



Toward a compelling customer touchpoint architecture

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Abstract Every business enterprise touches and is touched by customers in different ways at different touchpoints: points of human, product, service, communication, spatial, and/or electronic interaction collectively constituting the interface between an enterprise and its customers. Like any good architect conceiving of and giving shape to a building or a space, the enterprise must conceive, design, implement, and manage these touchpoints with the central goal of developing a compelling customer experience at all touchpoints over the course of the entire relationship cycle. This article addresses this central challenge in three stages. First, it makes the case for a holistic approach to the totality of touchpoints across all parts of the enterprise and all stages of the customer relationship cycle. Then, it offers a methodology for drawing up customer touchpoint blueprints. Finally, it suggests five critical requirements for compelling touchpoint architecture.

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1. Introducing touchpoint architecture

Some time ago, I was asked by an executive from a leading information storage and management company to facilitate a workshop on the design of customer touchpoints. Given high-technology enterprises' reputation of focusing more on technology and product architecture than on the architecture of the customer-company interface, I welcomed the opportunity. This article is a result of my research and learning leading up to, during, and following the workshop. It posits three stages in developing compelling customer touchpoint architecture:

1. Adopting a holistic approach for the full spectrum of customer touchpoint modes spanning across all stages of the customer experience cycle.
2. Developing blueprints of desired touchpoint configurations.
3. Ensuring the customer touchpoint experience is compelling.

2. Customer touchpoints: The need for a holistic perspective

Working on this manuscript, I performed a Google search for the phrase 'customer touchpoints' and,

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on April 7, 2012, came up with nearly half a million references for the term. Almost all the references could be traced to websites and postings from marketing and brand consultants. Clearly, the topic of customer touchpoints was a rich consulting vein.

However, what are customer touchpoints? They are points of human, product, service, communication, spatial, and electronic interaction collectively constituting the interface between an enterprise and its customers over the course of customers' experience cycles. Three elements of the definition merit special emphasis:

- While the human interface is an obvious touchpoint, so are product, service, and space. Of these, space—with its profound connotation of experience and given the emphasis here on architecture—is worthy of special attention. While it is obvious in hindsight, I first became interested in the link between place, space, and experience almost two decades ago when reading the book *The Experience of Place* (Hiss, 1990).
- Given the relentless push for an interconnected online world as well as the proliferation of mobile devices, new media, and digital and social marketing, electronic exchanges between an enterprise and its customers are increasingly important touchpoints.
- The phrase 'customer experience cycle' is meant to draw attention to an immediate link between touchpoints and the customer's experience at the touchpoints. It is this experience that must be compelling.

The above discussion suggests a good starting point for customer touchpoint design: any systematic consideration of the touchpoint architecture must be comprehensive—indeed, holistic—in nature.

I prefer the descriptor holistic to the word comprehensive for one simple reason: as customers, our overall experience interacting with any enterprise is never fully captured by the simple summation of our separate experiences at different touchpoints regardless of their mode or their timing. When it comes to customer touchpoint experience across all different touchpoint modes as well as across all different touchpoint occurrences, the whole is profoundly more—and different—than the sum of the parts.

Take the case of mobile phone services. Like many readers, my experience cycle with my mobile operator has involved multiple human, physical, service, communication, spatial, and electronic touchpoint modes over many years. As I reflect on my experience, I can only reach one conclusion: while my experience

at any one touchpoint at any specific period of time may have been no more than mildly irritating, my overall experience can be summarized in one word: horrendous. Seen holistically, I would judge my mobile operator's customer touchpoint architecture and its rendition and execution in terms of my experience as anything but compelling. Two factors contributed to my anything-but-compelling holistic assessment:

1. My overall experience over the course of the entire experience cycle to date is qualitatively more irritating than the quantitative sum of the individual irritating parts. Put differently, my assessment tool for the customer touchpoint architecture did not just keep an additive tally of individual touchpoint experience trespasses. Much to my mobile operator's disfavor, it nonlinearly and multi-dimensionally upped the experiential impact.
2. Even more damaging was the role of inter-touchpoint-mode (*intermodal*) and inter-touchpoint-occurrence (*intertemporal*) interdependencies. These are interdependencies in terms of expectations (i.e., after each touchpoint experience, I updated my expectations for the next touchpoint experience), operations (i.e., my actions at each touchpoint freed or constrained me in terms of my interactions at the next touchpoint), and functionality (i.e., in terms of my mobile operator's ability to meet my telecommunications needs).

When it came to my overall experience, everything was connected to and with everything else, and the whole was the result of the interdependence among the parts. The above two factors profoundly impact the design of customer touchpoints. Without a sense of the whole being more than the sum of its parts and the explicit recognition of interdependencies, an enterprise's touchpoint architecture will very much resemble buildings whose floors, rooms, and architectural elements are incrementally added. Each addition may make parochial sense and be locally optimal, but overall, the experience would not be compelling for residents, visitors, and at-a-distance viewers alike. For customers, this will also be the case for an enterprise without a holistic approach to the design, implementation, and management of customer touchpoint architecture.

3. Drawing up customer touchpoint blueprints

The customer touchpoint workshop alluded to at the beginning of this manuscript was limited to the pre-purchase phase of the customer experience

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