



Designing an emotional strategy: Strengthening digital channel engagements

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract The emergence of new technologies has revolutionized the way companies interact and build relationships with customers. The channel–customer relationship has traditionally been managed via a push approach in communication (“What can we sell customers?”) with the hope of cultivating customer loyalty. However, emotional understandings of customers and how they feel about a product, service, or business can drastically alter consumers’ engagement, behavior, and purchasing preferences. This rapidly evolving landscape has left managers at a loss, and what they are experiencing is likely the beginning of a tectonic shift in the way digital channels are designed, monitored, and managed. In this article, digital channel relationships are examined, and useful concepts for clarifying and refining the emotional meaning behind company strategy and their relationship to corresponding digital channels are detailed. Using three case study examples, we discuss the process and impact of such emotionally aware digital channel designs. Recommendations are made regarding how companies can select, design, and maintain digital engagements based on their strategy and industry needs.

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1. The new challenge

Building honest relationships between companies and customers is paramount to sustained business success. However, as we move into the digital age, the way in which we connect has changed. The Internet and digital channels have impacted this

interaction; no longer are customers simply downloading or searching for static data, but they are engaging with and sharing their own content via social networks. A customer’s constant engagement with technology and access to information influences their expectations of companies. Fisk (2006, p. 26) explained that customers are better informed than ever before, which has resulted in an environment where customer expectations are high and loyalty is rare. By becoming active members in digital channels, customers are able to voice their concerns and report on issues such as product quality, lack

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of availability, poor service, and high prices. Everything is now transparent and instantly broadcasted (Nunes & Cespedes, 2003).

The perspective that management is the sole creator of a company identity is no longer valid. The involvement of customers in brand building is now an important source of brand equity (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), as more customers are participating in online dialogues and interacting with each other in the process of creating the 'identity of self' through the identity of a brand. Previous research has indicated that customers demonstrate value-creating behaviors above and beyond those that firms create or anticipate (Schau et al., 2009). Therefore, it is argued that customer interaction is increasingly based on inputs provided by other customers and stakeholders beyond the control of the company. The exponential growth of data availability and the growing capabilities of digital technologies can now provide companies with valuable information to make strategic decisions. As a result, the traditional use of information technology within organizations has moved beyond functional applications toward a more strategic vision, whether they are equipped for this shift or not.

The design and management of a company's channel is an opportunity to strengthen company engagement with customers, as customers' purchase decisions are based on more subjective concepts such as the company identity, branding, advertising, and channel engagements. Consequently, this demand requires companies to possess new forms of knowledge and processes that allow them to create deeper engagements with their customers. The current literature and industry evidence demonstrates the capability of designers to create innovative and engaging product solutions; yet there is little evidence regarding the actual design and implementation of digital channel strategies. Against this backdrop, we introduce the foundations for designing emotionally aware digital channel engagements. We also establish the core characteristics of such digital channels and their corresponding customer touchpoints along with strategies for designing such touchpoints to create and manage customer relationships.

2. Use of design and emotion to strengthen digital engagements

The field of design and emotion has been studied to strengthen the role of meaning and to understand how it can be used to design digital channel engagements. Meaning is heavily intertwined with

emotion, and for the past decade has been a driver in product design as the creation of value between customer and product (Norman, 2004). Possessions are especially important for personal identity, as the use of products is one way in which an individual can symbolically define and express who they are (Sirgy, 1982). Richins (1997) explained that by injecting meaning into products consumers own and view as valuable, they are able to display a piece of themselves through that product. Belk (1988) suggested that our possessions contribute to our identities and also reflect them. Recognizing that we think of our possessions as part of ourselves is key in understanding the meaning of objects. Through this physical association between product and person or place, the product gains symbolic meaning for the owner (Belk, 1988). Emotions are functional because they pull us toward certain people, objects, actions, and ideas and push us away from others (Frijda, 1986). Pleasant emotions pull us to products that are (or promise to be) beneficial whereas unpleasant emotions will push us away from those that are (or promise to be) detrimental to our well-being (Desmet, 2008).

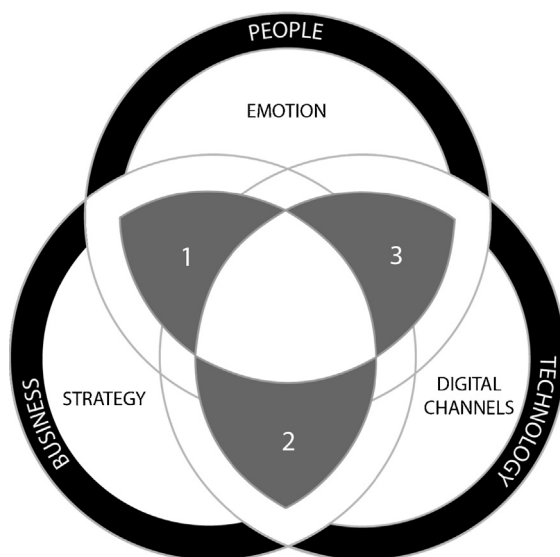
According to the marketing literature, a loyal customer can only be developed if a company can build emotional connections in addition to positive attitudes and behaviors (Mattila, 2001). According to Khan (2012), the vast majority of emotionally loyal customers have memorable experiences with a company, which generally leads to positive behavior toward the company (Mattila, 2001). The research of Park and Kim (2014) supports the importance of a company's awareness of this and revealed that a company's digital interactions can influence a customer's relationship with the company. A customer's perception of the investment made by a company in digital engagements can impact the relationship quality and customers' willingness to provide and share positive company experiences with others (Park & Kim, 2014). The ability to create engaging interactions with customers via digital technology could earn a customer's trust and result in emotional investment in (advocacy for) a company. Therefore, digital channel design should be high on management agendas. As Robinette, Brand, Lenz, and Hall (2000, p. 4) explained: "In every encounter there's an opportunity to meet a need and make an emotional connection" with the customer. However, research has highlighted that most companies are unsure how to best seize the opportunity and have difficulty in making digital channels engaging and valuable to the customer (Parent et al., 2011; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Current research has also largely failed to capture the use of emotions to inform business strategy. While there is increasing

research on channels as new distribution modes (Rosenbloom, 2013) and on the emotional aspects of customer choices in online environments (Rajamma, Paswan, & Ganesh, 2007), very little is known about the emotional aspects of company strategy as a way to inform digital communication and digital channel strategy.

3. Designing an emotional strategy

By starting with people, companies can uncover individual customers' emotional needs and in turn understand how to design to meet their needs (Guenther, 2012). This research builds upon Brown's (2009) and Guenther's (2012) theories to inform the emergence of a new research area. By placing customers' emotions at the center of a company's business strategy, customer relationships can be strengthened by providing innovative digital channel engagements. The cross-sections of emotion (people), strategy (business), and digital channels (technology) form three intersections (Image 1) that inform three defined areas for the creation of an emotional digital engagement. This model has previously been discussed in Straker, Wrigley, and Rosemann (2015a, 2015b); however, in this article we provide a novel contribution to the implementation of the three areas of (1) company and customer strategy, (2) digital channel strategy, and (3) digital customer experience, including a real-world case study for each. It is important to note that the process should start with the customer (see Figure 1) and not an existing technical solution.

Figure 1. The intersection of emotion, strategy, and digital channels



3.1. Company and customer strategy #1: Knowing and aligning your values

Customers will have associated feelings, emotions, and moods informed by past experiences with a company. Associations could be linked to branding, advertising, or social interactions with the company. In order to provide customers with experiences, the underlying emotions must first be thoroughly understood. Understanding the emotional drivers of a company's strategy facilitates the emotional commitment of customers and employees. An emotional commitment develops when a customer identifies with the values of a company to understand its mission. The importance of a sense of meaning is heavily explored in the field of design and emotion, as the customer mindset is a key driver of company performance. If the customer is engrossed in the experience and brand throughout recurring engagements, it has the potential to significantly affect the perception of company value (Verhoef et al., 2009). However, with the growing number of channels, companies are faced with the challenge of unifying their online value across multiple channels and engaging with customers in a way that is not only consistent with and true to their company value but also captivates customers in their sense of meaning. Another challenge with digital channels is the ability of customers to engage and share their own content, thus empowering them to express and publish positive and negative experiences with or without the permission of the company. Issues such as product quality, lack of availability, poor service, and high prices are now transparent and instantly broadcast by the customer, often impacting a company's reputation and resulting in the loss of customers and revenue. However, these new digital channels combined with increasing levels of digital literacy also allow embedding customers as co-designers and co-producers of company value and meaning (see Table 1).

3.1.1. Example #1: Communicating value through online identity at Burberry

At over 150 years old, Burberry has a rich history. Its fashion has been adapted for military combat,¹ the company has been an official supplier to the royal family, and its products have been worn by a range of celebrities (Ahrents, 2013). Burberry is fashion royalty; however, in recent times it has lost its competitive advantage in the world of global luxury

¹ During World War I, Burberry modified its popular, waterproof sport coat into what is now commonly known as the Trenchcoat.

Table 1. Company and customer strategy

<p>Aligning and knowing your value involves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing and communicating underlying emotional drivers of company strategy. • Outlining the purpose, values, strategy, and behavior standards of the company. • Aligning the relationship between company identity and customer needs. • Understanding which emotions are associated with the company strategy and supporting these with the right digital channel typology and touchpoints (Straker et al., 2015b). • Delivering the appropriate meaning in building equity in the company. • Consistently communicating appropriate digital content that aligns with the company's emotion code to design desired digital channel engagements. • Reflect the meaning and value of the company's strategy and match either the customers' needs or align with their values during all engagements.
<p>To accomplish these things, designers need to work closely with all departments of the company to understand and disseminate the value and align emotions behind the company strategy. Employees need to know the emotional drivers of the company and the values to inform their communication strategies. By understanding what emotion you aim to evoke when a customer engages with a company, the right digital touchpoint can be designed.</p>

brands (Phan, Thomas, & Heine, 2011). Burberry observed its target customer and realized that millennials are more influenced by peers than by anything a brand may have to say. An insight into customer emotions and behaviors is imperative in the luxury section, as the luxury customer is individualistic and knows what they want and how to interpret their personal style. They therefore want to stamp their personality on a luxury brand and use products and fashion as a definition of their individual personality and identity while highlighting the 'luxury' prestige status (Ahrents, 2013). By evoking key emotions such as attraction and stimulation, Burberry's digital channels turn mundane digital interactions into social activity. Customers invest time in designing their own Burberry trench coat while expressing a desire to be photographed wearing it. The Burberry website was designed to speak to the millennial customer through "emotive brand content: music, movies, heritage, storytelling" (Ahrents, 2013), resulting in these aspects becoming part of the Burberry story. Each digital channel provides a unique and consistent message that brings together the brand, culture, and customers in the same story. This story aligns with the brand value (British heritage) and the key product (the trench coat), making the brand accessible to a wider audience, from brand browsers to brand advocates. The success of Burberry's digital channel strategy is evident through the growth impact (brand and revenue) and high level of customer engagement with each channel. Burberry's digital channel presence includes over 16 million followers on Facebook, three million on Twitter, and over two million on Instagram (Burberry, 2015).

3.2. Understanding needs #2: Designing digital channel engagements

The process of creating an emotional experience is complex and involves many different factors. The design of digital channels needs to evoke positive responses, satisfaction, and pleasurable experiences over a period of time, thus informing the experience created. Customer needs determine the type of interaction the customer wants, highlighting certain feelings, emotions, and moods that are evoked through interactions with the company.

Traditionally, corporate strategy is shaped by macro data, industry trend analysis, competitive analysis, and technology assessments carried out by specialists focused on quarter-to-quarter sales (Guenther, 2012). However, quick shifts in customer preferences, tastes, habits, and lifestyles may not be able to be anticipated using traditional market research methods (Sen, 2009). It is for this reason companies need to be engaged with their customers on a deeper level to understand not only what they want but also why they want it (Price, Wrigley, & Straker, 2015). The field of design and emotion has various tools and methods to help understand customer needs, aspirations, and feelings by predominantly asking *why* questions. This empathic design approach places emphasis on understanding the emotional aspects of customer-product or customer-company relationships (Crossley, 2002). Companies should therefore be delving deeper by questioning customers and inviting them to interact rather than simply reacting to questions and instructions. Replacing the passive view of a customer with an active one can result in new insights and

Table 2. Understanding needs

Designing digital channels involves:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing new methods to understand your customers' needs. • Being equipped with the tools and skills to accurately interpret and translate customer emotions into meaning and needs. • Choosing the right digital touchpoint to communicate company value while also addressing customer needs. • Evoking feelings, emotions, and moods that align with the brand and customers.
The successful use of customer needs requires a deeper analysis and engagement with customers through all stages of the project. Once customer needs are understood, the right channel can be designed to address these needs. A design approach should be applied for this, such as ideating, creating, and testing the idea with customers. Findings from the first stage should be implemented into the process of designing the digital channel.

opportunities to design interactive and valuable digital channel engagements. Determining and analyzing different customer affective states is an important step because they inform the emotional experience of interacting with the company, attributing to the meaning and emotional response. The relationship formed between customer and company is also important for future planning and understanding what is needed to build a strong relationship over time (see [Table 2](#)).

3.2.1. Example #2: Understanding *Saturday Girl* at Kate Spade

Four storefronts throughout Manhattan were painted bright yellow with black and white graphic patterns (signature of Kate Spade). Apparel and accessories were featured on hangers and hooks inside the windows. These displays were only accessible for one month, 24 hours a day. There, passers-by got a preview of merchandise from the new *Saturday Girl* line. Next to the merchandise was a large touchscreen where users browsed items and placed orders, with free delivery anywhere in or within an hour of Manhattan. The purchase process simply required entering a mobile phone number and sending a confirmation text to confirm approval. A messenger delivered the purchase, and just like a take-out food order, payment occurred upon delivery via a mobile application. The digital Kate Spade storefront aimed to evoke desired emotions that reflect the brand's identity and represent the way in which *Saturday Girl* customers respond to and interact with the channel. The interaction with this digital channel aligns with the expected emotional experience of *Saturday Girl*, from the surprising pop-up yellow brick buildings to the convenient interactive touchscreens. When designing this digital engagement, Kate Spade understood the negatives of purchasing clothing online, such as not knowing the right size and the purchase not arriving on time. To create a positive experience, multiple sizes could be ordered, and a Kate Spade courier would politely wait for the customer to try on

the clothes and pay for the items she wished to purchase.

Kate Spade understood that its customers were increasingly shopping online. By knowing the negatives of online shopping, the company was able to design a digital channel engagement that allows a customer to get what she/he wants, when she/he wants it. Through the use of technology, it was able to use the benefits of digital shopping (such as 24-hour access) but integrate into the physical world by making the storefront less about selling and more about creating an experience, thus giving shoppers a reason to engage with the company.

3.3. Shaping behavior and motivations #3: The digital customer experience

Any engagement with a company results in an experience, and whether positive or negative, it will impact the behavior and motivation to engage with the company again. Over time, these engagements will influence attitude, behavior, and meaning relating to the experience and will either result in positive or negative emotional connections with the company. The literature has shown that memorable positive experiences lead to positive behaviors toward a company and in turn loyal customers ([Khan, 2012](#); [Mattila, 2001](#)). This area links back to the first strategy (knowing and aligning your values), as over time, the engagements made with the customer will influence their perceptions of the company value. Research has proven that a customer's perception of the investment made by a company in digital engagements can impact the relationship quality and the customer's willingness to provide and share positive company experiences with others ([Park & Kim, 2014](#)). Customer behaviors resulting from the engagement with digital channels can include liking, commenting, personalizing, purchasing, or sharing the experience with others. Understanding the effect of emotions on shaping behavior is an important aspect of informing the design of the digital channel and the resulting consequences of the engagement.

Table 3. Shaping behavior

The digital channel experience involves understanding:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of designing for an emotional experience and not just a functional purchased behavior. • The emotion targeted in the engagement is positive and long-term. • The action and behavior you wish to create is beyond the transactional sale. • The overall experience is a positive and memorable one leading to customer loyalty.
To implement this successfully, designers, marketers, and strategists need to work together and place no ownership on customer engagements. Behavior has a direct relation to the emotions evoked through the engagement; therefore, this can only be achieved after the first two areas are successfully achieved. The digital channel engagement must also translate the company values and address customer needs.

Positive experiences result in relaxed customers, which in turn results in repeat business, higher spending rates, and ultimately increased revenues (Jarach, 2001; see Table 3).

3.3.1. Example #3: Influencing behavior of Hijack

Meat Pack is a trendy shoe store in Guatemala known for being edgy and providing unique discounts on limited edition shoe brands, such as Adidas, Nike, and Reebok. With over 120,000 likes on its Facebook page, the store has become an icon for sneaker lovers. To live up to the expectations of its hardcore fans, Meat Pack launched the mobile application Hijack, which uses GPS tracking technology to detect the location of target customers. Building upon its already highly used mobile application, the store requires customers to earn their discount. Upon entering a nearby competitor's store, a discount clock is triggered, starting a count down from a 100% discount and dropping by 1% each second, thus encouraging the customer to leave the competitor to race to the Meat Pack store as quickly as possible to receive the highest possible discount. Examples include a 79% discount for customers who entered Meat Pack within 20 seconds of the alert being activated. The application automatically posts the customer's successful discount redemption on their personal Facebook profile. The digital channel engagement saw over 600 people 'hijacked' from competitors' stores in a week, with the fastest customer receiving an 89% discount (Brill, 2012).

The success of this engagement lured customers away from the competitors, not only by giving hefty price discounts, but also by making customers aware of the brand via an active digital presence. Hijack offers a different approach to the traditional discount voucher, which aligns with the company's values and targeted customer type (trendy and edgy). The experience of using the mobile application undoubtedly is fun and a memorable one, translating to a significant behavior change (running from a competitor's store). The long-term effects on

behavior are seen in engagement via other digital channels, such as Facebook, that has helped in positively promoting the store through memorable and fun engagements.

4. Impact and challenges of emotion-driven digital innovation

The impact of digital channel engagements with a company is facilitated by the emotions evoked and connections formed throughout the experiences. Failure to engage customers emotionally may result in under-performance, loss of competitive advantage, and/or missed opportunities (Wrigley, 2013). Designing, managing, and continually evolving a customer's emotional experience is incredibly complex due to the varying expectations, messages, and values of not only the customer but also of the company and the variety of digital channels. Benefits such as financial and competitive advantages could result from positive experiences due to the higher user involvement with a digital channel (e.g., time spent, number of pages viewed, amount of personal information revealed) translating into firm revenue (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010). Understanding the company's value and aligning it to customers' emotions is critical to innovating through digital channels. This research proposes that innovation requires insights into how and why customers behave in order to deliver positive digital engagements. As emotions drive customer behavior, starting with a clear understanding of the company's emotional mission and the value driver of the customer is paramount.

Customer perceptions of the investment made by a company in the interactivity of digital channels can impact the relationship quality and customers' willingness to provide and share positive company experiences with others (Song & Zinkhan, 2008). The ability to create engaging interactions with customers via digital channels can impact company growth via revenue and the customers' emotional

investment in (advocacy for) the company. This process requires a combination of creativity, deep emotional understanding, knowledge of digital behavior, and a strong company-to-customer strategy.

5. Implications and summary

Traditionally, design has been employed by businesses to enhance product development and sales by creating an artifact or outcome based on marketing research. Only in recent history has the use of design at an organizational level been investigated (Brown, 2009; Martin, 2008). However, designers have always sought to create experiences to foster positive emotional connections through understanding users and their interactions with a product or company (Desmet, Overbeeke, & Tax, 2001). This research aims to provide ways in which the field of design and emotion can help managers design digital channel engagements by focusing on delivering online experiences that customers desire from companies.

In these times of digitization, organizations are required to rethink the traditional concept of customer relationships as new technologies continue to empower customers. The framework presented leverages the role of design, highlighting opportunities made possible through digital channels. As this research spans across people, business, and technology, it aims to contribute to the body of knowledge and processes that will enable companies to engage with customers emotionally via technology, thereby building highly engaging customer experiences. With the ability to impact scholars and practitioners alike, future research should focus on extending the theoretical domain of digital channels to include customer emotional experiences and should require practitioners to publish best practices and outline key strategies and tactics with proven results. Fulfilling an emotional experience depends upon the overall emotional consumption experience, which is determined not only by the consumption of the product but also by all engagements with customers (digital and physical). None of the strategic issues identified here are solely the responsibility or exclusively the domain of designers. The successful implementation of these strategies requires input from a wide variety of functional specialists within the business.

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