

Multi Touch Point User Experience: Telecom Service Provider Perspective

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Abstract:

Telecom Service Provide have sustained relationship with their customers,, in which several transactions take place over a long period. To take advantages of advances in Information and Communications Technologies(ICT), as well as to align with the trends in changing lifestyles of customers, the providers are making available several channels through which customers can interact with them. From the customer's perspective, they have a choice of touch points through with they can fulfill their goals of transacting with the providers.

The paper provides a perspective on the challenges organizations face in ensuring consistently satisfying User Experience to the customers over the span of the relationship, a potential framework to address the issues and the aspects that influence the design of the User Experience.

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Introduction

A noticeable trend in the recent times is the primacy of services in the consumption basket of people. Telecommunications services provide a prime example. Another trend is the increasing demand of customers for additional value. Competition and abundant choice means providing superior customer value. **Error! Reference source not found.** is now an imperative for organisations to survive. To continually provide value to the customers requires the organisations to do a better job of anticipating and responding to customer needs than the competition does. In many cases, additional customer value comes from bundling a “service” element to what many traditionally used to sell as a stand alone physical product. An example is a cell phone manufacturer, who keeps on providing its customers with additional ring tones via its web site. There is a reverse trend where traditional service providers such as Banks, now extend their value offerings by cross selling products and services like insurance and credit cards.

The relationship between the firms and customer is therefore undergoing a transformation that can be summed up diagrammatically as:

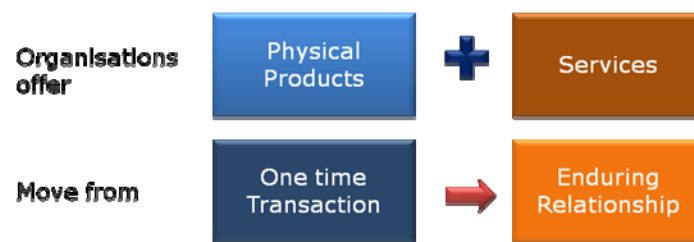


Figure 1

One of the earliest model of “Marketing Mix” used to fulfill customer needs is built on the concept of “4 Ps of Marketing” namely, Product, Price, Place (distribution) and Promotion. While the model and its variants could still form a basis of marketing strategies of firms, the concept of “Place” has undergone a radical alteration in the changed scenario. There is hardly a commercial organisation any more that engages with its customers purely in a “brick-and-mortar” mode, with even the sales transactions commonly taking place in modes other than the physical store. Increasingly, organisations are resorting to use of multiple channels to market their goods and services, and to sustain the customer relationship. In fact as, as early as 2001, there was evidence that organisations that effectively adopt a Multi Channel model are more successful.

Channel v/s Touch Point

Marketing channels comprise a set of interdependent organizations involved in the process of making a product or service available for use or consumption by the consumer or business user. Marketing channel perform the functions such as providing information, promotion of products and services, matching customer needs with their offerings and physical distribution. However, due to the advances in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) several new ways to perform these functions have emerged. It is important to recognise, however, that a customer interacts with a channel via an interface, and that the “Interface” is an entity distinct from the channel itself. The term “Touch Point” is being used by some organisations and authors of late to describe such an “Interface”. While no precise and commonly agreed definition exists, a Touch Point can be described as *“The interface through which a customer interacts with an organisation to obtain goods & services and sustain the provider-customer relationship”*. Since a user will use a “Touch Point” to attain a goal, in a context,

and will perform certain tasks, “Touch Point” appears to be a much more relevant construct than channel from the User Experience (UX) perspective.

As noted, organisations are increasingly engaging with their customers through multiple channels. Each channel, in turn, could be accessed via multiple Touch Points. For example, the traditional sales channel, a shop, may have Touch Points like the Sales Assistant, Kiosk and even the display itself. Poor user experience at Touch Points is likely to not only lead to incomplete transaction, but also leave a customer dissatisfied. In view of the importance organisations’ now place on building lasting relationships, it is even more relevant to understand the concept of Touch Point in depth and their attributes that influence the User Experience at Touch Points.

Attributes of Touch Points and User Experience

As mentioned earlier, the advances of ICT have thrown up a multitude of touch points that a customer can use. The attributes of a Touch Point that influence designing satisfying User Experience can be:

- The directionality of supported interaction: Unidirectional / Bidirectional / Multidirectional
- Whether the interaction is structured or unstructured
- Nature of the Interface – Inanimate / Human

The table illustrates comparison of several touch points. Each has its own characteristics, advantages and constraints to provide a specific kind of user experience. For instance, an SMS cannot be a suitable Touch Point to provide a satisfying product search experience. However, it is an extremely suitable Touch Point to provide feedback that the transaction has been successful, which enhances the Online Purchase experience.

Sr No	Touch Point	User Interface	Nature of Interaction	Direction of Interaction
1	Portal	Inanimate	Structured	Bidirectional
2	SMS	Inanimate	Structured	Unidirectional
3	email	Inanimate	Structured	Unidirectional
4	Printed Mailer	Inanimate	Structured	Unidirectional
5	Customer Care Center	Human	Unstructured	Bidirectional
6	Shop Counter	Human	Unstructured	Bidirectional
7	Kiosk	Inanimate	Structured	Bidirectional

User Experience at Touch Points : Extended User Journey Scenario

Attainment of single User Goal might entail a customer using several Touch Points. To illustrate, payment of a Telephone Bill might involve:

- Receiving a printed paper bill (TP1)
- Calling up the company call center to resolve a query (TP2)
- Visiting the company Portal to make payment online (TP3)
- Receiving a confirmation via an eMail (TP4)

To add another dimension: Such a User Journey not only involves several Touch Points, but may span a period of time. Therefore, for a satisfying Customer Experience organisation must ensure that not only the User Experience at every touch point is designed well but also the continuity and consistency of experience is maintained. This requires what can be termed as a “Touch Point Orchestration” strategy that is thought out and executed effectively. This, in turn would influence supporting Business Processes and ICT Systems. The overall framework can be conceptualised as:

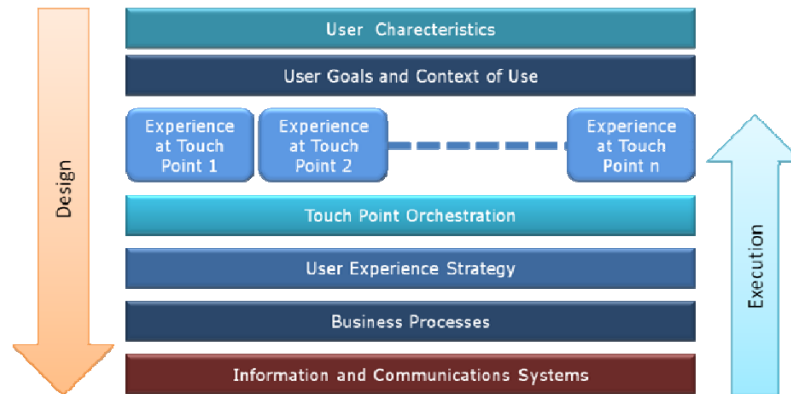


Figure 2

Touch Points in the context of Telecom Service Providers

Telecom Service Providers (TSP) have two main kinds of engagements with the customer:

- a. Subscription to services and purchase of physical products: The end point of this engagement is commencement of service.
- b. “In life” relationship: It starts from the point of commencement of service. Some examples of transactions that take place in “In Life” relationship are:
 - Presentation of bills
 - Payment of bills
 - Making customer aware of new advantageous offers
 - Resolving any trouble the customer might be experience in consuming the services. This is probably the most important one from the customer satisfaction and relationship viewpoint
 - Of course, the customer would generally subscribe to different kind of services or purchase other products during the “In Life” phase

A customer typically passes through a set of stages while transacting with a TSP, and would encounter and choose among several touch points. To illustrate, taking the case of subscription to a service:

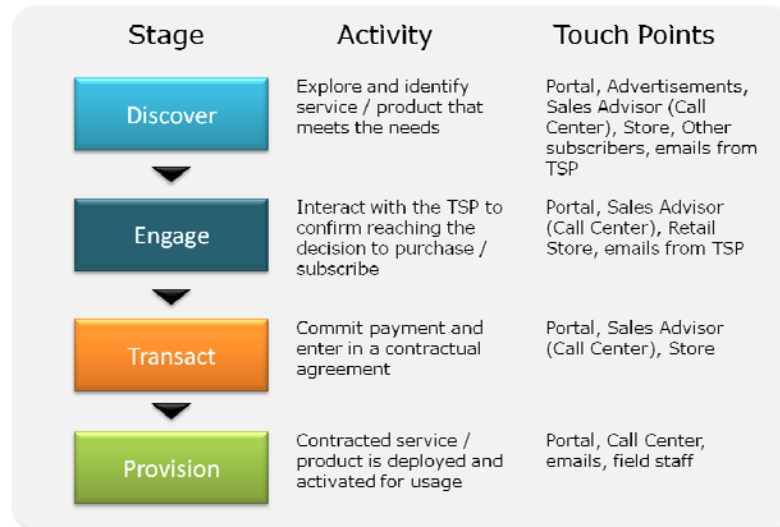


Figure 3

While the overall goal might be to subscribe to a “package” that satisfies the needs, there are sub-goals associated with each of the stages. For instance the sub goals at the Discover stage are likely to be:

- Becoming aware of the various products available in the market that appear to be suitable
- Understanding the details and carry out a comparison of features and prices
- Identification the vendor and the “channel” to move on to the “engage” stage.

It is also observed that customers like to exercise choice of the touch point for interacting with the TSP. The selection will depend on the User Experience that each touch point affords. The user profile, context of use and the user goal will determine the Touch Point that will actually be used. One of the crucial user characteristic is user’s adoption of, attitude towards, comfort, frequency and ability to use technology. Studies have brought out revealing differences among different consumer segments. Not surprisingly, it is observed that to search a product, Gen X people, who are much more comfortable with technology as against older generations, have marked preference to visiting a web site as against going to a store. Similar differences exist when it comes to purchasing a product. Clearly the design of Touch Points, and the Touch Point orchestration have to factor in such differences, so that each customer can use the Touch Points that he is comfortable with.

Even though the users would demand and organisations will tend to provide choice to customer in order to attract them, enhance user experience (“Put User in Control” : One of the axioms in the User Experience domain) and increase customer satisfactions, it might be advantageous to organisations and beneficial to the users to limit the choice of Touch Points, without appearing to be doing so! This can only be achieved by making the user experience at the desired Touch Points attractive enough to induce a user to choose of his own volition a specific Touch Point to transact. A good example is customer self service portals. TSPs everywhere are attempting to induce their customers to use self service portals not only for resolving service issues and queries, but even for purchasing new products/plans and making modifications to the subscribed ones. It benefits the TSPs as the costs of handling such transactions through Customer Care Centers (a.k.a. Call Centers) are increasing day by day. While complex requirements and service issues would require human intermediation, several kinds of transactions can be handled effectively via a self service portal. However, success of making the Self Service portals the first Touch Point of choice would hinge largely on how the User Experience is designed. It is interesting that, none of the TSPs even in the mature markets have been greatly

successful in this endeavor. In contrast, Banks which have similar long lasting relationship with customers seem to have been highly successful in promoting self serviced transactions through well orchestrated strategy using multiple touch points, notably ATMs, Telephone – Fixed as well as mobile, Internet, and Customer. While the scenarios that Banks and TSPs face are not identical, there could surely be lessons to be learnt from the way banks are handling this Touch Point.

Further complexity arises from the cultural and local influences. While certain commonality would certainly exist across cultures, it would be a folly to simply replicate the Touch Point User Experience models that prevail in the mature (or the so called “developed”) telecom markets to maturing markets such as India. It is possible that novel Touch Points could be more effective in such markets or even conventional Touch Points will have to be designed differently to provide a satisfying User Experience. For example, the self service kiosks in India will need to be designed differently to take into account a wide variation on literacy levels as well regional and language variations (India has over 20 languages in use across the country). The Banks, once again have been fairly successful in promoting use of ATMs surprisingly even among less educated population that does not understand English. The rapid increase in density of mobile phones in India has emphasised the need to sustain a satisfying relationship with the customers that come with wide demographic variations. It must be noted that the customers seem to use mobile phones with ease in spite of language and literacy barriers. TSPs can surely learn from these experiences and expand the range of touch points to sustain a satisfying relationship.

Multi Touch Point User Experience : Challenges

While the concept of touch point is understood, many a times addressed directly or indirectly in marketing activity, there is a need to take a User Experience perspective. Some challenges and directions for developing a strategy for touch point User Experience:

- Defining the concept of Touch Point within the context of the business
- Identification of attributes of touch points under consideration, their strengths and constraints they pose on the nature and quality of User Experience
- Determining transaction types and how transactions could be handled through multiple touch points, taking into account the changes in the user’s goals, expectations and emotional states, which can and do change significantly as task flow progresses.
- As the user moves from a touch point to another, the continuity of user experience has to be maintained. Considering that various touch points might be handled by different combinations of Human, Hardware and Software components, it is critical to have in place a sound Touch Point orchestration strategy. Understanding of the orchestration strategies used by different firms and their effectiveness could be another possibility.
- Understanding the relationships and influences among the various components that comprise the Multi Touch Point ecosystem: Hardware and software systems, User Experience Strategy, Business Processes, Business Strategy and other aspects of Organisation.
- Schemes for measurement of the Quality of Multi Touch Point User Experience

Telecom Services have now reached near universal adoption and command an indispensable place in the life of people. Besides, TSP business models are based on lasting and persistent relationships with customers. Therefore, Telecom Services Providers can not afford to neglect leveraging full potential of available touch points to drive the relationship with their customers and thrive in business.

- *Note: The conceptual models and information above is based on the Work in Progress of the author’s doctoral studies. The copyright of the material is held by Tech Mahindra and the author.*