

# Customer experience design

A framework for a new marketing discipline



How unspectacular!  
How memorable!



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# 1

## What do we buy when we buy coffee?

It depends, and price is an indicator.

But if you would have bought 7 grams of Colombian Mild coffee - enough for one cup - on September 8<sup>th</sup> 2019 on the New York coffee exchange, you would have paid \$0.024. The same amount in a package from a retail brand would cost \$0.11, and in a Senseo pad \$0.14.

Even when taking in account the depreciation value of the machine, the water or the electricity, that's a big difference with the price for a tall latte in a UAE Starbucks store, priced at Dh15 (roughly \$4); at 'Les Deux Magots' in Paris €5.28 and in 'Caffè Florian' in Venice \$8.20.

Still we gladly pay more than 800 times for a cup at Caffè Florian than for the commodity that was needed to prepare it. The difference is not better beans or better service. We buy the **experience** of sipping an espresso at the self-declared

oldest café in the world, on the stunning Piazza San Marco. We pay to be in the company of legendary characters like Casanova, Charles Dickens, Charlie Chaplin and Ernest Hemingway, who all frequented Florian when they came to Venice.

We invite you to explore together if we can take Customer Experience Design one step further. Let's see how we can lift it up from an intuitively and ad hoc series of activities to a methodological discipline with principles, tools and techniques.

We believe that methodologies and tools developed for touchpoint inventory and Customer Journey Mapping offer the best available toolset for this new discipline, if they are combined with an approach that starts from the brand personality.

## What's new?

As the illustrious Caffè Florian patrons shows, people have always been prepared to pay for experiences and so, naturally, companies have always staged and delivered them. The **new era** claims are somewhat overdone, as you find them in Pine and Gilmore's **The Experience Economy** (1999, updated in 2011), from which the coffee example was borrowed, and Rose's and Johnson's **Experiences. The 7th Era of Marketing** (2015).

Nevertheless, the ideas resonate that "in a world saturated with largely undifferentiated goods and services the greatest opportunity for value creation lies in **staging experiences**" and that "experiences are as distinct from services as services are from goods, as goods are from commodities" (the core ideas of **The Experience Economy**).

A Google Trends search comparing **customer experience** with **customer relationship** shows that Rose and Johnson are right to claim that the era of experience marketing is superseding that of relationship marketing, which they designate as the 6<sup>th</sup> era of marketing (see figure 1).

Experiences as an economic factor are not new. The interest in experiences might be rising but is certainly not new either. Already in 1971 Alvin Toffler saw an upcoming **experiential industry**. What is new is the realization that designing and managing experiences becomes more relevant, urgent and difficult in a multichannel world, where technology and digitization represent a challenge and an enabler for crafting better experiences for customers.

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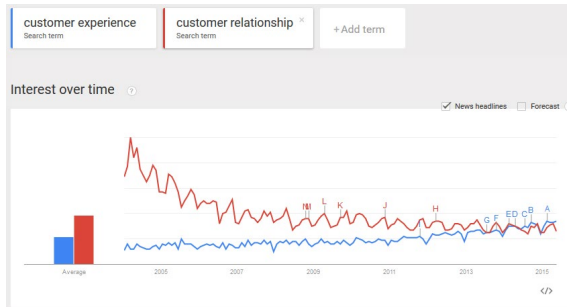


Figure 1

Google Trends search comparing interest in customer experience with interest in customer relationship


Consider only one obvious way in which technology and digitization pose challenges to customer experience design and management. In the past, the relevancy of investing in experiences in slow-moving industries with infrequent, rare or even one time only customer encounters was not very high. After all, what is the return on investment of staging an experience for a customer you will probably see only once or very infrequently?

A classic example is the tourist trap.

The mediocre fish soup in an expensive tourist restaurant in the port of Saint-Tropez might be disappointing for customers, but seems understandable from a purely economic standpoint.

But that logic has changed forever with the advent of social media. **Word-of-mouse** is now mightier than word-of-mouth. A company can gain positive leverage from investing in even once-in-a-lifetime customers and the ROI of the effort is higher than you can achieve with classic advertising to attract business.

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The ROI of investing in  
experiences  
can be demonstrably  
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# 2

## Experiences

So what are experiences?

**What is their relevance for companies? And what is the difference between experiences and services?**

An important but often forgotten point is that customers get experiences anyway. Good, bad or indifferent. "Customers always get more than they bargain for, because a product or service always comes with an experience" (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994).

Also, and important to develop a methodology for Customer Experience Design, is that experiences are a result, a sum, an accumulation of impressions that are given away by clues (which reside in touchpoints which reside in channels – see below).

**An experience is an end-result, the takeaway impression formed by people's encounters with products, services, and businesses.**

(Carbone and Haeckel, 1994)

Experiences are a mental thing but they are very real and persistent in the memory of the customer even when the services and most goods are long consumed and forgotten.





Think back of the restaurant you visited a month ago. You will probably not remember what you ordered, but you will know the experience was good, average or bad. So even when a company forgets or neglects to provide a service; it will create an experience. Companies deliver services, but their users build the experiences.

Experiences, or the accumulation (or absence) of impressions that result in an experience, can be caused by purposeful design or they can occur by chance.

The outcome we call an experience will sometimes but not always be intentional. We have to accept that if the experience is an end-result stored in the memory of the customer, we can't control it as much as we control our products and services.

**You can design products and services. Experiences can only be designed for.**

For the purpose of our methodology exercise, we will define customer experience as the cumulative impact of multiple touchpoints over time and in a journey that will most often cross multiple channels.

The concept of customer experience is very intuitive but at the same time quite elusive. Nevertheless, we believe experience-focus goes beyond and has more analytical and operational potential than customer-focus.

Customer-focus has become a hollow rhetoric in the ears of many customers, a mindset of employees and an organization at most. Focusing on experiences means focusing on a specific yet elusive outcome: experiences create stories that breed attitudinal loyalty, the emotional reservoir of goodwill makes the customer come back or recommend you.

# 3

## A framework for experience design (CXD)

As early as in 1994 Carbone and Haeckel wrote in their paper on Engineering Customer Experiences:

“Creating customer experiences is not new. Occasional purposeful design of these experiences by intuitive individuals also is not new. But rendering the design and execution of experiences as a management discipline with principles, tools, and techniques is new.”

Twenty five years later, we believe we’re not there yet. But most of the pieces of the puzzle are in place to propose a methodology for Customer Experience Design (CXD) or Engineering, as Carbone and Haeckel prefer to call it.

Simon Clatworthy in his 2012 article **Bridging the gap between brand strategy and customer experience** agrees we still have a way to go. He also introduces the brand as an important focal point of interest:

The link between customer experience, the brand and the design process is missing when it comes to tools, methods and processes.

A Google Trends search on **customer experience** and **customer experience design** or **customer experience management** confirms this: interest in customer experience has been growing steadily since 2005, but interest in customer experience design or customer experience management has not followed. (see figure 2 and 3 below)

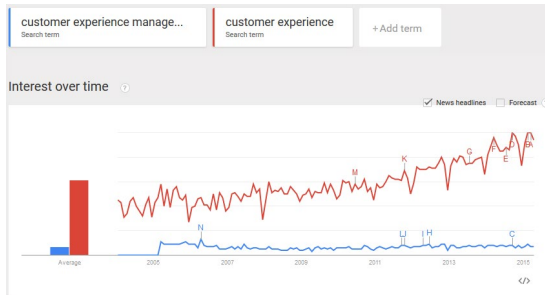


Figure 2: Google Trends search comparing interest in customer experience with interesting customer experience management

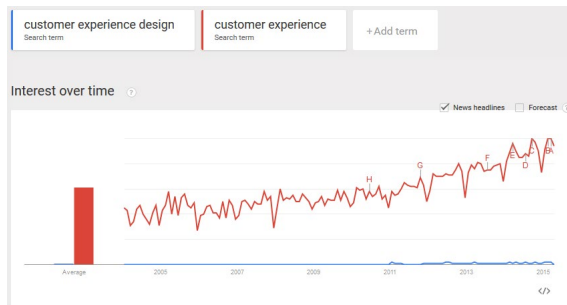


Figure 3: Google Trends search comparing interest in customer experience with interesting customer experience design

Where should we look for inspiration, now most of the pieces of the puzzle are in place to propose a methodology for Customer Experience Design (CXD)? The theatre and **staging experiences**, the central metaphors of Pine's and Gilmore's *The Experience Economy*, are useful, but they don't constitute a methodology yet.

Storytelling and content marketing will be a part of any Customer Experience Design methodology, but we don't believe that "the ability to deliver content-driven experiences will be the single most important key to marketing's evolution along this trajectory", as Rose and Johnson propose in *Experiences. The 7th Era of Marketing*.

**To flesh out the framework we propose these directions :**

- The insights and methodologies of Total Quality Management (TQM), Business Process Management (BPM), user-centered design and service design;
- Methodologies for touchpoint inventory and customer journey mapping

**Comparing experience design with service design or process design, for instance, yields some valuable insights.**

- **First**, while service and process design will start from the company's internal viewpoint and processes, experience design will always start from the customer's viewpoint, motivations and desired outcomes. The experience as desired outcome is the best starting point for any experience design exercise. Johnston and Kong (2011) say: "While a service is the process or activity, the customer's experience is their personal interpretation of the service process and their interaction and involvement with it during their journey or flow through a series of touch points".
- **Second**, experience design will have to include emotion and brand personality in the design process.
- **Third**, Customer Experience Design will develop as a framework and set of guiding principles rather than a rigid and inflexible process.

Summing up, while most service and process design exercises take an inside-out perspective, CXD is essentially and by necessity an outside-in exercise. This does not mean we should dismiss learnings and methodological principles from service design. For instance, CXD could include designing the behind-the-scenes activities that enable the desired experiences to be delivered as planned.

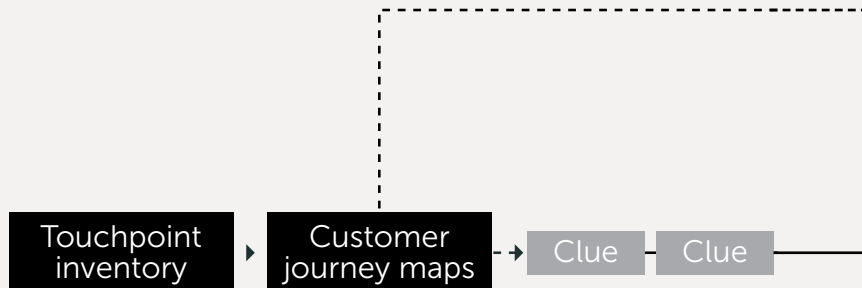


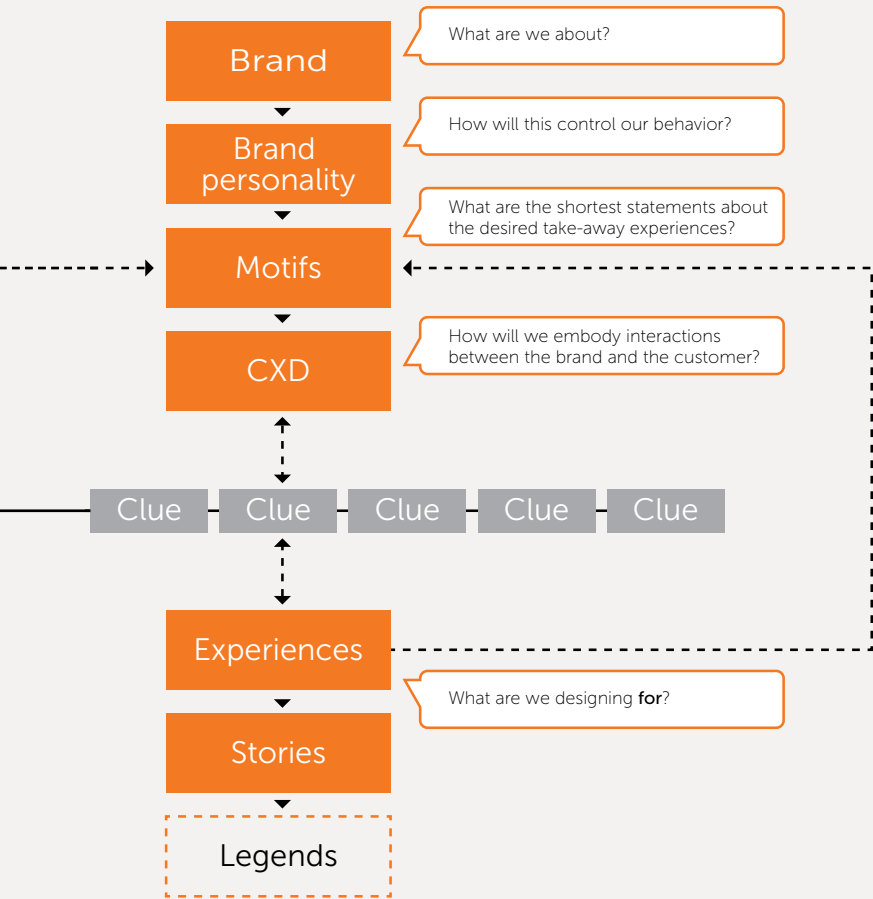
One of the lessons CXD could learn from service design is to include designing the behind-the-scenes activities that enable the desired experiences to be delivered as planned.

# The framework

This is our provisional framework for a Customer Experience Design methodology.

We will now elaborate on each of the steps and reflect on some of the general design principles. To conclude, we offer some remarks on the role of digital in CXD.





## Start from the experience: What are we designing for?

Where else to start than from the experience itself that will ultimately be the inevitable outcome of any encounter of a customer with products, services, and businesses? Here's what Bate and Robert (2007) propose as a useful design pattern or rule:

**"If you want to achieve outcome Y in situation S, something like X might help," with Y being the experience outcome.**

This design rule is a good operationalization of our remark that you can't design experiences as such; you can only design for experiences. A good start for a CXD exercise might be to ask participants in a work group to note down, in seven words or less, experiences they would like the customer to walk away with. As we will see later, we will have to iterate at least two times on this exercise. We will say about experiences, the situation S and the "something like X" in the remainder.

## Mapping the experience landscape

Once we have a first idea of the kind of experiences we want to design, we need a map (at least mentally, but a real map will help with focus and prioritization) of the experience landscape. It makes sense to discern four basic elements in this map: clues (which are part of) touchpoints (which are part of) channels (and which in a sequence will form) customer journeys.

**Clues give away impressions that will form the experience.**

**A clue is a specific embodiment of an interaction between a brand and a customer.**

The most obvious clues are product - or service performance based, like 'Does the glue stick?' and 'Does the car drive?'. But the context in which the product or service is searched for, evaluated, bought and then used will also contain lots of clues, like 'How does the glue smell?' and 'How does the closing of the car door sound?'.



A clue is located in a touchpoint, the point of interaction with a customer. Examples of touchpoints are a search page on a website, an email, a phone call, a television spot, a conversation with a shop assistant, a specific usage or utilization of the product, a mentioning of the product on Facebook.

Touchpoints reside in **channels** and are mostly channel-specific. A website is a channel, as is a call center, the physical shop, an event, TV-advertising, an app or your Pinterest page. A sequence of touchpoints, mostly across different channels, will constitute a **customer journey**.

“

You can't design experiences as such; you can only design FOR experiences.

## Touchpoint inventory and journey mapping

How should we start inventorying touchpoints and mapping customer journeys?  
Top down or bottom up?

In our experience, probably both. Start identifying key journeys by assembling best guesses, customer intelligence and applying judgment from different departments; at the same time, assemble channel and touchpoint data. Both tasks should not be underestimated.

To begin with, they are by necessity cross-departmental assignments, which might complicate their organization. They require constant mental flexibility, alternating zooming-in on the details of one touchpoint while immediately also helicoptering out to keep the journey perspective. One of the difficulties we encounter is the decision on how complete our inventory should be.

Should the goal really be to inventory all touchpoints? How much data is enough per touchpoint? When we start mapping journeys, should we initially consider all permutations of touchpoint sequences?

A pragmatic top down judgment will help to single out a few key journeys to start working on. But the initial approach should at least leave an opening for a methodical and systematic inventory and mapping of a quasi complete set of touchpoints and journeys. This follow-up would be more organizationally anchored and aimed at continuous customer experience **management**.

An excellent model for touchpoint inventory and customer journey mapping was proposed by the McKinsey article **The Consumer Decision Journey** (2009). It proposes to replace the funnel marketing & sales model with a more continuous and circular journey model that follows the customer from Initial Consideration, to Active Evaluation, Moment of Purchase, Post-purchase Experience and, finally, Loyalty Loop.


Touchpoint inventory and journey mapping should have following outcomes:

- A **rich quantitative overview** of as many as doable touchpoints and journeys.
- Focus the mind of participants on the cross-channel and, from an organizational point of view, most probably also cross-departmental **reality of journeys**. This focus will prevent what we call journey-blindness: the result of too exclusive a focus on touchpoints or channels, which often result from departmental siloing or persistent inside-out thinking.
- From the first two outcomes: A first **qualitative assessment of problematic journeys** and touchpoints. This could already be a basis for a quick-win approach. It should also be the basis for first discussions about organizational changes and change management.
- Derive the first ideas for **motifs**, the distinctive and recurring themes that are derived from our brand personality and that will be translated into and supported by the clues. This is the first iteration of the short (seven words or less) write-downs of the experiences we would like the customer to walk away with.

## Brand and Brand Personality: What are we about and how will this control our behavior?

In some of the customer journey mapping exercises we have witnessed, the missing elephant in the room was the brand. This is a serious mistake, if only for one reason: brands are for a large part about memorable emotions and that is exactly what experiences are also about for a very large part.

“



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”

Clatworthy's (2012) warning deserves full-length quotation:

“To fully leverage experience as part of a value proposition, organizations must manage the emotional dimension of experiences with the same rigor they bring to the management of service functionality ... There is there-fore a danger that organizations with an experience focus will develop experiential solu-tions that dilute the brand. To avoid this, the link between brand and experience needs to be clearly articulated and incorporated into the design process.”

That's just what we propose to do in our methodology.

The link between brand and customer experience Clatworthy calls for is probably best made by developing a brand personality. This concept was developed by Jennifer Aaker (1997) among others (framework: see figure 5).

While product or corporate identity designers tend to prefer visual analogies such as mood boards, this brand personality approach will work better in an experience design project group because the focus is on behavior and interactions.

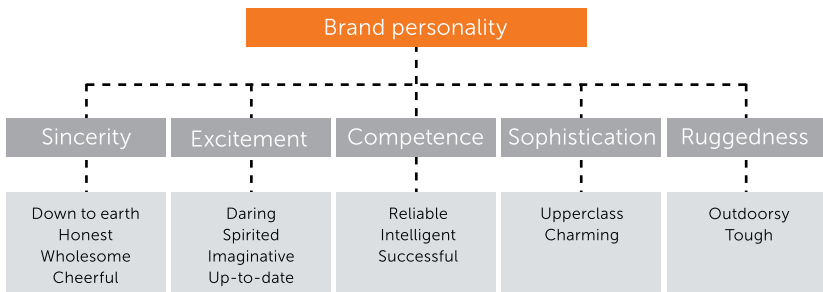


Figure 5: Aaker's Brand Personality Framework

The brand personality will be the guiding principle and touchstone in the remainder of the experience design exercise. At this point, the project group might also want to perform an experience audit by assembling internal and customers' opinions on experience performance. By confronting the outcomes of this audit with the (desired) brand personality, critical areas may be detected.

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## Motifs: What are the shortest statements about the desired take-away experiences?

The next step in the experience design exercise is the discovery and creation of motifs. Motifs are a powerful and intuitive metaphor proposed by Carbone & Haeckel (1994).

The short statements about the desired take-away experiences we started the exercise with will in this step become the motifs. A motif is what is left, after interactions in the customer journey, in the memory of the customer in the form of short verbal characterizations such as **extremely user friendly website**, **friendly people**, **classy**, **state-of-the-art**, **never been treated better**.



The Polish-born American social psychologist Robert Zajonc demonstrated in the 1960's why recurring motifs are so powerful with a phenomenon he called the **mere exposure effect**. This effect occurs when repeated exposure to a stimulus brings about a positive attitude change in relation to the stimulus. When people are shown things several times, they report liking them more the second or third time around, even when they aren't aware of any previous exposure. It doesn't matter either whether those things are triangles, pictures, melodies or faces.

## Clues

Working back from the motifs, the short verbal expressions of the experience we want the customer to walk away with, we can now start designing motif-supporting clues, the little things that embody interactions with a customer and that give away the impressions that will ultimately form the experience.

We assume in this context that the experience design project group will concentrate on designing **context-based clues** (How does the glue smell?) and that the **product- or service performance based clues** (Does the glue stick?) have been taken care of. It should also be obvious at this point that designing clues can never be a one-time effort but instead should be a continuous and iterative exercise. Inventing and designing clues that will work for you seldom is a hunt for Big Ideas. Clues are "little things".

Think of the IKEA pencil. How unspectacular! How memorable! And think about how perfect a clue it is for one of IKEA's motifs: 'We do our part, you do yours'. Clues never stand on their own but should always lead to something else and be coherent with other clues.

The adequate mindset to do a clue design exercise is scenario-based thinking. No funnels! And since most clues can easily be copied, you will never be finished in the search for new clues.



Think of the parking lot for pregnant mothers, which once was a beautiful and original clue for showing that the company that invented it cared for the comfort of their pregnant customers. Imagine you invented this clue.

Two things would have happened after that :

- First, your clue would easily be copied by other companies.
- Second, you would probably have to add other, coherent, clues to show that you really care (diaper-changing rooms to show that you will keep caring).

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A clue design exercise can take several forms:

- **Inventory, assess and improve existing clues**
- **Go on a search for missing clues**, starting from the motifs you want to install
- **Remove clues**  
Remember: customers get experiences anyway. Good, bad or indifferent. This means that you probably have a lot of clues that are just there. They have grown organically, have always been there, or were planted inadvertently, out of laziness or following some misguided company rule. Taking away those clues that cause customer frustration is surely one of the most productive forms a clue design exercise could take (see insert: Weeding clues)
- **Install “missing clues”**  
For instance, a hotel that wanted to cater only to groups of business people on seminars of more than one day took away all the TV-sets in the rooms, to give a clue that the room was only meant for sleeping, not for solitary TV-watching.

# Weeding Clues: The Case for Zero Frustration

One of our favorite clue exercises that clients often forget, is the unspectacular exercise of first finding and weeding out clues that cause frustration.

Most clients or users of any service would gladly offer advice on how to take away frustration clues. Companies, however often prefer not to solicit these advices or neglect them and instead engage in brainstorming and sometimes costly implementation programs of new clues first.

**Almost any company would greatly profit from a Zero Frustration program.**

This is an exercise to systematically detect and weed out frustration points.

The ambitious goal is to arrive at Zero Frustration within a given timeframe, measured by regular customer surveys and user labs.

The weeding metaphor is very useful indeed. What's the point of planting flowers if you don't destroy the weed in a one-time effort first and then continuously? Only a Zero Frustration program can create the space where stories can grow.

## Stories? Legends?

The next steps in our proposal for a methodology for customer experience design are partly out of your hands.

The objective of all the clues based on motifs is to generate positive story fragments. Hopefully, these fragments will be like the short verbal characterizations at the start of this exercise that helped to find the motifs. But you do not know this for sure, because

you simply cannot design the stories your customers will tell about their experiences with your brand. They are what you designed the experience for.

If cultivated coherently and over a long enough period, the story fragments will become stories. In turn, the stories, if cultivated long enough, will become legends, the dream for every customer experience design effort (think Disney). Companies should be aware that creating stories, let alone legends, takes time and a holistic approach. Overly dramatic, isolated gestures will only lead to what Carbone & Haeckel (1994 call "instant legends".

This explains why we don't agree completely with Rose & Johnson (2015, when they claim that content-marketing will be the single most important key to marketing's evolution along the evolution towards the 7th era of marketing.

Stories, or content, in our view, will be the outcome of an experience design effort, not, as they see it, the main instrument. The content marketing movement prescribes that marketers should tell stories. We say that they can't, and shouldn't. Content marketing, in our view, is about making people tell stories about your products and the experiences they have in interactions with your brand.

### What was the point again?

OK. So experience design will require a considerable effort, across multiple departments, and we will have to wait for the results. What was the point again? Well, ultimately, what you want is to get people to pay for the experience. Ouch, isn't that putting it too bluntly? We don't think so. People do it all the time.

At Caffè Florian, they pay more than 800 times for the coffee than for the commodity that was needed to prepare it. In France, a drink will generally be more expensive on the terrace than inside a bar. In a luxury hotel, the tea you drink in the bar on the 24th floor, with a magnificent panorama on the city, will be more expensive than the one you order in the bar on the ground floor. In all these cases, people pay for experiences.

**Of course, the link, or the conversion if you want, between experiences and payment is not direct and will be difficult to measure.**

The link runs via stories that will engender attitudinal loyalty, the emotional reservoir of goodwill that will make the customer come back or re commend you.

We have made some progress, though, in measuring this chain.

The Net Promoter Score (NPS, which was proposed (and registered as a trademark by Fred Reichheld of Bain & Company in 2003), is probably a good measure of attitudinal loyalty. But it only measures outcomes and doesn't tell us anything about how this outcome was achieved.

**If we want to go from Customer Experience Design (CXD to Customer Experience Management (CXM, we will need a more elaborated set of metrics.**

One field is promising, but still is in its infancy: journey metrics.

We are already pretty advanced in measuring what is happening at the touchpoint level and in pre-defined funnels, but measuring a journey from the point of view of the customer is still very difficult.

Google is a fine example of a company looking hard at digital experiences, and its 'Google Now Cards' is certainly a feature worth exploring.

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Ultimately, what  
you want is to get  
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the experience.

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# 4 The role of digital in CXD

Let's return to the beginning of our story and look at a not so obvious case: Starbucks.

Starbucks thinks in terms of experiences while integrating digital in their experience design.

Consider for instance their metric **Satisfaction with your experience** as one of the factors that explains (for 17%) four-week repeat visitation. Or their efforts to **transform the lobby experience**.

Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz's stressed Starbucks' **unique combination of physical and digital assets** as a competitive advantage and by the inclusion of **extending digital engagement** as one of their seven strategic pillars for growth.

Starbucks already claims to be the retail industry leader in digital.

This is a company that sells coffee, right?

Does their focus on experiences, including digital, pay off?

Let the figures speak.

The chain grew from 2,500 shops in 1999 to 16,680 in 2008 and more than 30,000 in 2019. In the same period, average store turnover grew from \$700,000 to well over \$1.4 million. The most telling figure to illustrate that coffee + experience beats just coffee is this one: while global coffee sales grew 65% between 2000 and 2018, Starbucks grew its annual revenue over the same period with 130% (from \$10.38B to 24.72B).



As a native digital agency, we pay a lot of attention to the role of digital in experience design. We integrate usability and efficiency in our designs. But we are only starting the journey towards developing systematic Digital Experience Design.

We believe that in digital, the functionality is the experience and have established best practices in this domain. Luckily, our customers almost always embrace them together with us.

**It is now time to take the next steps.**

Let's take another look at IKEA to compare a store-visit to a visit to their website. The former is highly memorable and produces stories, based on experiences. Despite the use of video's, 'Shop the Look' experiences and trend reports, the online visit is still less immersive than the experience a real store-visit creates.

How do we turn a website or app visit into a truly memorable experience? Aiming for Zero-Frustration certainly has to be the first step in this journey. But we will have to take it beyond that. Technology will probably help. Think of the opportunities for motif and clue design that the Internet of Things will have to offer.

Personalization will certainly be part of the equation. Connecting digital experiences over different devices and with the off-line world will be important. But the most important thing will be to always keep the holistic perspective on the overall experience we want the customer to walk away with.

An exciting experiment is Ikea Place: customers use augmented reality to experiment with furniture from the retailer in their own homes. You can place chairs, desks, and just about anything else true to scale in your kitchen, backyard, just to see how it looks.

As a crystallization of our thinking and experimenting with Digital Customer Experience Design in the past years, the framework we propose here, is only one further step in this exciting journey.





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