

# When customers go on journeys

How to optimise touch points and customer journeys by means of online communities

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Every contact with a brand can be a moment of truth. In order to make the customer experience and customer journey as pleasant as possible, companies must identify and control touch points reliably. Julia Koch and Natali Pohlschneider explain how this may be achieved by means of market research online communities.

„Nothing is as constant as change,“ said Heraklites of Ephesus already. The marketing universe is also constantly subject to changes. While brands used to focus on their products and their quality, companies are now increasingly shifting their attention towards customer experience.

## The consumer's path

Customer journeys usually follow the same pattern:

- The (potential) customer becomes aware of a need or a problem.
- Consequently, he then starts looking for products and solutions and finds out about his options.
- The longer the customer deals with his existing options the narrower the selection of products or services that might come into question. Offers are examined and evaluated closely.
- In the next step of the customer journey, the interested party chooses a specific product or service. This turns him into a real customer. However, the relationship between the company and the customer does not end here.
- The customer's experiences post buying decision are those decisively affecting his loyalty.

Along the entire customer journey, companies have the opportunity to „get in touch“ with potential customers through a wide variety of touch points. Whether through launching special offers or having convincing arguments, there is a wide variety of methods utilised to initiate dialogue and interaction with the customer.

## **The moment of truth**

Whether deliberately controlled by the company or previously unnoticed, every single contact with a brand represents a crucial moment in the customer experience – the moment of truth. Many companies are struggling to reach their target group at the right point in time and on the right channels along the customer journey. Therefore it is important to better understand the customer's path from his first need to being a loyal customer.

## **Recognising touch points**

First of all, one must identify the touch points. Qualitative market research methods are particularly suitable to explore the effects of the different touch points as well as their structures at the same time: for example, in-depth interviews allow a detailed analysis of a person and his or her customer journey. At the same time, the results highly depend on the respondent's memory. Diary studies are also particularly suitable for gaining a better understanding of individual customer journeys. Due to a longer duration of the survey, the customer journey can actually be accompanied for a while. This often leads to more reliable results.

## **The flexibility of online communities**

Market research online communities (MROCs) have a special advantage when it comes to analysing customer journeys. They combine the advantages of both techniques, in-depth interviews and diary studies. Participants solve different tasks, write diary entries in their digital journals and allow market researchers to delve into their otherwise private world by providing photos and videos. At the same time, the communities take advantage of processes known from group dynamics: participants exchange information in forums, group messengers or video chats. The entire process is closely accompanied by a trained moderator to animate the participants accordingly, so that important issues may be explored more in depth. The flexibility of online communities also plays a crucial role. Ideally, a community solution should provide various means of expression and allow project-specific customisation in order to accommodate the questions and objectives of the respective project. For touch point analyses, these include sorting and placing tools to record the sequence of the touch points, or collages and mobile video upload features to describe and document touch points in detail.

## **The participants' daily life**

But how exactly does a touch point analysis work in online communities? First of all, the participants must be put in the right mood for the product or topic. A suitable means for this are forums in which the community members generally talk about the product, service and their respective experiences. At this point obvious touch points may already be collected. In psychology this stage is called „priming“. Priming

specifically influences the processing of the participants' everyday life in such a way that they are subconsciously sensitised to the topic through the preceding discussions. As a result, the participants notice the touch points in everyday life – even those that otherwise are not consciously perceived. The extended field time gives participants enough time to go through typical life situations, get in touch with touch points, record them digitally with their smartphones and share them with the community. This enables us to analyse which touchpoints are relevant at which point in time along the customer journey.

## **Meeting different needs**

Gradually, a comprehensive picture emerges of the touch points in their entirety. However, these are only rarely lined up strictly one after another. Instead, the same touch points often come into play at different times of the journey. For example, online retailers are consulted both for a first pricing as well as for experience reports during the stage of closer evaluation, and ultimately for the actual purchase. And there is the crux: depending on how far the potential customers have already traveled along their journey, they have different needs that have to be met. After all, each touch point is also a moment of truth.

## **Measuring the impact**

During the second step one has to find out how customers perceive and evaluate the current network of touch points. Which touch points show a lot of presence and are used frequently? Which ones are relevant during which phase of the customer journey? Which ones constitute an ideal combination? These questions may be answered in a multi-stage process. For example, there is a tool that can be used to determine the sentiment of individual touch points. The results show which emotions are triggered predominantly. A subsequent ranking shows how important the respective touch points are to the customer. Additionally, collages provide even more emotional and profound insights into particularly important points of contact as well as various combinations of various touch points. In forums or chats, one may discuss previous experiences concerning the different touch points with other community members.

## **A glance over the shoulder**

Since the participants can document their experiences with their smartphone and directly share photos and videos with the community, market researchers are also able to „glance over the participants' shoulder“. Thus, experiences can be immediately reconstructed. This often allows a more exact understanding of the respective customer journey. Upon completing these stages the status quo of the customer journey including its individual touch points becomes apparent. Nevertheless, the analysis often also reveals existing weaknesses. So how can they be eradicated?

## **Solving problems as a team**

The online community In|Spiary by Produkt + Markt additionally focuses on touch point optimisation as a given priority. A co-creation approach comes into effect for this purpose – customers and companies join forces and work together on solving problems. In a departure from convention, however, the focus is not on optimising products and services, but instead on optimising marketing strategies. Due to this reason, for a touch point analysis, careful recruitment of participants is utterly important. Participants do not only qualify by being at a certain point in their customer journey. They are also screened regarding certain desirable character traits.

## **Wanted: creative minds**

For this purpose, we specifically search for lateral thinkers and people with extravagant mindsets – people who express themselves well and who think creatively. After all, creativity is particularly important when it comes to touch point optimisation. MROCs provide ideal conditions for this matter: Since the community is not a location-based platform and participants do not necessarily have to be active simultaneously, there is a maximum level of flexibility. Whether blackbirds or night owls, shift workers or freelancers, Inuit or Australian, they all participate at times when they are the most creative.

At the time when ideas are generated to optimise the touch points, the participants have already intensely dealt with their own customer journey as well as the journeys of the other participants. As a result, all of their senses are subconsciously tuned towards touch points and the brain automatically links the existing information to newly acquired knowledge. These neuronal processes are assisted by various creative techniques based on different methods. Methods worth mentioning, for example, would be a change in perspective (alienation techniques such as the headstand method), association or confrontation techniques (stimulus word technique). Furthermore, processes related to group dynamics may be specifically utilised during touch point optimisation. Particularly the joining of participants and employees in the online community broadens the horizons of both parties and encourages new thoughts. Hence, MROCs do not only aid in generating profound insights; they equally facilitate the development of effective solutions for touch point optimisation.

## About the authors



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