

The Art of Creating Attractive Consumer Experiences at the Right Time: Skills Marketers Will Need to Survive and Thrive

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KEYWORDS

*Marketing Skills, Customer Experience,
Consumer Experience, Big Data,
Key Metrics, Causal Models,
Real-Time, Deep Knowledge,
Creativity*

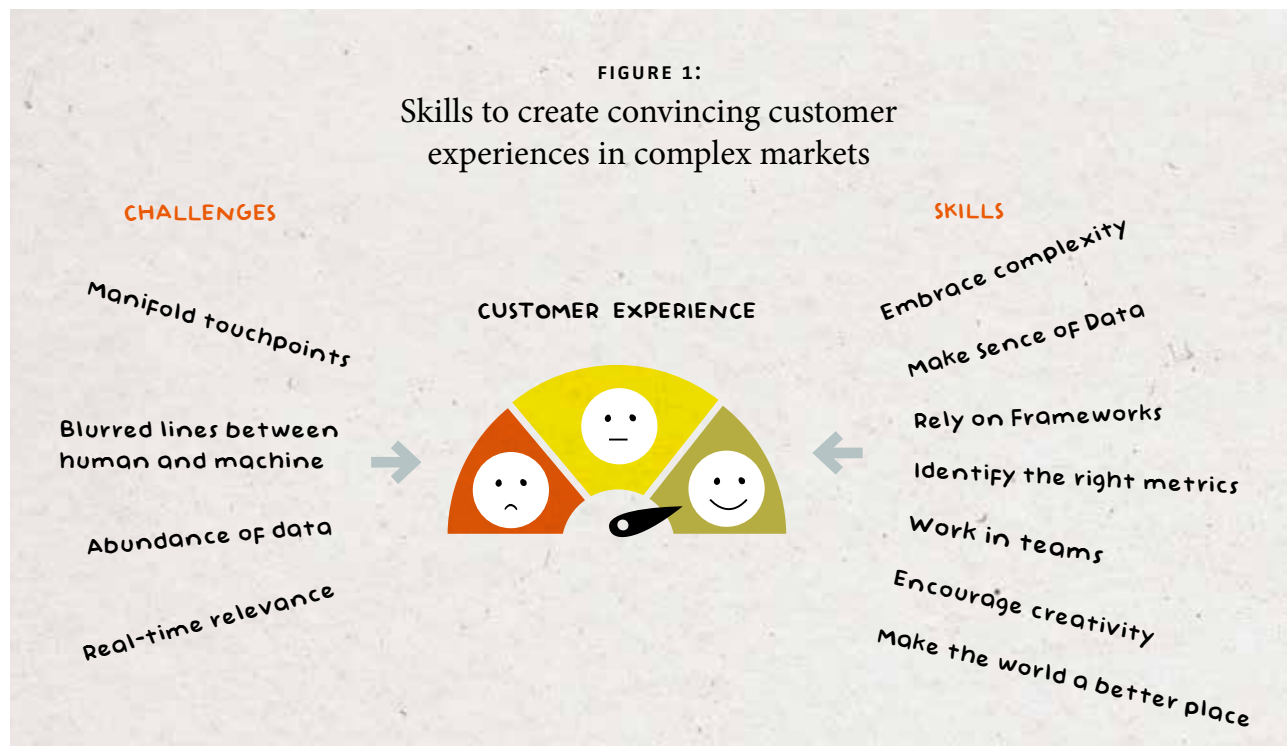
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Technology, data and the fragmentation of attention

/// Delivering a strong, positive and enduring customer experience is still a critical challenge that most companies face, but the way people experience almost everything is being completely transformed. Technological opportunities like mobile, location-based, digital making, virtual reality, drones, neuroscience, automation, machine-to-machine interactions through the internet of things are changing consumer behavior, changing the way companies are organized, changing the role of “humans” in the marketplace. The lines between human and machine are becoming blurred.

The manifold experiences and new technology result in massive amounts of data across all touch points in the entire customer journey, across channels, offerings, platforms and devices, incorporating collaboration with other customers and partners, and across time and space as well. And given all those different touch points, consumer attention has become fragmented. Consumers have gained more control over what media they consume or channels they use. The ability to push messages and ideas to consumers that marketers used to have has greatly diminished. Now, all marketing is pull, there is no more push. In this new world, marketers need to be “real-time relevant” – to gain awareness, to change perceptions and to spur action. They need to have the content in the channel, format, time and context that the consumer wants – to stand at least a chance of the consumer attending to the information and being influenced by it. In this new consumer world, marketing works best when the consumers initiate the conversation – or the relationship – with the company because what they find is relevant at that very instant.



But how can marketers handle this complexity and this pace? What are the skills necessary to identify the right technologies, to design all the different experiences and to appeal to consumers at the right moment? Essentially, seven skills are required to survive and thrive in the new market conditions (Figure 1).

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Seven skills marketers will need to survive and thrive

1. Embracing complexity /// There is no simple any more. Marketers need to embrace the messiness and unwieldiness that is the path to purchase for their customers – a dynamic process that happens across a myriad touch points in multiple channels on multiple screens involving multiple partners in

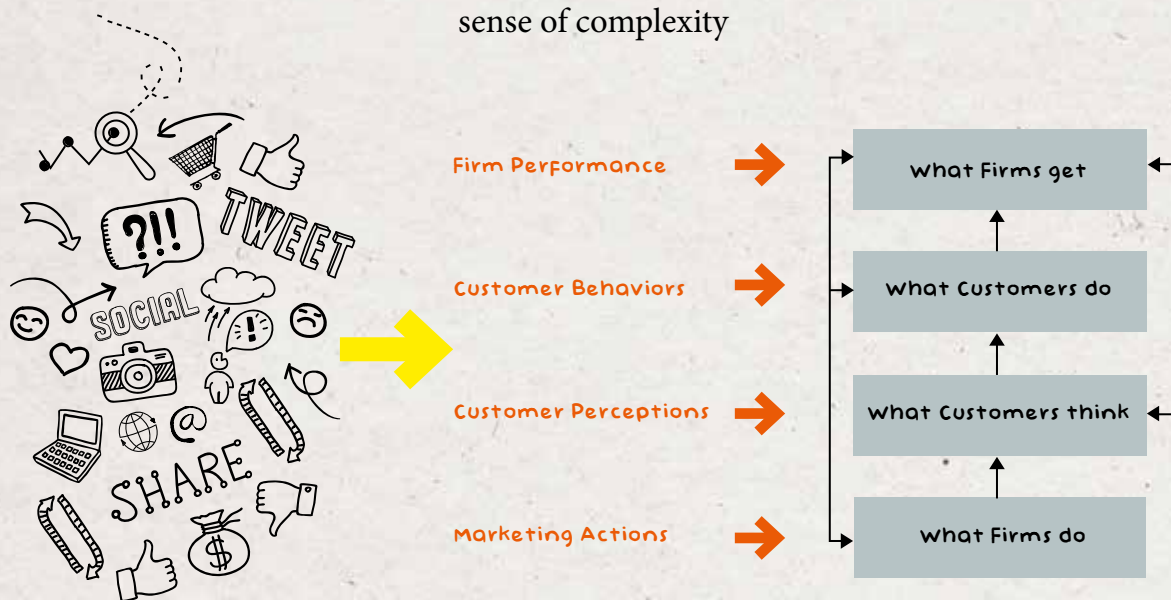
uncontrollable contexts with significant social influence. To gain any perspective or apparent “control” in these environments, successful managers have to embrace the complexity and develop models and approaches that enable them to consider and incorporate multiple dimensions – the old 2x2 matrix just isn’t going to be enough. Consider just one element in the overall customer journey – digital media. Making sense of how distinct elements of the digital media landscape may influence a consumer’s path to purchase is a daunting task. A myriad companies are working to develop multi-touch attribution models that enable them to understand the extent to which each digital element may influence the path to purchase. These models offer much promise but, at the moment, are somewhat scattershot in their effectiveness. That said, it is crucial to embrace the complexity anyway – and to begin to develop these capabilities and models.

2. Making sense of all the data /// Complexity and technology have led to an explosion in data. There is a critical need for new models and approaches to analyze, visualize, integrate, interpret, and present this huge amount of data. We need ways that lead to usable insights and result in improved value for both customers and companies. Marketers will need better causal models, better predictive analytics, more scalable methods, simpler ways to gain insights from unstructured data, easily understandable and updatable data

visualization techniques, and easily implementable monitoring approaches, metrics and dashboards. What makes this even more challenging is that these new approaches need to be dynamic and to provide real-time insights, enabling real-time design, access, personalization, and response. With the explosion of data, channels and the digitalization of everything, almost every action is traceable and causal inference models are becoming more ubiquitous. Marketers of the future will need to have the capability to build and test these causal models, to gain insights from them, and to change course when necessary. At the Marketing Science Institute, we have just completed our 2016-2018 Research Priorities, outlining the most pressing topics companies face in the next 2-5 years. Making sense of the data arose as a key priority. As one company noted, we need “to evolve traditional methods to faster and agile consumer/customer ‘pulse reads’ that can lead to better and faster insights; to read marketing levers in real time, including emerging touch points; and the agility/ability to change plan given real-time learning.”

3. Relying on frameworks /// This may sound quite “old school,” but I firmly believe that marketing frameworks – maybe even new ones not yet developed – will be a critical resource for the marketer of the future. Frameworks are a way to put order into a complex environment and the more messy and confusing the scene gets, the more important it will be to find structure for moving around successfully. Understanding the critical paths for the customer journey, or the key aspects of a successful innovation and new product introduction, or the key elements of brand engagement, or the keys to a successful content strategy will be necessary to gain insights and make decisions. Frameworks don’t have to be unduly complex. For example, in the one pictured on the right side of Figure 2, Gupta and Zeithaml provide a simple framework within which companies can link their own actions with consumers’ thoughts and actions and the respective outcomes. What is the value of these frameworks? Keeping everyone on track, and providing a common language for checking progress and moving forward.

FIGURE 2:
Using frameworks to make
sense of complexity



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to pay attention to metrics
that don't matter. Traditional metrics
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4. Identifying the metrics that matter and paying attention to those ///

Decision makers can often get bogged down with metrics – and often measure the wrong things. A critical skill for marketers will be to identify the metrics that best reflect the desired outcomes of the organization and that sufficiently reflect specific indicators of critical processes. As causal inference models become better over time, marketers will begin to get a sense of which metrics truly act as leading indicators and are good proxies for desired outcomes. Recent evidence suggests that traditional approaches, such as surveying customers to gauge their satisfaction or likelihood to recommend, may be less effective moving forward. Instead, more in situ measures throughout the customer journey may become better metrics.

We also need to pay more attention to how the metrics we collect may actually influence our customers. Much research suggests that merely asking customers about their future intentions can influence their future behavior – the “mere measurement effect.” Recent research my colleagues and I have conducted suggests that these effects may be more pervasive than previously thought. We find that asking customers to focus on what they liked about the experience (via an open-ended prompt at the beginning of a traditional post-purchase survey) led to significant increases in future purchase behavior in a consumer retailing context and to significant increases in conversion from trial to purchase in a business-to-business context. Assuring that our metrics are accurately measuring what we want them to measure is critical. Perhaps more difficult will be the ability to not pay attention to metrics that don't matter. Traditional metrics that no longer predict key outcomes need to be demoted.

5. Create agile teams with deep and broad skills ///

Marketers will need to have deep expertise in big data analytics and also have the skills of an anthropologist to deeply and quickly grasp what is going on in the minds, hearts, voices, and hands of consumers. Marketers will also need significant integrative skills. The customer insights group within an

organization may be faced with insights from a huge machine learning attribution model and at the same time with insights from qualitative social media data. Also, there are significant opportunities to integrate and leverage insights from design science, architecture, information systems, biology, engineering, and other fields to enhance the processes by which we design experiences.

Successful companies will need individuals and approaches that enable them to compare and to integrate the insights from such disparate approaches. The marketing team will also need to be skilled in the art of developing a compelling narrative – to tell their story up the chain of command, across all groups in the organization that might influence or “touch” the customer. Communicating a brand's value proposition in captivating ways to a heterogeneous and barely attentive market will be crucial. Finally, marketers will also need to respond and react in real time. Much like a sailor navigating an upwind course, marketers will need to both “stay the course” – keeping key objectives in mind – and make quick, necessary “tacking” adjustments in real time given the continuous feedback being received from the market.

6. Encouraging creativity and curiosity ///

The marketer of the future will need to be supremely curious and creative. Understanding the role of emotions in experience design and the customer journey will be a significant challenge. Also, how to help consumers and customers get their “jobs done” smoothly, with less friction, and maybe even with more joy. Disruption and innovation are coming from unlikely places – unlikely start-ups are gaining trust and stealing significant share from very well-known and entrenched market leaders. Consumers are empowered, attention is fragmented, and barriers to entry are eliminated. It is much easier to identify market opportunities, to solve customer problems in more efficient and often cheaper ways. Thus, encouraging disruptive thinking, and fanning creative sparks into flames will be critical. Companies will need to hire curious, creative thinkers who can connect disparate things in new ways.



7. *Keeping an eye on making the world a better place* ///

Last but not least, marketers have a real opportunity to develop products, services and relationships with customers that focus on improving well-being and establishing optimal social contracts. Many companies will need to gain deep insights into the needs of developing markets and into how to serve people at the base of the pyramid. Consumer reliance on technology also creates opportunities for brands to be embedded in the lives of their customers like never before, and with these deeper relationships come greater responsibilities. Recent advances in behavioral decision making and behavioral economics offer great opportunities for companies to work with their customers to ensure that value is created for consumers as well as for companies. Encouraging customers to make better decisions will also be a critical skill for marketers of the future.

Delivering great experiences at the moments that matter. The main objective of all these skills is to still create strong and enduring experiences for customers under ever more challenging conditions. Customer experiences are dynamic, complex, social and embedded in the larger ecosystems that customers inhabit. It does not appear that the focus on designing and delivering great customer experiences is going to diminish anytime soon. Clearly, understanding your customer's decision journey and the critical moments in that journey – in real time, and in context – will be critical. But those marketers who are able to take insights further to design and deliver consistent, seamless experiences will be the marketing stars of tomorrow – and will make their companies thrive.

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FURTHER READING

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Real-time!

