Mind *the* Gaps

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Thankfully, we've moved past the point where anyone wants to argue about the value of taking a comprehensive approach to designing an omnichannel brand experience. The bar for quality brand experiences continues to rise every year. Even the most skeptical companies are now being forced to improve their customer experiences for fear of losing share of market and mind.

However, just because everyone is being dragged into the age of the omnichannel brand experience doesn't mean they understand how to navigate it once they get there.

One must first notice—and then avoid—the most common pitfalls in the world of omnichannel brand-experience management.

Here are five traps worth watching out for.

#5 – Those Personas? They Suck.

By far the easiest way to begin taking a customer-centric approach to improving the brand experience involves the creation of personas. Many brand marketers proudly brandish their personas as proof of progress towards a great brand experience. The only problem is that, more often than not, personas are either too limiting or too broad to be of any real help in crafting a great experience.

How does knowing that someone is 35, has two kids and drives a minivan help figure out how to improve a brand experience? That 35-year-old is way more complex than a set of basic demographics. We all are. We all act very differently at work, alone, with family, with close friends, or in a big group. Core characteristics make each of us who we are and few would suggest that these include our age or what car we drive.

To be useful, personas need to focus on mental states, situations of use, and other psychographic dimensions that have to do with how a customer encounters our brand. If done correctly, we can probably find customers who may traverse through many different states or modes depending on their situation of use. Are they at work? On their phone? In a store?

The five pitfalls of the omnichannel brand experience.

A computer anti-virus software manufacturer settled on three key personas: Nervous Nelly, Set-It-and-Forget-It, and The Tinkerer. These personas did not emphasize age, gender or amount of Internet usage. Instead, they focused on what each type of customer was trying to accomplish, might act in a certain situation, and needed to be helped. Crucially, one customer could be all three of these personas at different times depending on the context.

This way of describing customers opens the door to new and creative ideas on how to craft a brand experience that will deliver on customers' expectations. Understanding key expectations, combined with leveraging more actionable personas, is a huge step in the right direction that many brands miss.

#4 – It Doesn't Matter How Good You Think You Are

Today's marketplace is more complex than it has ever been, largely because the customer now has more
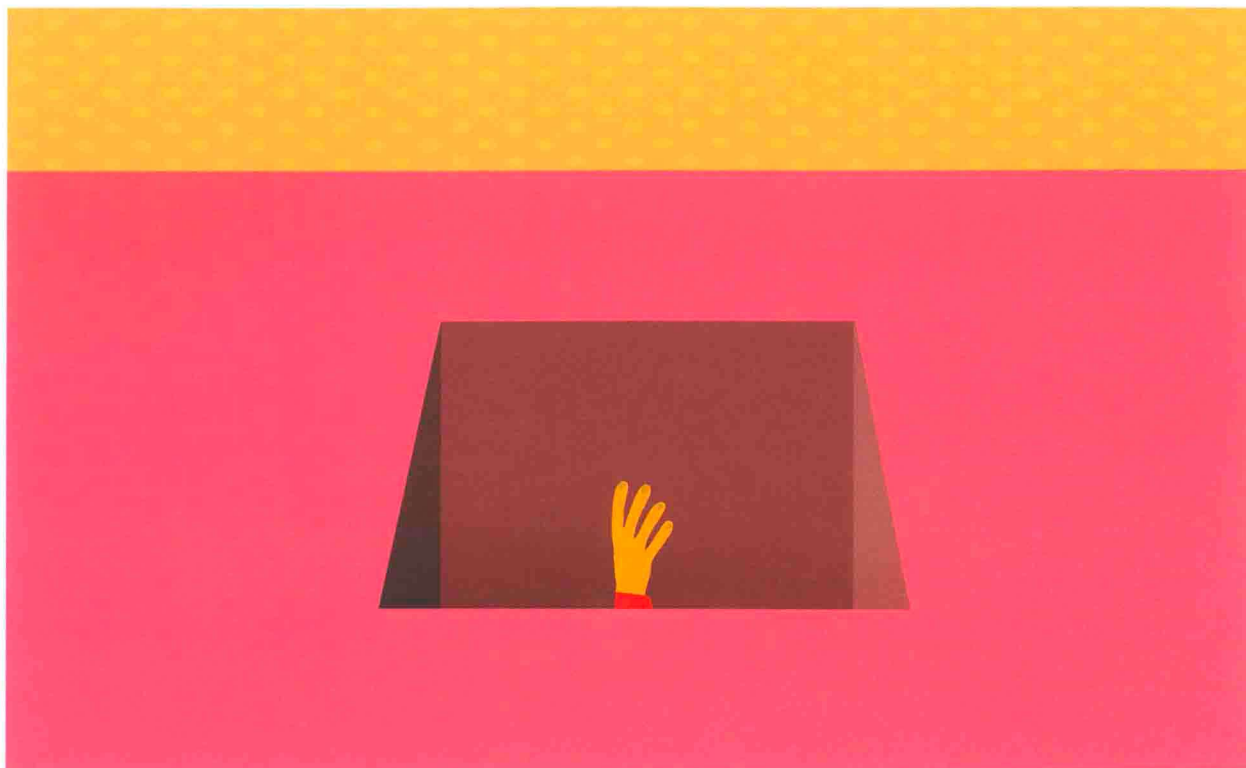
of a voice than ever before. Customers are creating and sharing real-time perceptions of companies based on their experience. These perceptions turn into our brands. If we are not delivering on our promises, the gap between what we think we provide and what our customers actually experience will grow even wider. Managing this perception gap has become critical.

The problem is, most companies are either not thinking about this, or falsely believe they are hitting the mark. According to Forrester's annual survey, 90 percent of companies across all industries say providing a great customer experience is a top corporate priority. But ask the customers of those companies whether they're actually getting a great experience and only three percent agree.

Oops.

Why such a big gap? Most brands don't take the time to observe customer interactions. While they start off with the best intentions, the conversations about the subject usually go something like this:

"Let's go talk to our customers."

"Yes, we need to talk to customers."

Someone then proposes a customer research project.

"Wait, how much do we have to spend? It's going to take that long?"

"Well, we don't have time for that. We probably have a pretty good idea of who our customer is."

No, we don't.

Gut instincts are certainly a good place to start, but customers today are increasingly complex and the web (pun intended) of different channels in which they interact makes it that much harder to truly understand what they believe, need, and

want. Looking at data, conducting focus groups, and sending out surveys does not tell enough of the story. No real substitute exists for making in-person observations in real situations with real customers.

This is not an easy task. It takes time and money. However, such understanding is the key to finding insights that will allow a brand to deliver on its vision and close the perception gap.

#3 – Believing What Customers Tell You

A huge gap exists between what customers say they do, and what they actually do. This is why surveys are close to worthless when it comes to innovating the brand experience. This is not the customer's fault. Customers believe in their thoughts and actions, but people often forget all the little (and big) things they do that have become second nature. Every business should experience watching customers make a list of the steps they take to go through a process (such as shopping for and buying a product, setting up an account, or using a product) and then observing the same customers actually go through that process. There will be tons of differences.

It's like the difference between telling a person to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich versus telling a computer to make one. The person has the context and life experience to know they need peanut butter, jelly and bread, how to open the jar, get a knife, and so on. The computer needs every detailed step outlined in exactly the right order. It does not even know what peanut butter or a jar is.

We need to observe customers in their natural habitats and actions, so that we can see the thinking and actions that have become habits.

#2 – You've Got to Stand for Something

Every company is founded on core beliefs. Think of a small, 'mom & pop' shop in your neighborhood. Most likely the proprietors have a clear point-of-view on how they want their business run and can control the experience in the store because they are living these experiences with their customers. They are observing and interacting with customers who are members of the same community, acting and reacting in real time because they are human beings and that is what human beings do. Their customers choose to be there because 'mom & pop' are real, their store is convenient, and they deliver on what their customers need.

This approach does not scale as brands grow larger and into new channels unless a brand can clearly articulate what it believes in while delivering what customers want. Large brands that hit this on the nose are few and far between, yet notably the customers of large brands are looking for the same things they expect from the little store down the street.

Chipotle focuses energy on making food fast and consistent, but also has a strong belief in sustainable practices. This belief guides the development of its brand and in turn attracts customers who share this belief. For example, Chipotle chooses not to sell pork because it has not yet found a vendor that meets its standards.

While the omnichannel experience might not be top-of-mind in this particular decision, Chipotle has a clear set of beliefs and expectations that all employees — from the executive board to the restaurants — can clearly understand. Chipotle's brand, expressed in places as diverse as a YouTube video and the attitude of a cashier, are portraying an authentic message that comes from a shared belief.

Anki is a robotics and artificial intelligence company that believes in taking robots out of academic labs and making them fun. Their first product is a toy called Anki Drive, and, boy, does it deliver on that belief. It's a super-complex mix of robotics and artificial intelligence that allows you to race robotic cars using a smartphone or tablet either by yourself, against friends or virtual characters. To me, it's a vastly improved version of old-time slot cars. To my kids, it's a live game and a video game at the same time.

Author Simon Sinek says that people don't buy what we do, they buy *why* we do it. The core set of beliefs that motivate a company's existence is one of the touchstones of the brand experience. If we don't know what we stand for, and we haven't communicated that throughout the organization, how do we know that we're doing what's right for our brand experience?

#1 – There is No Omnichannel

If we truly take the customer's point-of-view, there is no such thing as an omnichannel experience. Customers have their desires, perceptions, and needs. They are simply looking for us to satisfy them. The Omnichannel Customer Experience might as well be The Great and Powerful Oz.

Customers assume that brands have everything figured out and that we know exactly what we are doing — or at the very least, they expect us to act like it. But behind the curtain we are scrambling, trying to piece together an experience for our customers the best we can by relying on surveys, analytics, and industry scores to gauge our success across channels.

Customers aren't exactly lining up to explain to us exactly what we're getting right and wrong. Of course, we do get feedback, but typically only hear about the truly amazing experiences or the predictably horrible ones. If we're simply delivering on expectations, we might not hear anything.

Perhaps customers come into the store or go online. They look around, find what they want, buy it, and go away. In their eyes, the experience was neither amazing nor horrible. They will neither shout our praises nor flame us on social media. Yet somewhere in their brain they know we satisfied their need and will consider returning. Every time a customer returns, another opportunity exists not just to deliver on expectations, but also exceed them.

As we work to understand the brand experiences we deliver to customers, we'd do well to forget about omnichannel and focus simply on exceeding expectations. Customers have only their experience and their perception. To provide a successful brand experience, we need to ground ourselves in a clear vision of what we stand for, understand what our customers think and do, and grasp the invisible parts of the experience so we can drive insights that allows us to better fill the perception gap that exists between our customers and our brand.

If we're doing things right, we won't need to know our Net Promoter Score or send out a lot of surveys. All we will need to do is look at our bottom line. ∎

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