

How to create profitable customer experiences



BY KAREN HEGMANN

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” proclaimed science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. In the online world, the competitive edge

will go to companies that are able to leverage the Internet’s ability to engage and transform an audience, evolving the magic into reality.

What’s needed is not simply an understanding of technology, but an understanding of what people experience when they interact with technology. By studying how people think and feel, companies can connect customers to their product or service by reaching them on a deeper emotional level.

Experiences are events that happen

to us throughout the course of our lives. They add value to our world as they are based on the relationships between what we feel, think and do. Marketers can prompt us, as customers, to take action by triggering events which help us relate to our life experiences.

Interactivity involves a reciprocal relationship between the sender and receiver of a message. A conversation is interactive, as is direct participation in a game such as hockey. In any interaction, there are elements of control, feedback and

creativity. When customers interact with a company, they’re looking for experiences that will make them feel good.

With the mere click of a mouse, customers can make or break a company’s reputation. Customers who have a bad experience will simply take their business elsewhere. Companies who cater to customers’ needs by treating them as emotional human beings will establish loyalty far beyond that ever imagined in traditional marketing environments.

In an interview last year, Bill Dupley,

director of strategy and business development for Hewlett-Packard Consulting Canada in Mississauga, Ont., explained that consumers enter buying situations in different behavioural modes. Marketers must be able to define which buying state the customer is in, and then design an experience based on the customer’s needs and expectations. According to Dupley, most current sites “don’t facilitate around what a customer wants to do,” but “facilitate around what a company wants to tell.” Companies can help facilitate the buying process by “integrating social science into the e-experience” and by thinking in terms of building “Web stores, not Web sites.”

HP discovered the best way to find out what customers really valued was to give them control over the shopping experience. When customers threatened to go elsewhere if they couldn’t shop online, HP launched www.HPshopping.com. The site sells PCs, printers and other hardware and software directly to consumers, operating as a wholly owned HP subsidiary. Customers can track their orders, customize PCs and even get gift ideas online. In 2000, HP reported that between 90% and 100% of the site’s customers used self-service.

The HP Web site also encourages customers to use the company’s call centres or send e-mails if they can’t find what they need online. Call centre reps are able to access and update the same database. According to HP, about 80% of the customers who telephoned the call centre had already visited the site and were looking for more information or were about to make a purchase. For HP, the concept of self-service on the Web is a process of constant refinement as customers continue to gain control over their shopping experience.

One way designers can create successful online experiences is by integrating the principles of narrative into the message. Stories give our lives meaning. They help establish our place in the world by putting our experiences into context. Companies that incorporate stories into their brand message forge emotional connections with their customers. Customers are invited into the brand experience as participants in a shared company vision.

In the Internet economy, return on investment will be a function of the return on interaction. The look and feel of a Web site set the tone for a customer’s future relationship with a company. An engaging interface can personalize a transaction to the point where a customer relates to an online transaction at an almost human level.

If an experience is inconsistent and fails to meet a customer’s needs, it will be of no value, and the customer won’t want to repeat it.

Marshall McLuhan suggested that total communication means sharing insight and unique personal experiences through sensory inputs. It’s time to harness the power of the Internet by recognizing its ability to give added dimension to the customer experience. This will give marketers the magic they need to create truly interactive experiences as they transform cybersurfers into loyal and paying customers.

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