to the consumer certain details about the product: a product in a locked cabinet ‘must’ have a higher value (so the consumer thinks), for example, than a product placed in large bins by the cash register.

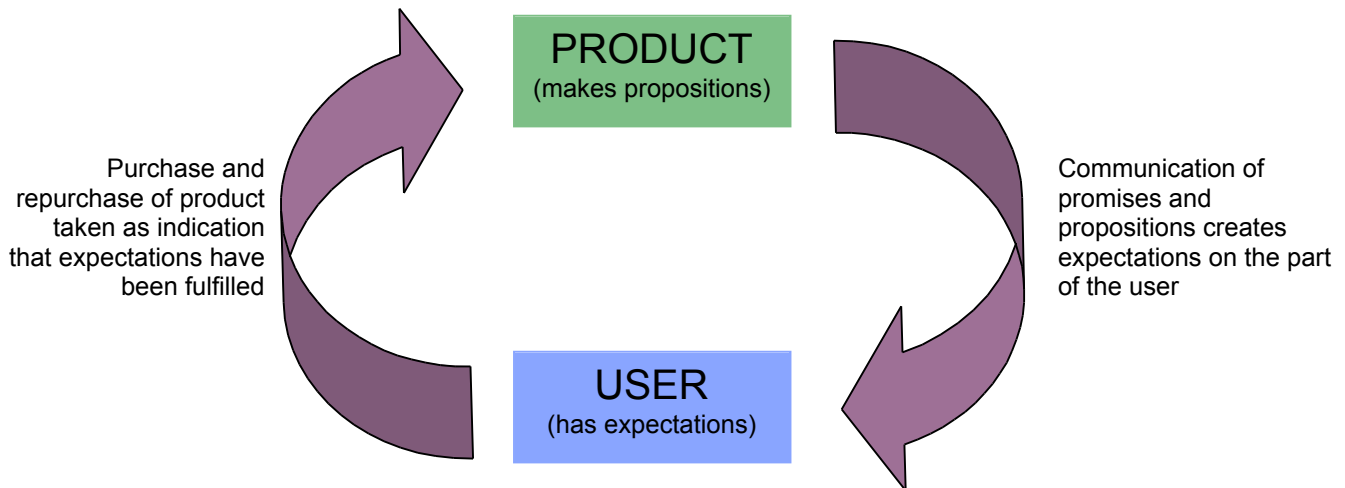
Pricing is the monetary value which is placed on an item (in this case, when it is presented to consumers). In some cases, this can mean a higher intrinsic value (an item made of solid gold has more finite value than a similar item made of paper); just as often, it can represent a perceived value (a shirt with a Prada label has more perceived value than a similar one with a Gap label). In most cases, the monetary value of an item is based on some combination of intrinsic value and perceived value – both of which are complicated constructs, to some degree dependent upon the relationship of the brand and its stakeholders.

Positioning is the most complex of the propositions made to consumers by a product. Positioning refers to a product or service in relation to its competitors – and competitors can be real or imagined. Where a product sits in relation to others in the mind of the consumer is a result of a great number of factors, including the previous three Ps, but also such things as socio-economics, geography, demographics – and the relationship the user has with the company, its products, and its brands.

Setting Up Expectations

Communications, like advertising and the ‘Four Ps’ set up expectations on the part of the user: for example, a higher price and fancy packaging, and placement on the shelf at Holt Renfrew or Bergdorf-Goodman communicate to the potential user that the product has certain quantitative attributes (high quality, high utility) but also certain qualitative attributes (the product will impart a feeling of luxury to the user, the product will allow the user to have a rich experience, etc.) that are much more difficult to communicate and to measure.

This combination of expectations is the biggest factor in brand identity and brand loyalty.



This cycle continues: the product (or service, or company) continues to make promises and propositions that may or may not change over time; users receive these messages, develop expectations, and purchase the product. If the user decides that the product as purchased meets expectations (and creates new ones, such as that the product will deliver on its promises the next time it is used or purchased), the theory goes, the user will purchase the product again and again, thus validating the product's propositions.

Why Isn't This Good Enough?

We've said that relationships are the backbone of brands, and we've described how relationships are initiated. We've described how brands are important for many reasons. No argument there. But why talk about the 'User Experience'? As we've described it, products communicate propositions to consumers, the consumers believe these propositions to a greater or lesser extent, and purchase the product. So the relationship is established, right? Well, not always.

The internet economy has resulted in certain challenges in the development of these relationships, and therefore in the concept of 'brand building'.

The internet and its related technologies have changed the nature of traditional marketing communications. The networked economy means that the individual has the power to discover, develop, and disseminate information just as quickly and effectively as a large company. For the company, this means that it cannot control the relationship with its stakeholders as it once did – the one-to-many model of traditional advertising is no longer sufficient.

For these reasons, we find that 'branding' (the process of creating and maintaining a brand) is an over-used, oft-misunderstood concept. While it's still true that the idea of creating relationships between products and their users is a good one, 'User Experience' is a more useful concept to describe the process by which a brand is developed, and more relevant in the current marketplace.

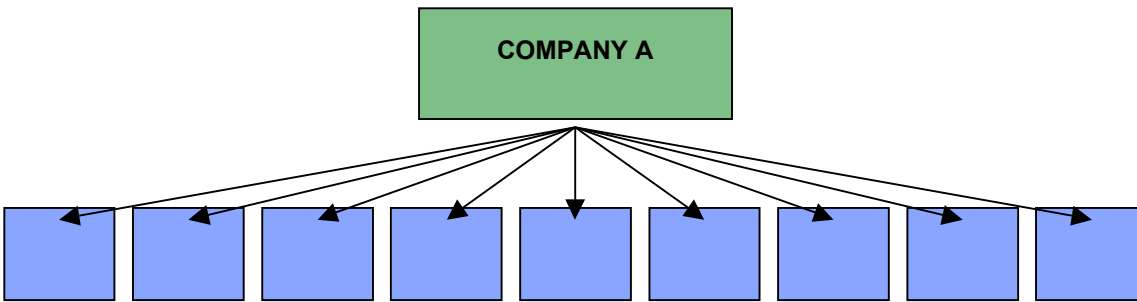
The Present

While the concept of 'brand' is still a relevant one – in other words, it's still relevant to think about products (or services, or companies) as having meaning to users that transcends the functional benefits – the *process* by which strong brands are created has changed. It's no longer sufficient to look at a one-to-many model of communication in order to make promises and propositions to users; and it's no longer sufficient to assume that the relationship can be controlled by the product and its one-way communications.

Consumers (users) now have more information and power at their disposal than ever before, and this has significant ramifications for the process of brand development.

The One-To-Many Model: Broadcast Advertising

Historically, products (or services, or companies) have made propositions or promises to consumers by advertising to them. Advertising has included such things as television or radio commercials, billboards, newspaper or magazine ads, or other 'broadcast' media. By its very nature, advertising in this manner communicated *one* message to *many* individuals.



This traditional method of communication is one-way – from the companies to the users. Consumers are expected to receive the message, and then to act on it. Generally this message consisted of something along the lines of “Product X is good, and good for you, so you should buy it.”

The problem with this model, in terms of branding and user experience, is that it does not really permit a relationship to exist. At least, not a real relationship with a two-way dialogue.

First of all, while this model allows products (or companies, or services) to communicate with users, those users are not given an opportunity to communicate to the companies, except through their purchasing power. While it's true that companies have historically conducted surveys or focus groups in order to get 'feedback', generally speaking the individual did not have the means or opportunity to communicate with the company.

Second, by its very nature, 'broadcast' communications are not individualized, and treat every user the same way. Companies have spent a lot of time and energy trying to identify 'target groups' – but here again, they speak of 'groups' rather than 'individuals'.

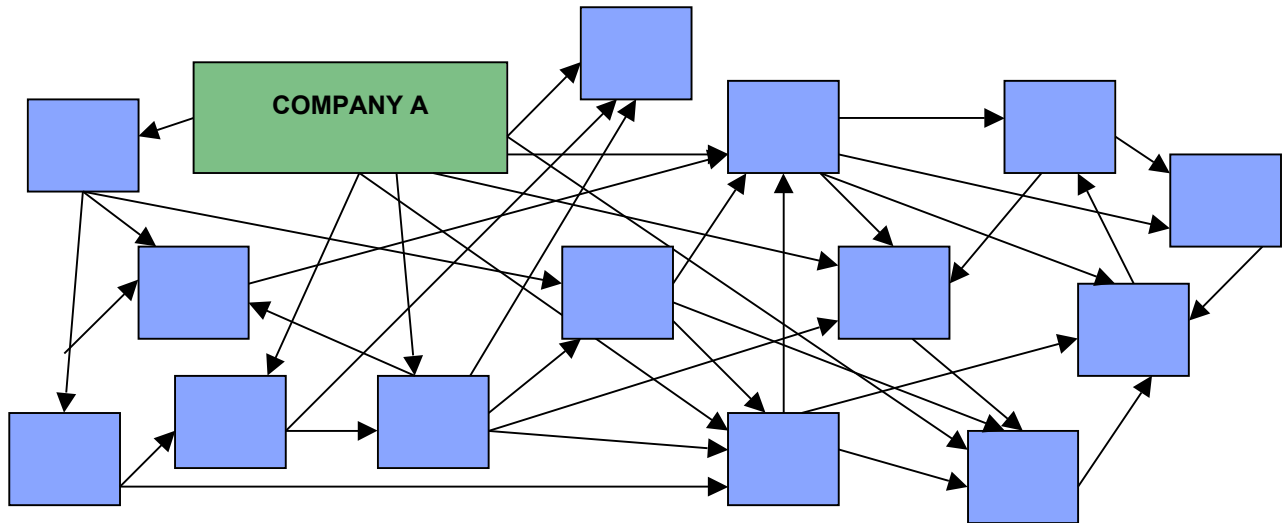
Historically, this one-to-many model has been adequate – largely because individual users did not have any other option. They 'voted with their dollars', and companies seeking to increase market share or mind share or sales did their best to interpret these votes, and respond accordingly.

However, the internet economy has changed all that.

The Many-to-Many Model: A Networked Economy

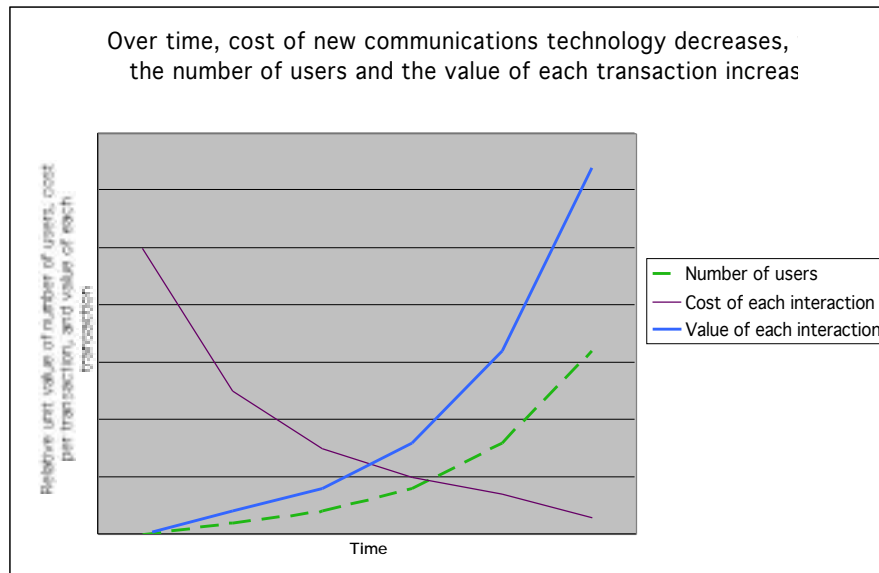
The internet has given us a networked economy. While we often think of networks in terms of the physical cables that connect one computer to another, or a number of computers within an office which are connected together, a network in terms of communication refers to the ability of individuals to communicate with other individuals.

A communications network looks more like this:



It's important to remember that when a network is limited, the value of each node in the network is also limited. However, the value of each node increases exponentially with each node that is added to the network, as does the cost of the infrastructure to build the network.

While individuals have always had the power to communicate with others, the networked economy has increased the number of individuals which can interact, the frequency of that interactions, and the variety of ways in which the interaction can take place. In addition, the number of new individuals which are added to the network every day reduces the cost and increases the value of these interactions over time by making more efficient use of the infrastructure.



The telephone is a good example of a networked system. It allows individuals to communicate with other individuals, and the value of this communication increased as the cost of communication decreased. The first telephone cost a lot of money and was practically worthless, because there was no one else to phone; the millionth telephone, by contrast, costs next to nothing but has a much higher value, because now the individual can potentially communicate with one million other individuals.

The networked economy, then, in which more and more individuals have the means to communicate with more and more other individuals, in more and more ways, has a number of ramifications for User Experience:

1. Individuals now have access to more information than ever before
2. Individuals are increasingly able to communicate with many other individuals, whenever and wherever they want
3. Individuals have the power to disseminate information at a speed that can rival the very companies which seek to communicate with them
4. Target 'groups' have become more fragmented than ever – it is harder to talk to the right users at the right time in the right place

Access to information

Individuals have more information than ever, they know what it means, and they can and will disseminate it to as many other individuals as they can.

Individuals (users) now have easy access to all kinds of information through the internet, as well as ever-increasing alternatives. Users are also more media savvy than ever before. These two elements combine to create an 'audience' that is neither easily fooled nor easily convinced.

One consequence of the possession of this knowledge is that individuals simply *know more*. When we look at advertising from the 1930s, 40s or even 50s, for example, it often seems childlike and amusing to us, because in many cases the promises or propositions appear to us to be blatantly untrue. When Bette Davis appears on a poster claiming that "All My Friends Smoke Merit Cigarettes", we wonder how anyone could have believed that. Contemporary North Americans have read and heard too many stories about

spokespeople not believing in – or not even using - the products they endorse to believe that Bette Davis is telling the ‘truth’.

But the knowledge possessed by the individual extends to more than just knowing about the behaviour of movie stars, of course. In 1996, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the *entire* lifetime knowledge of the average person in the 18th century was roughly equivalent to the amount of information contained in *one* Sunday *Los Angeles Times* newspaper. Today, the average person knows much more (and has the sources at hand), including such diverse things as how to operate a computer, a car, a VCR, a mobile phone, a home-theatre surround-sound system; how to bank in person, on the phone, or on-line; what Pro-Vitamin B5 means to hair; how DNA is involved in the reproductive process; why Oprah’s book club has had a positive impact on the publishing industry; why the British Queen is only a republican figurehead in a parliamentary democracy; the difference between first-degree murder and manslaughter 2; why a simple majority is not enough to elect the president of the United States – in short, the sheer volume of available information has increased the amount of knowledge possessed by the individual.

Individuals (users) can, and have demonstrated that they will, disseminate this information. On the web, this can be relatively dull or limited-appeal information (such as personal websites or blogs, or chain emails to large groups) – or it can be well-researched, well-written investigative reporting (such as salon.com). More often it’s something in between: a bulletin board with posts from people all over the world (www.fuckedcompany.com) or opinion-based essays (www.tomationation.com).

But the power isn’t limited to the internet, of course. All kinds of advances in technology have permitted the ‘average person’ to produce communications material once the exclusive territory of large companies. The individual can now easily record, edit, produce and burn his/her own music or spoken-word CD; produce and print novels; film, edit, produce and distribute movies or television shows – really, any communications vehicle is now accessible to individuals, rather than large companies, which have been the traditional owners of the means to create broadcast communications.

Without getting into a discussion as to the political or philosophical ramifications of this shift in communications power, the result, for the purposes of this paper, is simple: users (consumers), once heard only by where their dollars were spent or not spent, or in the odd focus group or survey, now have a powerful, professional-sounding voice. And with the assistance of the internet, this voice can be transmitted around the world in hours.

The combination of individuals’ access to the means of production, access to an audience, and the savvy to deconstruct the messages given to them creates an interesting situation for products (or services, or companies): It’s not so easy anymore for products to control their promises and propositions, and almost impossible to fully control how those propositions are received. Consider this example:

Nike’s iD website allows customers to ‘build their own’ sneaker, complete with a word of their choice or iD on the side. For his iD, Jonah Peretti, a student at MIT, requested the word ‘sweatshop’, which generated the following email exchange:

From: Personalize, NIKE iD

To: Jonah H. Peretti

Subject: RE: Your NIKE iD order

Your NIKE iD order was cancelled for one or more of the following reasons: 1) Your Personal iD contains another party’s trademark or other intellectual property. 2) Your Personal iD contains the name of an athlete or team we do not have the legal right to use. 3) Your Personal iD was left blank. Did you not want any personalization? 4) Your Personal iD contains profanity or inappropriate slang, and besides, your mother would slap us. If you wish to reorder your NIKE iD product with a new personalization please visit us again at www.nike.com

Thank you, NIKE iD

From: Jonah H. Peretti

To: Personalize, NIKE iD

Subject: RE: Your NIKE iD order

Greetings, My order was canceled but my personal NIKE iD does not violate any of the criteria outlined in your message. The Personal iD on my custom ZOOM XC USA running shoes was the word "sweatshop." Sweatshop is not: 1) another party's trademark, 2) the name of an athlete, 3) blank, or 4) profanity. I chose the iD because I wanted to remember the toil and labor of the children that made my shoes. Could you please ship them to me immediately?
Thanks and Happy New Year, Jonah Peretti

From: Personalize, NIKE iD
To: Jonah H. Peretti
Subject: RE: Your NIKE iD order
Dear NIKE iD Customer, Your NIKE iD order was cancelled because the iD you have chosen contains, as stated in the previous e-mail correspondence, "inappropriate slang." If you wish to reorder your NIKE iD product with a new personalization please visit us again at www.nike.com
Thank you, NIKE iD

From: Jonah H. Peretti
To: Personalize, NIKE iD
Subject: RE: Your NIKE iD order
Dear NIKE iD, Thank you for your quick response to my inquiry about my custom ZOOM XC USA running shoes. Although I commend you for your prompt customer service, I disagree with the claim that my personal iD was inappropriate slang. After consulting Webster's Dictionary, I discovered that "sweatshop" is in fact part of standard English, and not slang. The word means: "a shop or factory in which workers are employed for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions" and its origin dates from 1892. So my personal iD does meet the criteria detailed in your first e-mail. Your Web site advertises that the NIKE iD program is "about freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are." I share Nike's love of freedom and personal statement. The site also says that "If you want it done right . . . build it yourself." I was thrilled to be able to build my own shoes, and my personal iD was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realize my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of statement and reconsider your decision to reject my order.
Thank you, Jonah Peretti

From: Personalize, NIKE iD
To: Jonah H. Peretti
Subject: RE: Your NIKE iD order
Dear NIKE iD Customer, Regarding the rules for personalization it also states on the NIKE iD Web site that "Nike reserves the right to cancel any Personal iD up to 24 hours after it has been submitted." In addition it further explains: "While we honor most personal iDs, we cannot honor every one. Some may be (or contain) others' trademarks, or the names of certain professional sports teams, athletes or celebrities that Nike does not have the right to use. Others may contain material that we consider inappropriate or simply do not want to place on our products. Unfortunately, at times this obliges us to decline personal iDs that may otherwise seem unobjectionable. In any event, we will let you know if we decline your personal iD, and we will offer you the chance to submit another." With these rules in mind we cannot accept your order as submitted. If you wish to reorder your NIKE iD product with a new personalization please visit us again at www.nike.com
Thank you, NIKE iD

From: Jonah H. Peretti
To: Personalize, NIKE iD
Subject: RE: Your NIKE iD order
Dear NIKE iD, Thank you for the time and energy you have spent on my request. I have decided to order the shoes with a different iD, but I would like to make one small request. Could you please send me a color snapshot of the 10-year-old Vietnamese girl who makes my shoes?
Thanks, Jonah Peretti

(Nike did not respond to this last communication. It should be noted that this wasn't a hoax – Nike spokespeople did confirm the exchange, while at the same time refusing to comment on their involvement with sweatshops.)

This exchange was not only posted on various websites and covered in news stories, but also circulated widely by email. Several people we talked to received the text by email more than twice.

Nike's well-known tagline is 'Just Do It.' In their communications they have established a positioning built around freedom, the power of the individual, and the power of hard work and determination taking the individual anywhere he or she wants to go. Consumers responded well to such exhortations (even when the sheer ubiquity of the product seemed to undermine the notion of being an individual), and between 1988-1993, Nike's earnings growth averaged approximately 41% a year (from *The Money Tree*, March 1998).

But rumours of Nike's use of sweatshop labour in third-world countries – where children as young as 5 years old hand-stitch the high-priced symbols of American youth culture – have persisted in the past decade, and have damaged Nike's reputation. It's hard to believe in the power of the individual, hard work and determination when you know that the child you made your shoes gets paid a dollar a day. And in the 5 years between 1993-1998, Nike's earnings growth averaged just 13% (*ibid*).

Nike's story is nothing new, of course, and companies have been creating images which are divorced from their reality for years – there's nothing homemade about Campbell's Soup, for example, but it's still accepted as a good food to serve the family. But the growing popularity of the internet has made the dissemination of exchanges like this (with equal parts humour and evil-corporate-empire vs good-hearted underdog) easy, fun, interesting - and, more importantly, are given cultural currency.

Individuals are much more media aware, and informed about their world, than they have been in previous generations. Teenagers (the demographic with the most disposable income to spend, and with additional influence over family purchases), for example, are very wary of any attempt by companies (or products, or services) to try to 'sell' them anything based on image (Sprite's 1995 launch of the 'Image is Nothing, Taste Is Everything' campaign achieved higher sales increases for Sprite than any campaign in the preceding 15 years, and allowed them to outpace 7up, their closest competitor). So when Nike says one thing ("it's all about freedom and individuality") and then does another ("well, actually, your right to freedom stops at our corporate party line is threatened"), the response is fast and furious: Between 1999 and 2000, for example, Nike's share of the athletic footwear market declined from 49.9% to 39.2%.

This example is relevant to our discussion on User Experience for several reasons:

- Nike made a proposition to a potential user ("we can help you embody the individuality we stand for by allowing you to create your own special shoe"), on which it could not or would not deliver, thus disappointing user expectations and therefore compromising their relationship with users
- The experience had by the user was not consistent with the expectations Nike had established
- The user, no longer restricted to sending a letter of complaint and/or refusing to purchase the product, not only challenged Nike's proposition, but then was able to expose Nike's failure to deliver on its proposition to the wider world
- Nike, once a brand which created near-insurmountable barriers to entry for other athletic-shoe companies, is now being overtaken by brands which have provided a User Experience which is consistent with their brand identity (like Adidas, New Balance, and Reebok)

What this means is that products (and companies) no longer own the brand. It is increasingly owned by the user, and the user, with the power of knowledge and the ability to communicate that knowledge to a large audience, will not tolerate experiences which are dissonant from the propositions and promises made by the brand.

The networked economy is fragmented

Increasing individual power over knowledge and communication has resulted in an increasingly fragmented marketplace.

Not only are there more communication channels (more radio stations, more television channels, cell phones, internet, PIDs, faxes, etc.), but every niche can be catered to: an interest in 14th century alliterative poetry does not make for good business in a geographically limited area – the numbers are just too small – but over a large geographic area, like all English-speaking countries, this kind of specialized interest can be catered to.

In addition, individuals are more than ever aware of their choices: It used to be, if you lived in a small town and the only store was a Sears, chances were you had to buy all your stuff at Sears. Now, consumers know that if Sears doesn't have what they want, they can easily shop on-line or by phone anywhere in the world – without even leaving their house. If they don't care for the movie at the local drive-in, they can call one up on digital television, use their satellite dish, download one off the net, or rent one at the video store, or even make one themselves.

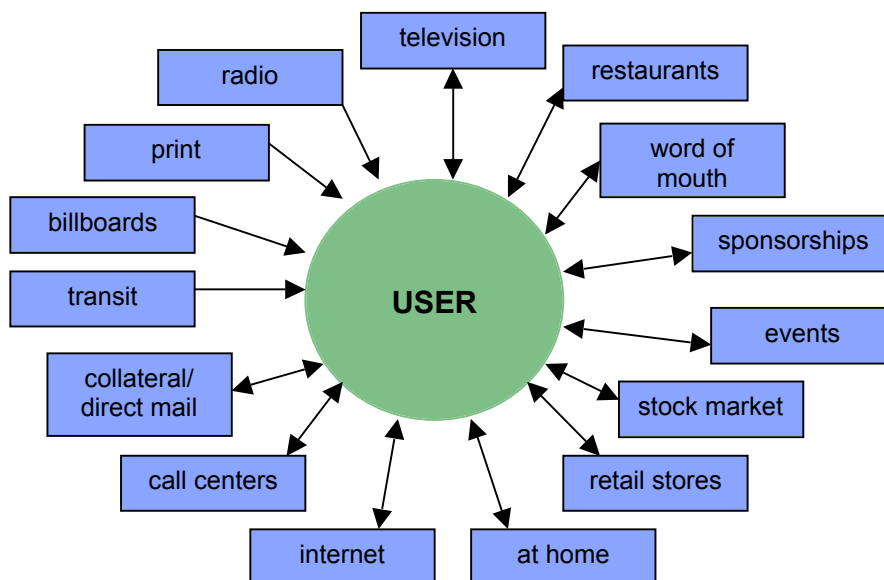
For brands, this is why the User Experience becomes very important.

Brands must now learn to communicate and deliver on their promises and propositions consistently across an increasingly large number of interactions, and communicate to users who increasingly have the means to communicate right back, as well as the ability to communicate with other brands instead if they do not find the dialogue satisfactory. We tend to think of this kind of interactivity in terms of websites, but, as noted earlier, developments in communications technology have enabled individuals to participate in a two-way dialogue with brands in a variety of ways.

While users have always *experienced* brands in ways other than just using the product, they have never had so many opportunities to *communicate* with brands as they do now. And as we've discussed, it is this communication which is the basis of experience, and the accumulation of experiences which build a brand. The dialogue between product and user has increased in frequency, intensity, and nature: from a one-way communication to groups, we now have a two-way communication involving individuals.

Touchpoints

Users interact with brands at many different touchpoints:



While some of these touchpoints remain one-way (that is, the product is communicating with the user but the user has limited ability to communicate in return, using the same channel), many more of them have now become two-way. Every time a user experiences the brand, at any of these touchpoints, he or she is participating in this ongoing, two-way dialogue with the brand.

It's easy to forget that users don't interact with a brand just when they see advertising and when they purchase the product. Users have interactions with brands *all the time*, and in some unexpected places.

In some ways, marketers and advertisers have known this for years – sponsorships, for example, were designed to take advantage of this fact. The idea was that users would interact with the brand at a time and place (stock car races or concerts, for example) which was a positive 'experience' for the user, who would then associate the brand with this positive experience. This is part of the process of developing the relationship: associating the brand with events in one's life, rather than simply with the functional benefits.

User Experience is really just an extension of this concept. The truth is that users are having experiences all the time – going to work, having lunch, talking with friends, going to the gym, listening to music, surfing the net – and throughout all these activities, they are often interacting with brands. Sometimes the brands have intended these interactions (as in the case with advertising or a website), but many times the interactions are unintentional (friends talking about a new car they bought, Barenaked Ladies singing about Kraft Dinner) or just unmanaged (a newscaster reporting live who just happens to stand in front of a retail store, seeing a review of a product on a website).

User Experience: Going Forward

User Experience is a good term for the process of brand building as it is today. As we've discussed, in the past brands were largely a result of a one-way communication from products to consumers. The words we use to describe this communication, 'products' and 'consumers', reveal that the relationship between them, though in some cases transcended, was essentially antagonistic.

However, when we use the terms 'brand', 'user', and 'experience', we more accurately reflect the relationship as it exists in an environment in which users have more power than previously to engage in a two-way dialogue. A brand is not simply a 'product', it is a relationship; to refer to individuals as 'users' rather than 'consumers' implies an ongoing relationship rather than a finite exchange; and 'experience' is a more accurate term for individuals' interaction and communication with brands.

Why The User Experience Is Important

User Experience is important because it is the building block of the relationships between a product or service and its stakeholders. Over time, individual User Experiences accumulate to create a relationship.

As we all know, people remember negative experiences much more readily than they do positive experiences – in fact, they take positive experiences almost for granted, while negative experiences stick in their mind and are more likely to be communicated to others. The radio industry used to have a saying: "For every one person who calls in to complain, there are 10 more who are complaining about us to their friends." When the company does not have the ability to engage in a dialogue with its users, a product or company may not even hear from users who are disappointed – but the user's friends and acquaintances will. All the product will be left with are declining sales and no way to know why.

It's a pretty simple equation: positive user experiences equal a positive relationship; negative experiences equal a negative relationship – and negative relationships are bad for brands.

The challenge for marketers now is to ensure that users have a positive experience at every touchpoint. It's important to remember that a positive User Experience generally requires that the touchpoint is essentially transparent. Users don't really care if they are in a store, talking on the phone to a customer service rep, using the product, trying to buy the product on the website, researching the product on the internet, or seeing television commercials. They don't stop to think about how different channels present different problems – all they really care about is whether or not the brand (a) makes consistent propositions and promises across those channels; (b) delivers on those promises and propositions.

Marketers have always known about users' tendency to be oblivious to the nature of the touchpoint. Ask focus group participants if they have seen advertising for a brand, and typically anywhere from 5-20% will claim to have seen some kind of communication for the product that never existed (i.e. participants will say they saw a television commercial, when in fact the brand has only ever been advertised in magazines). To users, the medium of communication is irrelevant. What's important is that the promises and propositions have been made and received, and have engendered expectations on the part of the user. If these expectations are fulfilled, the brand grows. If these expectations are not fulfilled, the brand dies.

Consider this information:

Jupiter Media Matrix' latest research indicates that seven of 10 online shoppers who experience poor service online carry their grudges offline by cutting back on shopping at offending websites' brick-and-mortar stores.

That's a serious issue for multichannel retailers, the survey finds. Even though 67 percent of shoppers expect such retailers to be able to access customers' consolidated account activity across all sales and service channels, a mere 18 percent of them are set up to do so.

Retailers are disappointing their customers in other ways as well, the Jupiter study finds. While 83 percent of customers want to return goods purchased online in physical stores, and 59 percent want to pick up online orders in stores, only 18 percent of retailers have the internal systems to make that possible.

And although 55 percent of customers expect e-mail complaints to be resolved within six hours, only 38 percent of sites meet that expectation, whereas one-third take more than three days to respond.

Jupiter analyst David Daniels says that competition between online and offline operations for customers and profits leads to this unfortunate (and costly) segmenting of customer information. Just 18 percent of retailers have customer-relationship management systems capable of pulling together a single view of their customers across all channels.

Bad E-Tail Experiences Affect Main Street, Too
(03/22/01, 11:31 a.m. ET)
By Cheryl Rosen, *InformationWeek*

This research indicates that the user expects that the *promises and propositions made by a brand will be true at every touchpoint*. Users are not concerned with the nature of the touchpoint, because their relationship is with the brand, not the touchpoint.

Essentially, this is all about fulfilling the expectations of the user. In an environment in which the individual has more communications power than ever before, users expect that brands will anticipate their expectations – after all, the brands were the ones who set up the relationship in the first place – and behave accordingly. The User Experience, then, should be the first consideration of the brands. As we have described, users are not concerned with the channel by which the brand communicates with them;

they are concerned with the experience they have with the brand. Users' focus is on the brand, not the channel.

This sounds like a simple concept, and it is.

However, products (or services, or companies) often create a disconnect when they move from one-way communications to two-way communications, or when they move from a communications channel with which they are familiar to a communications channel with which they are unfamiliar.

From *Fast Company*, March 2001:

At the Sprint PCS call center, I am soon teamed up with customer-care advocate Chad Ehrlich, a gracious 29-year-old with years of experience delivering service by phone. Chad takes a call from a businessman in Lubbock, Texas. The man is upset about his bill: It was running \$60 to \$100 a month. Suddenly, it has shot up to \$1,600. "I'm not going to pay it!" the man declares.

Chad is reserved. "Let me take a look at that bill," he says. Chad whirls through screens of information. "Hold on a moment for me, sir, I'm going to get a representative from the fraud department on the line." Chad puts Lubbock on hold and dials Sprint PCS's fraud department, where he reaches a familiar recorded message and is put on hold. Lubbock is on hold for customer-service rep Chad, and customer-service rep Chad is on hold for more customer service.

A female fraud rep takes Chad's call. She can see from Lubbock's history that he's complained about this problem before. The conversation between Chad and his colleague in fraud is frisky.

Fraud: "He thought he was cloned, but he wasn't."

Chad: "His bills did go from almost nothing to sky-high ..."

Fraud: "We can send him to a cloning specialist and make it 'official' if you want ..."

Chad: "He's denying that he made or received the calls."

The impatient woman from fraud dials the Sprint PCS cloning customer-care department and ... is put on hold.

Chad, Lubbock's customer-care advocate, is talking to a woman who is Chad's customer-care advocate. She has called *her* customer-care advocate, who is busy on another call. So now we have two customer-care advocates on hold waiting for a third customer-care advocate. Meanwhile, a fuming customer from Lubbock (who may or may not be trying to rip Sprint off for \$1,600) waits. On hold.

That, right there, is customer service in the new economy. It has become a slow, dissatisfying tangle of telephones, computers, Web sites, email, and people that wastes time at a prodigious rate, produces far more aggravation than service, and, most often, leaves you feeling impotent. What's even worse is that this situation is a kind of betrayal. It wasn't supposed to be this way. One of the promises of the new economy was that the customer would finally be in charge. We weren't supposed to need to call customer care -- but if we did, then someone would take our call quickly. (Why not? No one else would be calling.) A customer-service rep would understand our problem practically before we mentioned it, and all would be made right.

Why do we hear this sentence so often: "We are experiencing higher-than-usual call volumes... ." If you're experiencing higher-than-usual call volumes, then why aren't you experiencing higher-than-usual staffing volumes? How hard is that? What the new economy has done to customer service is exactly the opposite of what everyone predicted would happen.

The key to this example (which is by no means uncommon) lies in two things: one, that 'promises' have been made by the new economy (by products, services, and companies) to users; and two, when products create high expectations which are out of their core competency (i.e. Sprint's main business is

phone service, not customer service) they risk not fulfilling these expectations. And that results in a negative User Experience.

The problem doesn't lie in poorly managed CRM (customer relationship management) departments or faulty technology installations of CRM systems; it doesn't lie in poorly-trained technicians or store clerks; it doesn't lie in a website that takes too long to load; it doesn't lie in direct mail initiatives which never get opened; and it doesn't lie in databases which are never properly segmented.

The problem lies solely in the fact that when products invite users to take part in what appears to be a two-way dialogue, the User Experience often declines in quality. Accustomed to operating in the one-to-many model, most brands can't seem to anticipate the expectations of users which are created by the promise of a two-way dialogue. And even when they are aware of these expectations, they seem to be stymied by how to fulfill them.

It's great to have a high-tech customer service department, but (a) it's not so great if it creates more hassle for the consumer; and (b) if the product was fulfilling the expectations it created in the first place, there wouldn't be a *need* for the customer service department.

Ensuring A Positive User Experience

Products may make propositions or promises to users and potential users, but the products' ability to engage in a relationship which results in the product's transcending functional benefits – resulting in the creation of a brand - reside with users.

The relationship is created by an accumulation of positive interactions the user has with the product – the User Experience. Ensuring a positive User Experience, then, must be the first goal of any product which hopes to become a brand, and for any established brand which is attempting to communicate to users and/or potential users in the 'new economy'.

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but we think that every product, service, company or established brand must keep the following in mind, in order to ensure a positive User Experience:

Set up meaningful expectations

Prior to any communications to users or potential users, a product must determine what expectations it will communicate to users. This is different from a 'mission statement', a 'corporate vision' or even a brand positioning. A mission statement or corporate vision (such as Coke's desire to put a Coke product within arm's reach of everyone on the planet) is inward-focused (what does the individual care if there is a Coke product within reach of everyone – all he cares about is whether *he* can find a can of pop), while a brand positioning ("The best-tasting cola drink", for example) is often broad and does not reflect the experience of the individual.

An appropriate set of expectations for Coke might be:

- Coke will make its products easy for you to find and buy
- Coke will quench your thirst
- Coke will not make you feel like an outcast, because lots of other people drink Coke as well
- Coke is the kind of product you will feel good about drinking, because Coke is associated with lots of other things that you also feel good about

All of these expectations are meaningful to the individual, rather than to the company. Only when expectations have resonance with the individual will they be successful.

Ensure the ability to fulfill these expectations

As we saw with the Sprint example, above, products that communicate expectations that they cannot fulfill run the risk of negative User Experiences.

Recently, Lands' End developed a new website. On the website was a tool which would use a variety of body measurements of the user in order to create a computer-generated model of the user's body, which could then be used to 'try on' clothes digitally. Lands' End publicized this tool, even held a big launch party for it and got lots of press coverage – except that the tool didn't work. It didn't even work at the launch party. So instead of a lot of stories about how Lands' End was a pioneer in on-line shopping, what it got was a lot of press about how it had failed so spectacularly.

What's interesting about this example is that Lands' End has been highly successful as a mail-order-catalogue business for years. Lots of people were *already* buying clothes they never got to try on. It wasn't as though Lands' End customers were refusing to buy clothes they hadn't seen on their bodies – they just accepted that if they wanted a Lands' End jacket, they had to check the size guide in the catalogue and trust that Lands' End would take it back if it didn't fit. And they did.

But Lands' End decided to change the expectations of the users. Based on their positive experiences with Lands' End in the past, users were prepared to accept the new proposition, but when it failed to deliver, the backlash was worse than if they had done nothing at all. Sales did not increase, and the brand actually lost credibility because their proposition was not delivered, and now puts their other promises and propositions in doubt.

Remember that the medium is transparent to the user

As we've already discussed, users don't care whether they are on a website, in a store, on the phone, talking to their friends – they expect the brand to fulfill expectations wherever they interact with it. It's irrelevant to them if a Director of Marketing hasn't talked to the IT Manager for weeks, or whether the company that hosts the website has gone bankrupt, or whether a sales clerk doesn't have authorization to have a pair of pants sent to a hotel in Minsk. All they really care about is that they have an expectation which has been communicated to them by the product, and they want the expectation fulfilled.

It's sort of like trying to tell your teacher why you can't hand in your homework: your teacher doesn't really care if your dog ate it, if you had a late night because you were talking on the phone with your best friend, or if you just forgot. All the teacher knows is that you were supposed to hand in your homework, and if you don't, you get zero.

For companies, this means that everything that is user-facing – advertising, websites, promotions, sponsorships, products, call centers, retail outlets – must be coordinated to fulfill the expectations which have been communicated to the user. If a product is advertised as 'fun and easy to use', the website must also be 'fun and easy to use', for example. If the product is 'fun and easy to use', the sponsorships should not be of Masterpiece Theatre.

Use technology wisely, or not at all

The 'new economy' has created many opportunities for brands to engage in a two-way dialogue with users. Websites, call centers and one-to-one marketing have all benefited by advances in technology. However, as with Lands' End and Sprint, above, sometimes this technology simply creates more expectations that can't be fulfilled.

And sometimes this technology is used in inappropriate ways, which do not improve the User Experience at all. Confusing websites with involved sign-in processes or long download times, or DVD players with

'smart chips' which would program your fridge to make dinner if only you could figure out how to turn it on, do not improve the relationship between a user and a product, and in fact can damage a relationship.

If the technology can be made transparent to the user, it will probably improve the User Experience. If it gets in the way, it's probably not a good idea.

Users aren't stupid – they're just busy

Many marketing professionals secretly – or not so secretly – believe that users are not, in the aggregate, all that bright. So when an interaction fails, blame is often put on the user, and the communication is 'dumbed down', as if that's the only way the user will understand.

But users aren't stupid. They just have a lot on their plates, what with living their lives and all, and they don't necessarily have time to listen to the propositions and promises made by a product unless those propositions and promises are meaningful to them. And users are too savvy and have too much knowledge to be taken in by propositions that aren't relevant or which seem unbelievable.

Once they have accepted a proposition and the expectations it engenders, the product must deliver on these expectations.

Biographies

Sarah Welstead

Sarah was an Account Director in the Branding Practice at marchFIRST Toronto. She oversaw brand strategy, communications and client services for a wide variety of packaged goods and high-tech clients, including SCJohnson, OctaneWave, JTI and others. Prior to joining marchFIRST, Sarah worked at full-service advertising agencies such as Bates, DDB/Anderson and Lowe SMS, where she developed and implemented integrated marketing campaigns for clients like Weetabix, Standard AutoGlass, Trojan condoms, Alpen, and Wendy's Restaurants.

Sarah holds a BA in English from Wilfrid Laurier University. She is an editor at *brokenpencil*, a literary magazine based in Toronto. She can be reached at youarethere@eudoramail.com.

Jim Carruthers

Jim was a Senior Content Strategist in the Branding Practice at marchFIRST Toronto, Jim not only ensured that communications messages are meaningful to the user, he also rigorously tests interactive media for positive user experience. Prior to joining marchFIRST, Jim ran an internet consulting company, BrainGarage, and worked at PolyGram Records for several years in the national marketing department.

Jim has a BA in History from Concordia University, and is an inveterate Apple computer guru both at the office and in his spare time. You can reach Jim at jimc1@braingarage.on.ca.

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