Product Content Strategy: A Theoretical Approach

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Understanding the focal points of customer experience, customer decision making, motivations, content design and engagement helps us to comprehend the importance of product content and its design in relation to various platforms, executions and customers. These areas are also important for understanding external factors that can negatively or positively influence engagement of product content.

To keep ahead of the competition, businesses need to ensure they provide consumers with the best possible user experience. The digital era and internet provide companies with opportunities and platforms that give consumers the ability to experience products in non-tangible ways. The benefits of ensuring a positive user experience are great, and reducing the amount of pain points a consumer experiences are a necessity.

Understanding the customer decision-making process means that businesses can minimise the risk of negatively impacting the customer, which could affect conversion and engagement. By comprehending possible motivations, a business can manage its cognitive and experiential signals to engage with customers in the most efficient ways possible.

Engagement through an understanding of the customer decision-making process gives a business the opportunity, firstly, to satisfy the customer through positive interaction and, secondly, to build trust and brand loyalty that can result in repeat traffic and formed relationships. Customers use these relationships to fulfil parts of their lives, and once a relationship has been created it can be very beneficial for a business. Businesses can use these relationships to improve interactivity and customer satisfaction and improve the overall user experience.

Customer Experience

The customer experience is the culmination of interactions the customer has when engaging with a brand through a channel and the influences motivated by cognitive and affective cues aimed at sight and sound. The online customer experience has become as vital within the online shopping environment as purchasing the product itself, and improving this service gives businesses across a wide range of industries a competitive advantage.

Historically, creating value through experience has been directed by what will be beneficial for the brand, rather than what value can be created for the customer. However, customers are now able to interact with brands through multiple channels, resulting in multi-faceted customer journeys. Due to increased competition, increasingly greater customer expectations, and a need to differentiate further, brands are now focusing their attention on improving experiences and creating value for customers.
Minimal research has been conducted on the impact of style content on the customer’s journey and experience, so it remains a challenge to effectively understand and implement strategies where great and impactful customer experiences can lead to positive purchase outcomes, competitive advantage and loyalty. Poor experiences, on the other hand, can be damaging for business. The user experience impacts the customer’s perceptions of value, service, and product quality in a non-tangible environment that can affect brand loyalty and customer retention.

The ability of customers to interact with brands through multiple channels and with each journey, and with each individual customer experience becoming increasingly unique, brands now have less control over the customer landscape than they previously may have had. Therefore, brands will need more resources, outputs and functions to try and successfully manage these experiences and generate positive outcomes. The need for customers to want to create and search for their own experiences also means that brands are finding it increasingly difficult to measure and manage the customer experience. At each touch point, brands need accurate knowledge of which experiences lead to positive engagement rates.

Flow Theory and cues can be used to help ensure that the customer experience is engaging and interactive. The concept of Flow Theory is based on a state of mind in which a person acts with total involvement and is fully immersed in their activity, while logically transitioning seamlessly between actions. Enabling Flow Theory by creating an engaging user experience through a grand design means that cues can be used to draw in the customer and keep their attention whilst online. A substantial amount of online revenue is lost globally due to poor online experiences, so this can be a valuable approach when taken correctly. A lack of interactive experiences makes customers less engaged and less likely to make online purchases. A ‘flow-like’ state for the customer can only be achieved through design, and once a customer is experiencing flow, there is less chance that he or she will be interrupted or distracted whilst online.

Previous experiences with a brand can influence current customer experience in terms of brand expectations, but external influences can also play a significant part, such as trends and cultures — or even the weather. It’s up to the brand to determine how the customer will truly react to these external factors. In terms of how content is presented, the customer’s previous experiences will directly influence how current content is interpreted. Brands must understand their audience and know what they are trying to achieve through the production of content to ensure that strategy and customer experience are perfectly aligned.

The wide range of internal and external factors that create a ‘customer experience’ is difficult to measure. With the customer interacting with brands through multiple channels, it’s difficult to portray their experiences accurately. Not knowing which factors have a positive or negative impact on the customer at various touch points means that brands cannot plan with 100% certainty for a desired outcome at any stage of the customer journey.
At the same time, the lack of empirical research carried out on online user experiences in terms of content design calls for further exploration into the important factors of content design. In order to understand the effects of different aspects of content design, consumer decision-making characteristics need to be addressed. The fact that some consumers are motivated to shop online for either ‘practical’ or ‘hedonistic’ reasons is also worth investigating.

**Customer Decision Making**

In an online environment, gaining the customer’s attention is crucial. The customer will decide to purchase a product or not based on the information they receive. If they do not have enough information, or if they are distracted in some way by what they see, the customer will go elsewhere to gather the information they need. This is where product content can play a vital role in attracting a customer. Content needs to strike a balance between providing enough information and not being too overwhelming. Creating a user-friendly website can influence customers to eventually purchase products from the site. If a customer likes a company’s website or brand, they will be more responsive to the content, so content design is integral. Also, creative and engaging imagery will help customers to embrace new offerings.

In an online environment, customers actively seeking information on an organisation’s site are ‘partial employees’ of that organisation. This cognition means the customer is engaged and wants to succeed in their task, and this can only be assisted by website functionality. When the customer succeeds, the company succeeds — and vice versa. Customers have positive emotions when retail shopping and experience reduced risk whilst shopping online, based on signalling cues such as positive reputation and personalised advertising – cues that influence the decision-making process.

The identified advantages of online shopping over ‘bricks and mortar’ retailing are important to acknowledge: convenience, time and energy saving, cost savings, and a more diverse range of product offerings are all initial considerations that need to be made for that customer – and for them to go online in the first place. Research has shown that online shoppers have more positive attitudes when shopping online than while in-store shopping, due to increased opportunities that enhance personalisation and interactivity. In the competitive online marketplace it is essential to keep your customers happy and engaged, as they can easily shop online elsewhere.

It’s also important to know whether the consumer has enough information to make a purchasing decision. If they don’t, then the customer will have to rely on signals and cues to help inform that decision. In this case, you need to understand the importance of content design and how strategically designed your site is. The three theories highlighted below show how both the customer and the site work together and – depending on the level of your content information – how that content can hinder or assist the customer’s decision-making process.

- **Inference Theory** assumes that customers make judgements based on information and will comprehend accessible cues.
- **Signalling Theory** involves the seller prompting the customer with cues to gain insight into possibly unknown information.
- **Cue Utilisation Theory** focuses on how the effect and efficiency of multiple cues can be utilised to help the customer arrive at a decision.

As customers have limited cognitive and information-processing competencies in a shopping environment, where incomplete information is in abundance, the cues provided can really help. Extrinsic cues are seen to be most influential in an online environment where physical products are not available. However, for these three theories to be used effectively in product marketing, brand credibility and reputation and product characteristics remain critical success factors. With thousands of new images and messages received each day, the human mind can’t decipher and interpret each stimulus – so, naturally, customer attention has become increasingly selective. You have to consider whether content changes on your site will give the customer more information to decode or will be perceived as a positive, stored experience. Bear in mind that each customer is an individual, and reactions to stimuli and information overload will vary, depending on the individual.

By adapting and elaborating on the Customer Decision Model, an alternative customer decision-making model (Fig.1) has been created to illustrate the multiple channels and touch points in play during the customer decision-making process.
This model also illustrates how, at each stage, the customer can move backwards during the journey – based on the interaction they experience, the evaluation of that interaction, and the support they receive. The customer decision-making process is not nearly as linear as we used to think! Just how far the customer is required to move back will depend on how confident the customer is with the information they have to take a decision at a given stage and touch point. It’s important to note that, at all stages during the customer’s journey, internal and external influencing factors are always present, and this can impact a decision made at each stage. Customers always begin each journey with a positive or negative past experience, or a non-existent experience.

By creating strong, well-executed content, brands can reduce any perceived risks of confusion or distraction for the customer that can occur when extended cognition is needed, resulting in the possibility of quicker decisions being made. However, any decisions that the customer makes will most likely be determined by their motivations, so it’s essential to understand customer motivations.

Motivations

The main identified online shopping motivations are: convenience, time and energy saving, cost savings, and a more diverse range of product offerings. While research shows that customers miss interaction with physical products while in-store shopping, they enjoy the service, security and privacy of shopping offline. These are the motivational factors that businesses need to recognise and reassure their online customers that they’re helping them to make the best decisions. Again, in an increasingly competitive marketplace, understanding the consumer is paramount.

There are three underlying motivations behind shopping behaviour: 1) to purchase a product, 2) to acquire a product that provides satisfaction relative to non-product-related needs, or 3) to attain goals not related to product acquisition. These are important to recognise in order to be able to understand how consumers will approach your website. A certain initial design or layout will have great influence on the next decisions your customer will make.

Creating the right experiential atmosphere is a critical motivational factor in influencing online shopping behaviour. Consumers are looking for fun, pleasure and excitement in an online shopping experience. These motivations are intrinsically created by the design and layout of your website, but let’s not forget that other fundamental factors influence motivations and intentions, such as privacy, security and customer service.
Motivations vary, depending on the individual. 'Brand loyalty' is the psychological or emotional connection a consumer has with a particular brand. Brand loyalty can play an essential role in determining why a consumer uses a certain website and continues with a purchase, regardless of functionality. The brand might provide products that serve a practical function, but it can also provide the consumer with symbolic, social and cultural meaning. While the practical consideration is foremost for most customers, improvements in technology and functionality have made shopping online more enjoyable for the customer, meaning that the allure of 'hedonistic' shopping is becoming more and more prevalent.

Content plays a vital role in product evaluation, and it's important to understand that outcomes can vary considerably, depending on whether a product's image is firmly established or newly reimagined. The customer is always processing different information, and he or she may not have the mental recall of a product to absorb new product content — which might actually be off-putting.

**Content Design**

Great design can boost customer satisfaction and pleasure. It also creates opportunities for customer flow to be initiated. Innovative content design and enhanced customer satisfaction can also lead to improved brand image and perception.

The intangibility of shopping online has an impact on customer experience and product assessment. A way to overcome this dynamic is to present website content and layout in ways that are optimised for the consumer. In addition to site content and layout, imagery and videos are other important deciding factors. High-quality imagery deployed with minimal product information might, for example, place a product in a 'too premium' price category for some customers. On the other hand, such content might succeed in drawing attention that it wouldn’t otherwise. This all depends on the product in question and the customer’s motivations.

Also, 'information overload' can be distracting, but design influencing can help shape customer attitudes in positive ways. Customers actively seek out information through optimised design and a preferred means of navigation, and dislike being presented with anything unnecessary. However, contradictions have been discovered as to the elements in question of buying behaviour, which tends to processes received information and depends on the context of analysis. Whilst different layouts have certain effects, user characteristics can also influence interactivity and the customer experience. Familiarity needs to be taken into consideration, especially when assessing brand bias.

The 'halo effect' can have a tremendous influence on brands. Content that's authentic, engaging and relevant can exploit an impression created in one brand area to influence opinion in another area of the brand. But this content, or another external factor, can influence brand perceptions or quality of service positively or negatively. If content can be created to influence these perceptions, feelings and thoughts about brand characteristics, then weaker aspects of the brand can be presented more effectively. Because it's difficult to determine the exact source of effect for the customer, it's also difficult for a brand to generate a desired effect at will through any touch point.
To sustain a competitive advantage, three factors should be considered and integrated: the customer, the competitors, and the corporation. Using the 3C model developed by Kenichi Ohmae (1991) enables a holistic view of the strategy in place. Adapting this model for content design can determine which components need to change or stay the same to achieve the three main aims: 1) identify the customer’s needs and wants; 2) identify how to be different from the competition; and 3) identify the brand's internal capabilities and resources.

This model makes it possible to see how brands operate and to see whether or not current content matches the existing business strategy or how a strategy needs to develop. However, the 3C model is not a guarantee for success, and should be used to stimulate thinking around strategy and possible options to be explored. Not all businesses have the ability to continuously update and test content, and it may not even be necessary. Brands, therefore, need to decide both on their approach once all three components have been considered and on the importance and direction of execution (Ohmae, 1991). Higher production values may show products to be ‘aspirational’ or of higher quality, but the product and customer needs will determine the success of this approach. Depending on price or availability, not all products will require such an investment in content.

In today’s ever-increasing, competitive market, brands need to stand out from the competition by being different and extraordinary. This demonstrates value to the customer that they aren’t receiving from another brand. But to be different without risking failure requires a big investment in planning and resources.

You want the customer to become immersed in your brand, and to believe your product will make their lives better – or help them escape to another world. Higher production values can do this in ways that other aspects of customer engagement cannot. Updating content means the experience can be refreshed and reduce the risk of an experience becoming stale. Stale content betrays a lack of innovation, and a consistently negative experience culminates in a negative brand perception.

**Engagement**

In order for the content and design of content to be considered effectively, it must be acknowledged that engagement and interactivity are keys to measuring the effectiveness of the content. The added value is based in accompanying customer relationships from an interactive and experiential level. This can expand the realm of consumer choice beyond the core purchase decision.

Engagement allows consumers to further relate to a brand and assess shared values. ‘Engagement’ is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of three dimensions: 1) the cognitive (thinking); 2) the affective (feelings, attitudes, emotions); and 3) the behavioural (doing). By addressing these three dimensions, we can recognise the varying approaches and responses that customers have towards
content, and what they may like or dislike. Brands should therefore try to ensure that their content engage effectively with customers.

Engagement, or a lack of engagement, is influenced by other factors, including the customer’s need for identification and belonging, regardless of the stimulant. Engagement allows customers to find like-minded individuals and shared brand values. A customer’s level of engagement is influenced by brand-related factors, so these should be taken into consideration when addressing content and testing.

Engagement may only be considered when trust and satisfaction are achieved. Engagement and interactivity then enriches the online shopping experience and adds value to customer satisfaction, which in turn leads to online purchases and reinforces positive brand perceptions.