The new battleground of customer experience

By Wayne Hull

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For CEOs and CMOs alike, addressing customer experience will be the key imperative in 2018 - and not merely at the B2C level, but B2B and B2B2C too. With marketing technology budgets growing apace - and CMOs' global tech spends forecast to exceed that of CIOs for the first time in 2018 - executives will need to consider who they hire in the digital space carefully.

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If experience is the essence of the digital economy, immersion is its zenith. While a digital-only paradigm is possible, data also now integrates with brick and mortar: embedded in the ever-expanding consumer experience landscape are nodes – both physical and digital – changing the nature of the customer-brand interaction. The result is fierce competition for consumers' attention. The most immersive experiences are able to capture it.

Experience and brand expression

Over the past few years, the rise of the digital economy has seen brand identity and digital experience become a tightly linked pair. The way in which many brands now express their vision, voice and purpose most ably is by immersing and engaging consumers via digital platforms.

Given the rapid uptake of digital technology among both companies and consumers, shifts toward the experiential paradigm are accelerating.

For the shopper, mobile already means purchasing anywhere, which many do; applied intelligence personalises the options presented with ever-increasing sophistication. Many corporates' helpdesks have seen reinvention: aware of the fact that customers often prefer to seek help online, rather than engaging with a call centre, the chatbot has become the assistant many seek. Banking, too, has seen an overhaul: your nearest branch is now your tablet.

Yet, while decoupling products and services from a physical store or central location has been a primary role of digital technology – abstracting experience from time and place – there are also now an increasing number of ways in which digital is beginning to drive a deepening of the in-person experience and a tighter meshing between tech and the tactile.

Unembedding (and re-embedding) digital

Consider the Via Montenapoleone in Milan, the first digitised fashion avenue in the world. A shopper who downloads the street's One Luxury Destination app has instant access to an intelligent navigator and district guide and is also able to receive invitations to fashion and beauty events. Through beacon technology, the app is also able to reach other potential customers in town, directing them to shopping experiences with brands whose offerings they are known to enjoy.

A second example of digital-physical meshing is Carla, Colombian airline Avianca's Facebook-embedded chatbot. Able to assist travellers with a range of routine flying tasks, Carla is available for help with check-in, flight status checks, seating changes, itinerary checks weather updates and simple translations.

Or consider the app assisting travellers in Brazil's the Rio Galeão International Airport. Developed to enhance users' travel experience during the Olympic Games, the app offered real-time information on flight statuses, showed travel alerts and provided exclusive offers to travellers while they were inside the airport. Through a network of geo-positioning beacons, the app was also able to guide flyers from check-in to boarding gates and restaurants.

Experience architecture

Whether digital-only or designed to link the digital and physical worlds, creating seamless, immersive experiences is both a creative and analytical undertaking. The process requires the skills of campaign analysts and user interface specialists as much as it does those of data scientists, data engineers and those in DevOps. Considerations at the design stage span everything from colour connotations, user experience and interfaces to the ways in which data is sourced and used to personalise the experience.

Moreover, benchmarks are constantly rising. Exposure to best-in-class digital experiences increases consumers'

expectations and sensitises them to experiential breaks or disconnects. Today's digitally astute customer expects to be treated as an individual, with real-time content and purchasing options that not only showcase brands' interest in his or her unique needs and preferences but which remain consistent in purpose and quality across channels, platforms and technologies. Inconsistencies between channel or device are often detected rapidly.

The result is within the arena of experiential architecture, skillsets once siloed within a traditional agency, tech and consulting environments are forced to mesh tightly – which they can. What is arising in their place is the integrated whole.

ABOUT WAYNE HULL

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