The Customer IS the Store

By: Lewis Sears

(Safely) "Driving" sales of consumer products

I'm glad we can all agree that texting and driving is a menace to society, and no one would ever do that. But a recent study shows that perhaps I'm a little naïve. Even so, I'd like to give drivers the benefit of the doubt and assume that when it comes to online purchasing, all hands are off phones until the car is safely parked. Indeed, these days, there's nothing unusual about logging into an app, performing a search, and ordering your mother flowers while still strapped into the driver's seat…

Our digital connections pervade every aspect of our lives. While I still enjoy going to lacrosse games at the stadium, I don't refer to a physical game day program for information about the teams – I look it up online. Similarly, while I still frequent physical stores, I'm just as likely to shop online while I'm INSIDE the store. Actually, it's possible to talk to a store employee about a product, perhaps handle the product, find a better deal on the online portal, order for in-store pick-up, and then walk to the front of the store to pick up the item.

Often, the sale begins long before the customer actually visits the store – or the online store portal. There is a progression of consumer engagement from interest, passive investigation, active investigation and decision time to purchase, initial impression and continuous experience. For every company and their brand, each stage represents an opportunity – or conversely, threat of purchase (or even brand) derailment. And while the engagement journey takes many forms, such as people, media and technology, the common thread throughout is the impact of digital connection.

The customer journey in a digital life

The concept of a customer journey is not new. What is (relatively) new is the pervasive nature of the digital experience throughout that journey. Here is how digital informs – and affects – each step

along the way:

Interest: Companies proactively drive interest in their products – think advertising, branding. In the digital world, we think of email, online advertising, SEO and increasingly, social media management. From a brand perspective, more is not always better. Messages should be crafted to individual needs. This requires a knowledge of the consumer, their behavior, and many other attributes.

Passive investigation: Consumers have a wealth of information to digest. While there are many external sources, the company needs to ensure that their branding and message are consistent. Companies CAN control their own messaging. And while it's important to provide all kinds of information in all kinds of channels, it's also important for that information to be consistent. Because consumers leverage multiple channels, each should reinforce the core campaign.

Active investigation: Consumers will contact companies with questions about their products, services and contracts. Phone-based CSRs have given way to chat windows, chat bots and other AI-enabled contact points. But all of these channels must have a consistent 360-degree view of the customer and deliver a consistent brand message.**Decision time:** By monitoring the digital behavior of the consumer, it is often possible to determine when a sale is imminent or if a sales opportunity is waning. This is, therefore, a critical time to take action, often by approaching the consumer via the same aforementioned channels.

Purchase: Whether in-store, online or in-app, the purchase process should be easy. It should present product information consistently throughout the process. This mandates that the same offers, the same prices and, perhaps, the same promotions – i.e., the building blocks of a long-term relationship with the customer – be governed centrally. So regardless of channel, the shopping experience must persist for a customer who begins their shopping journey online, continues in an app, follows up in store, calls the CSR, or any combination thereof. It is also important that the offer remains the same and that the process be contiguous and continuous.

Initial impression: Post-purchase, the consumer embarks on a journey that may last a lifetime. Even something as fleeting as a meal can leave a lasting impression. And throughout this time, customer impressions continue to evolve. Their interactions as they learn about the product, experience it, and interact with the company throughout, are very relevant for future sales.

Continuous experience: Customer impressions that impact future buying decisions have always been valuable to companies. Social media only magnifies the impact of experience (and that it does so exponentially, is an understatement). Feedback, whether positive or negative, can quickly reach the entire world of consumers. Meanwhile, dealing with any fallout can be very difficult (as United Airlines recently learned). For this reason, it is important to ensure that nothing in your customer's journey inculcates anything but the most positive feedback.

And with so many moving parts, the experience at any point of the customer's journey has the potential to impact both current and future purchasing decisions, as well as the company's entire brand image.

Governing this journey is the digital framework.

More than just the front end

An end-to-end view of the customer journey does not stop at a web page. The digital framework is more than a system myopically focused on user interfaces and customer relationship management. While these are great hooks into customer contacts, they do not govern the entire customer journey. All aspects of the services rendered, and/or still available, should be visible to the customers via their channel of choice. Accuracy is paramount and clarity across channels is necessary to avoid confusion; and confusion, of course, leads to issues and dissatisfaction. So the digital framework must be an extension of the underlying business model.

Along with service satisfaction, consumers are very sensitive to price and ongoing charges. Indeed, such sensitivity is often the breeding ground for escalating tension. For this reason, payment and billing information – such as services rendered, services still available, past charges, pending charges and so on – must be 100% accurate, and not just an estimate derived from front-end pricing systems. And, there should be no unpleasant surprises. This means that invoices should be clear and consistent with the original expectations set during the sales engagement process.

Serving the "digital you"

Just as navigating a busy intersection doesn't necessarily preclude the ability of a driver to purchase a last-minute Mother's Day gift, consumers can conjure up a brand experience from literally anywhere. Random situations can drive a desire to visit a website, portal, store, app, or any other digital channel. The store is now everywhere; everywhere is now the store.

But while the channels may change, the digital you – today's customer – is the same. Today, the customer IS the store. For this reason, successful companies must be poised to fully take advantage of the digital framework in order to present their best effort in every channel, at any time of day, to any audience.