

Don't Get Lost on the Consumer Journey

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Data creates new opportunities to understand how real people find their way to our brands, and new insights as to how to communicate in ways that support their journey. But how do you navigate through all of the information that's available?

If you are reading this at home, take a look at the objects around you. Now think about the process you went through in acquiring these items. My guess is that, in some cases, the process was pretty simple.

Let's say that you're drinking a delicious cup of tea. Did you do some background research by looking at videos on expert tea blogs? Did you run it past your friends before you

bought it?

Did you go to different stores to compare prices? Probably not.

The truth is that while we have numerous ways to obtain things and an almost infinite ability to research them, sometimes we don't expend the effort. There are times that you want to be an "empowered" consumer... and there are times you just want a cup of your favorite tea. A journey based on rational and emotional needs.

What about more high-involvement purchases, like your television, kitchen appliances, furniture and even the pictures on the walls? These could all be the end product of a decision-making process in which communications play a bigger and more multi-layered role than ever before. By way of illustration, MediaCom's own Car Buyer Journey research identified 30 different forms of influence from communications in the period leading up to the purchase!

We are now increasingly adept at shuttling between different content sources to help us make an optimal decision, including brand information, third-party experts, peer reviews and algorithmically-derived comparisons. And because of the increasingly ubiquitous access to the internet, we can do this exploring anywhere or anytime. Also, because most of us are not Spock-like creatures of pure logic, our journeys are not tidy, linear affairs: most likely, they involve an interplay between emotional and rational needs as we backtrack, re-check our facts (until we find ones that we like) and procrastinate before we actually do something.

Opportunities and challenges

The upside here is clear: lots more opportunity for communications to play a role in influencing decisions. The brand that spots the right times to connect with consumers (and provides the right content that shifts the decision process in their favour) will win. The only downside is complexity, which causes confusion and alienates customers.

Here are five fundamentals that can help.

1. Look for the category patterns

Journeys may look complicated, but it's essential to understand how different kinds of information influence the decision-making process. Don't be intimidated by "big data." Just bringing together digital data from across the spectrum can reveal patterns of intention and behavior between consumers and the brands in your category. At the other end of the scale, "method insight" (getting a real world feel by accompanying consumers during their decision journeys) is an equally legitimate way of understanding the nuances in these journey "patterns."

2. Understand where communications can play a role

Identify the most important points at which your communications can connect with your customer's decision-making process. Data can help inform your view in terms of both the volume of opportunity and the quality of the connection. Assess where you can effectively disrupt your competition.

3. Understand what content people are using

Consider the kind of content people are connecting with right now. What role is it playing in their decision making? This is not a creative critique, but a view on the consumer's use of "content," whether it be brand advertising, peer reviews, retail communications or aggregators. Where does content need to be emotive, where is it rational, where is it lean-forward and where is it interruptive?

4. Connect your content

In a world where every screen is a potential shop window, are you making it easy for people to navigate your content? Think of your agency as communication plumbers: our job is to keep consumers within our communication system by making sure that all the elements of the plan are correctly linked together. Think Super Mario.

5. Collaboration is key

Taking a consumer-centered view of the decisionmaking journey is a brilliant way to align

the efforts of your agencies with a common vision: the right objective for the right content delivered at the right connection point. Far from complicating matters, this provides a touchstone for creativity and analysis. Instead of being intimidated by the expanding role of communications in influencing decisions, we should embrace it as an opportunity to understand more intimately how real people are finding their way to our brands. Just as importantly, it's a chance for us to create more coherent communications that support them on that journey.

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