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How to create a realistic customer journey map

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Abstract Although many articles discuss customer journey mapping (CJM), both academics and practitioners still question the best ways to model the consumer decision journey. We contend that most customer journey maps are critically flawed. They assume all customers of a particular organization experience the same organizational touchpoints and view these touchpoints as equally important. Furthermore, management lacks an understanding of how to use CJM as a cross-functional, strategic tool that promotes service innovation. This article proposes a solution to the unwieldy complexity of CJM by linking customer research to the CJM process and by showing managers how to develop a customer journey map that improves a customer's experience at each touchpoint. Using the case of an actual retail mall, we show that common CJM assumptions about the equal importance of all touchpoints are fundamentally wrong, and how easy it is for retail managers and strategic planners to make incorrect judgements about customer experience. This article demonstrates through a case study how customer research helped a mall's strategic management team understand which touchpoints were more or less critical to customer experience. It also shows key strategic initiatives at each touchpoint, resulting in cross-functional input aimed to advance service innovation at the mall.

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1. The customer journey map confusion

Customer journey mapping (CJM) is an increasingly popular strategic management tool praised by both academics and practitioners for its usefulness in understanding an organization's customer experience. Although academic and managerial literature

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is replete with CJM articles and many service organizations employ the process, confusion still exists as to how best create a customer journey map. Indeed, the Marketing Science Institute (2014) identifies research that addresses the best ways to model the customer decision journey process as a major research priority for practitioners and academics alike.

This article clarifies the confusion surrounding CJM by putting forth a method that blends consumer feedback and research into the CJM process, using an actual retail mall as an example. We show how organizations can create and implement realistic customer journey maps. These maps are integral to understanding customer experience and to maximizing CJM as a strategic management tool for service innovation.

2. Understanding the CJM process

The fundamental idea behind CJM is relatively simple; it is a visual depiction of the sequence of events through which customers may interact with a service organization during an entire purchase process. CJM lists all possible organizational touchpoints customers may encounter during the service exchange process. By clearly understanding customer touchpoints, senior management can work with cross-functional team members to employ tactics that foster service innovation. The goal of these tactics is to enhance customer service provider interactions by improving the customer experience associated with each touchpoint.

Touchpoints are typically depicted horizontally on customer journey maps in accordance with a process timeline. The timeline is then separated into three periods: pre-service, service, and post-service. The pre-service period refers to the customer experience before an actual service begins. In the CJM process for a mall, pre-service customer experience may include touchpoints such as seeing mall advertisements, listening to a radio advertisement, or receiving an e-mail solicitation. The service period refers to touchpoints that customers experience during an actual service: entering the mall's parking lot, engaging with employees, visiting stores, and interacting with mall kiosks. The post-service period refers to the customer experience that takes place after the actual service. Touchpoints in this period may include a customer posting a picture of a purchased item on Facebook, returning merchandise, or receiving an incentive to return to the mall.

After identifying all the customer touchpoints in the three periods, managers should develop strategic categories along the vertical axis that depict relevant strategic initiatives associated with each touchpoint. While the horizontal axis in CJM is relatively easy to comprehend, developing the vertical axis can be significantly more complex. The effectiveness of a customer journey map as an innovation tool depends on the vertical axis.

Some CJM pundits dismiss the importance of the vertical axis altogether and focus on CJM solely as a graphical representation of a customer's touchpoints with an organization. Although this visualization technique may aid managerial understanding of customer experience, it leaves management with a deficient tool that is essentially useless in helping to promote innovation within a service system. Other CJM pundits encourage managers to develop the vertical axis as an emotional journey of customer thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and emotions that cannot be observed directly (Lingqvist, Plotkin, & Stanley, 2015). This emotional emphasis transforms CJM into a very specific management tool—namely, an empathy mapping exercise (Tschimmel, 2012). Although an empathy map represents a useful service design tool, its ability to help managers understand the complexity and interdependence inherent within service systems is extremely limiting. Finally, other CJM advocates view the vertical axis as a managerial hodgepodge—essentially a space in which managers can plan a myriad of activities, including design opportunities, customer objectives, employee tasks, branding opportunities, and omnichannel retailing opportunities (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009; Dasu & Chase, 2010; Skinner, 2010). The issue here is that as a customer journey map expands vertically and becomes more complex, the confusion surrounding it may also increase. Managers should regard the vertical axis of a customer journey map as specifying the key components of the entire service system, showing how marketing, human resources, operations, and information technology can work together to meet customer expectations at every touchpoint. By doing so, the CJM process is inherently linked to the service blueprinting process, another service innovation tool (Bitner, Ostrom, & Morgan, 2008).

3. A realistic customer journey map that fosters innovation

Three major factors may limit managers from fully employing CJM for service innovation and improvement. First, although scholars have constructed CJM from a theoretical perspective (Clarke, 2014), studies offering real examples and instructions for managerial interpretation remain scarce. Second, an

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