

Special Issue Papers

Towards the 'perfect' customer experience

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Keywords

co-creation; brand; customer experience; encounter management; retail banking

Abstract

The aim of customer experience management is to enhance relationships with customers and build customer loyalty. Research suggests, however, that service quality and customer satisfaction may actually be declining as customers often receive service and quality that falls well below their expectations. This paper examines the concept of customer experience and considers how an 'outstanding' or 'perfect' customer experience might be achieved at an affordable cost. Case studies from two leading companies are used to illustrate their approaches to creating the 'perfect' customer experience. Managerial insights from the case studies are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The terms 'customer experience' and 'customer experience management' are receiving increasing attention in both the academic and managerial literature. As the call for papers for this Special Issue points out, there are over 200 million references to the expression 'customer experience' in cyberspace and yet few companies actually understand what this means, what it actually looks like and how their managers can galvanise the organisation to deliver a superior customer experience.

In fact, observers suggest that service quality and customer satisfaction are

actually declining.^{1,2} Referring to studies by organisations such as the Council of Better Business Bureaus and the University of Michigan, Brady² concludes that good service is becoming increasingly rare. Further, the concept of 'customer rage' is becoming an increasingly rare phenomenon.^{3,4}

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of customer experience and, in particular, what represents an 'outstanding' or 'perfect' customer experience. This is especially important in terms of understanding how brand equity can be enhanced—a key objective of marketing

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strategy. Customer experience has been defined 'as the user's interpretation of his or her total interaction with the brand'.⁵ The terms customer experience and customer experience management are becoming more widely used by organisations in every sector. As the recent popularity of this term has increased, many books are being published on the topic, business seminars are being held in and much is being written about the subject in the business and popular press.

However, while the term 'customer experience' has a huge number of citations in online databases, the concept of the 'perfect customer experience' is a relatively new concept.⁶ This view is confirmed by a search on Google Scholar, which yielded a mere five citations. All organisations need to consider how they can create superior customer encounters leading to an 'outstanding' or 'perfect' customer experience. A simple means of defining outstanding or perfect in this context is consistently achieving a five out of five score on customer satisfaction. It should be noted that the word 'perfect' is in parenthesis, for it needs to be considered in context of the nature of specific customer segments' expectations relating to that offer, and, it should be achieved at an effective competitive price.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we briefly review the literature relating to the concept of the customer experience. Secondly, we discuss the concept of the 'perfect customer experience'. Thirdly, we examine, case studies of two leading organisations' approaches to creating a 'perfect customer experience: one in a direct business-to-business relationship and one in an intermediated business-to-consumer context. Finally, we discuss managerial implications, limitations and future research.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Current observers of the customer experience phenomena could be forgiven for considering it to be a new 21st-century breakthrough concept when faced with book titles such as *Customer Experience Management: a Revolutionary Approach to Connecting with Your Customers*.⁷ Over the last eight years, a plethora of other management books covering the topic of customer experience and its management have also been published.⁸⁻¹¹

While most of this popular management literature suggests that customer experience and its management is a new idea, pioneering consumer researchers such as Holbrook and Hirschmann have been investigating experiential consumption for over two and a half decades.¹² Although contemporary academic work emphasises Holbrook and Hirschmann's work as the starting point in considering experiential marketing, it has origins in much earlier academic work. Holbrook¹³ points out earlier researchers have emphasised how the services performed provide consumption experiences¹⁴ and the importance of the consumption experience¹⁵ Further, work by Lebergott¹⁶ traces the concept of the consumption experience back to the writings of John Maynard Keynes, Alfred Marshall and Adam Smith. As detailed reviews of this literature already exist,¹³ we do not rehearse such discussions here.

Recent research in service-dominant logic¹⁷ emphasises the importance of co-creation where the customer is 'always... a co-creator of value' and where 'the brand becomes the experience'.¹⁸ Co-creation has an important role to play in seeking to develop an outstanding or perfect customer experience. When a co-creation approach is adopted, the customer engages in a dialogue and interactions



with suppliers during product design, production, delivery and subsequent consumption. Here, branding is not so much about advertising and conventional brand-related activities, but rather about building processes to support the customer experience.

In considering customer experience, it is appropriate to consider two perspectives of consumer behaviour: the traditional information-processing and decision-oriented approach and the experiential perspective. The information-processing perspective, sometimes referred to as the cognition, affect and behaviour (CAB) approach, is well documented in the consumer behaviour literature. This cognitive view suggests that the customer is engaged primarily in goal-directed activities such as searching for information, evaluating available options and deciding whether or not to buy a particular product or service. The experiential perspective is emphasised by researchers such as Holbrook and Hirschmann.^{12,19} Experiential consumption research emphasises emotions and contextual, symbolic and nonutilitarian aspects of consumption²⁰ where value resides not in the object of consumption but in *the experience of consumption*.

The information-processing consumer research stream sees customers as involved in a cognitive process on the basis of whether past, present or imagined future experiences are valuable for them.²¹ With this approach, the customer is considered to be willing and knowledgeable enough to make an assessment of the benefits and the sacrifices involved in buying a product or entering a relationship. The experiential view of consumption has, however, broadened this perspective considerably. Consumption includes the flow of fantasies, feelings and fun where such behaviour may not necessarily be goal-directed.²²

Thus, customer experience needs to be seen from both an information-processing approach that focuses on memory-based activities *and* on processes that are 'more sub-conscious and private in nature'.¹² This involves viewing customer experience from a perspective of both normal day-to-day routinised actions,^{23,24} as well as more emotional experiences.^{7,9}

We argue that companies addressing customer experience management should consider carefully which of these two perspectives to emphasise. A rational perspective might be the predominant emphasis in a business-to-business context, while an emotional experiential perspective may be emphasised in a business-to-consumer context such as the leisure industry. Adopting an appropriate combination of these perspectives will be relevant to many organisations. Company's efforts to create an 'outstanding' or 'perfect' customer experience will need to consider the creation of customer's experiences from both rational and emotional perspectives.

Evidence suggests, however, that companies are not creating superior customer experiences. For example, Meyer and Schwager²⁵ quote research from a recent survey of the customers of 362 companies by Bain & Company. Only 8 per cent of them described their experience as 'superior'; yet, 80 per cent of the companies surveyed believe that the experience they have been providing was in fact 'superior'. This suggests a huge gap in perceptions between companies and their customers. Companies would benefit greatly from learning how other organisations have successfully created outstanding or perfect customer experiences, *as viewed by customers*. Meyer and Schwager²⁵ conclude that companies should deconstruct customers' overall experiences and resulting customer satisfaction into its component experiences: 'Because a great



many customer experiences aren't the direct consequence of the brand's messages or the company's actual offerings, a company's re-examination of its initiatives and choices will not suffice. The customers themselves—that is, the full range and unvarnished reality of their prior experiences, and then the expectations, ... must be monitored and probed.'

TOWARDS THE 'PERFECT' CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Our discussion to date suggests that it is appropriate to consider the role of both normal, day-to-day experience and practices as well as 'hedonic', emotional or peak experiences in terms of seeking an outstanding or perfect customer experience. There has been remarkably little discussion relating to the idea of a perfect customer experience in the academic literature. Bromley briefly discusses the concept of the perfect order in terms of order entry accuracy, picking accuracy, carrier damages, back orders and pricing accuracy in the context of third-party logistics providers.²⁶ Yanci outlines a planning process with the objective of creating a perfect customer experience in a healthcare facility.²⁷ In a much more specific context, Accenture addresses call centre performance and the creation of a perfect customer call.²⁸ Payne and Frow point out that while a very small number of companies are now starting to embrace the concept of the perfect customer experience, it has received little attention in the academic literature.⁶

An online search shows managerial discussion of the concept of the perfect customer experience. For example, Wolf defines the 'perfect customer experience' as one that 'results in customers becoming advocates for the company, creating referral, retention and profitable growth'.²⁹

We consider that this definition represents a useful starting point for addressing the concept of the perfect customer experience as 'advocacy' typically implies achieving a very high score on customer satisfaction.

A number of studies have emphasised the importance of seeking high levels of customer satisfaction and resulting advocacy. For example, a study by Jones and Sasser reached two conclusions.³⁰ First, only extremely delighted customers (eg a 5 on the 5-point scale) can be considered truly loyal. Secondly, customers who are just satisfied (eg a 4 on the 5-point scale) are only slightly more loyal than customers who are thoroughly dissatisfied (eg a 1 on a 5-point scale).

A more recent measurement tool, the 'Net Promoter Score' (NPS) proposed by Reichheld, involves asking one question: 'How likely is that that you would recommend our company to a friend or colleague?'³¹ The NPS is calculated by taking the share of customer 'promoters'—respondents highly likely to recommend your organisation to others (scoring 9–10 on a 10-point scale), and subtracting the share of customers who are detractors (scoring 0–6 on a 10-point scale). The NPS represents a calculation of advocacy. If the company has a substantially higher NPS than the competition, it is likely to grow at a much faster rate than its competitors.

Such measures, despite some limitations,³² can help companies make a judgment as to how far they have progressed in terms of delivering an outstanding or perfect customer experience. Of course, customer satisfaction, at any given point in time, reflects the summation of a customer's previous (and present) encounters and experiences with the product or brand. As Grönroos points out, customer-perceived value is created and delivered



over time as the relationship with the customer develops.³³

Discussions regarding customer experience often emphasise the sale or after-sale service situation; however, the customer experience needs to be considered in terms of the whole interaction over the lifecycle of the customer relationship, not just for the sales and service activities. The stages of a customer relationship can be considered under the three broad headings of acquisition, consolidation and enhancement. Each of these elements can be divided into further encounters under these three headings. Each encounter can be mapped using tools such as process mapping or service blueprinting.^{34–36} The concept of a perfect customer experience also needs to be considered in the context of the channel environment in which a company is operating. Although some companies may choose a single-channel strategy, many more are developing marketing strategies based on multiple channels. With most organisations today operating in a multi-channel environment, the channel strategy should seek to ensure that a perfect or outstanding customer experience is created both *within* channel and *across* channels.

The context of a customer experience also needs to be considered. To achieve a 5 out of 5 score on a first-class international flight with Cathay or British Airways costing, say, US\$8,000, expectations are likely to be very high. A similar 5 out of 5 score in customer experience, however, may be achieved with a low-cost airline such as Southwest Airlines, Ryanair or Easyjet with a fare of, say, US\$80. In the latter case, expectations are much lower—all that might be expected is that the staff are pleasant, the plane is clean and it departs and arrives on time—even though the seats are cramped and the

food and other facilities are minimal or nonexistent.

A superior or outstanding customer experience must be achieved at an affordable cost. The concept of a segmented service strategy is important here.³⁷ Improvements in customer experience should be based on the profit potential of different customer segments and service strategies and investment decisions should be made with the knowledge of this profit potential.

CASE STUDY RESEARCH IN CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Given the observations, discussed earlier,^{1,2} that service quality and customer satisfaction may actually be declining, and the scant literature on the concept of the perfect customer experience, we were interested in identifying examples of companies that had implemented a formal strategy aimed at delivering a perfect experience to their customers. Our objective for this paper was to provide two case studies documenting journeys of organisations focused on achieving the perfect customer experience.

A number of criteria were used in determining suitable case studies. First, cases should illustrate examples from both the business-to-business and the business-to-consumer sectors. Secondly, cases should contrast rational and emotional aspects of the perfect customer experience. Thirdly, the cases should deal with both a *direct market*, and an *intermediated market*. We considered that the challenge of dealing with intermediaries or distributors was a particularly important one as was a particularly important one as the experience that the consumer has is not just influenced by the supplying company, but also by the intermediary. Finally, also with the intermediary. Finally, the companies selected should be well-known brands with large



numbers of customers. It was considered that large companies with substantial customer bases had greater challenges in achieving superior customer experiences compared with smaller companies.

We developed a shortlist of possible companies from various sources. This included an examination of specific literature on customer service and experience management, a broader search of the management literature, an extensive internet search and discussions with senior executives conducted as part of an ongoing research project on customer experience and customer relationship management.

Based on the above criteria, two companies were chosen: TNT Express Services—a leading provider of express services and logistics, and Guinness—a global beverage company. Information for the case studies was collected from various sources including desk research, company records and field visits. Each of the case studies outlined below reviews: the problems being faced by the organisation in terms of customer experience; the process of creating a perfect customer experience and the results achieved.

CASE STUDY 1: TNT EXPRESS SERVICES—TOWARDS THE PERFECT CUSTOMER TRANSACTION

TNT Express Services UK and Ireland is part of the global TPG Group that employs some 150,000 employees in 64 countries and has an annual turnover in excess of £8bn. It provides an excellent example of an organisation dedicated to creating and delivering a perfect experience for every customer, every time, in a business-to-business context.

In the late 1990s, TNT undertook research that showed very high levels of customer satisfaction. Some 90 per cent

of customers were satisfied (scoring 3–5 on a 5 point scale), with the balance being neutral or dissatisfied. TNT concluded, however, that those customers who were merely ‘satisfied’ as opposed to those who were ‘very satisfied’ could be in danger of defection, especially if they had some subsequent reason for dissatisfaction. The company recognised that it was imperative to improve the experience of these customers, shifting them to being highly satisfied and thereby increasing their loyalty and profitability. TNT then launched a radical programme aimed at creating the ‘Perfect Transaction’ for all customers.

The first step was to understand where improvements could be made to the customer experience. TNT conducted further research and found that by asking whether customers had any problems with the service that they received from TNT, they obtained a much clearer picture of the customer experience and how it could be improved. Also, they asked customers about what they wanted. Then, using this information, they developed a list of areas where the customer experience could be improved. Before any performance enhancements were made, statistical modelling was used to prioritise this list. The costs associated with these improvements were carefully considered. TNT senior managers recognised that outstanding customer service had to be delivered at a reasonable cost—both for the customer and the company. Next, the opportunities for improvement were analysed by weighting the frequency of occurrence with the impact of the problem, to pinpoint enhancements that really mattered to the customer. This led to the identification of key areas that would lead to the perfect transaction. The ‘Perfect Transaction’ includes the chain of events from when a customer requests a collection to



the time that payment is received for the consignment—as shown in Figure 1.

High on the list of priorities, customers asked for one point of contact when they telephoned TNT in order to avoid excessive call transfers, too many contact points and long telephone holding. As a result, the customer services department was strengthened. Instead of multiple points of contact, a customer who now telephones TNT deals with one individual, who can handle any inquiry. Employees have greater ability to respond to customer queries through wider knowledge, greater authority and enhanced technology. The result is that the customer gets better and faster service. Implementation is ongoing with service enhancement continuously being modified always driven by feedback from the customers.

An important outcome is that TNT has found a dramatic improvement in employee satisfaction—employees enjoy giving better service to the customer and become frustrated when they lack the skills and authority to do so. The extensive customer service training includes an innovative programme whereby employees are trained to understand their important role in delivering the perfect customer

experience. Teamwork is essential, with each person sharing in the responsibility of achieving perfection during each step of the transaction. This can only be achieved if employees share a positive attitude—striving to beat their previous best performance. TNT has won the transport industry award for 'best use of internet/e-commerce'. This award recognises the company's work in developing new applications to enable customers to monitor the location of their parcels. The new multi-channel applications enable customers to track more than 750,000 consignments each week from collection to delivery, through a range of different channel media. Although TNT had provided internet tracking for their customers for around eight years, the new application means that consignments can now be monitored via a wide range of communication devices. This gives customers the ability to check the location of their goods via mobile phones, handheld computers, e-mail, web browsers and even conventional touch-tone phones.

The results of this perfect transaction strategy have been highly positive. Previously, each step in Figure 1 was measured

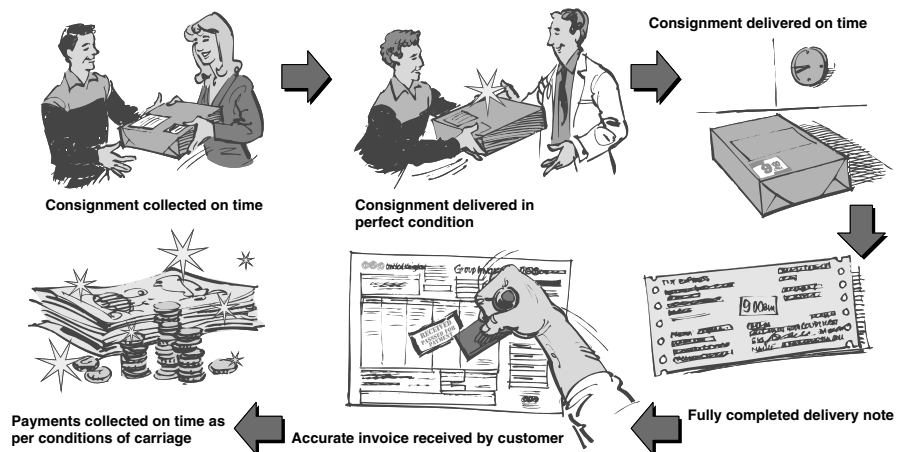


Figure 1 The 'Perfect Customer Transaction' at TNT



separately. If each step achieved individually, on average, a 95 per cent perfect execution, this would previously have been considered highly satisfactory. TNT discovered, however, that these steps were viewed multiplicatively by the customer, not additively. Thus, across the six steps, with a 95 per cent perfect execution in each, only about 74 per cent were perfect transactions *in total* from the customer's perspective. This insight led TNT to dramatically improve the customer experience in each of the six steps, and, as a result, the customer experience across all the steps as a whole. The UK and Ireland operation is now the largest in the TNT Express Group, representing approximately one quarter of group sales, and is the highest profit contributor. In recognition of its achievements, the company has been awarded numerous industry awards for service excellence and customer care. Most importantly, customers are experiencing the benefits of the perfect transaction initiative.

CASE STUDY 2: GUINNESS— DELIVERING THE 'PERFECT PINT'

Guinness, part of Diageo plc, is brewed in over 35 countries around the world. Guinness is one of the most well-recognised global brands and has a loyal following of consumers. Their special brewing skills are at the heart of every one of the 10 million glasses of stout that Guinness customers enjoy every day across the world. Producing a consistently high-quality product, however, was one of the key problems facing Guinness.

Product quality is recognised as a critical factor in building loyalty among consumers—especially in switching occasional drinkers into loyal consumers. Research suggested that acquiring a taste for thick dark beer requires the product

to meet consumer expectations *on every occasion*. Achieving this lay beyond the remit of any one department, especially as the supply chain involves intermediaries who could not be directly managed. To ensure a perfect consumer experience at the point of delivery, Guinness formed a special cross-functional process improvement team charged with the job of delivering the 'Perfect Pint'.

Manufacturing a standard product, however, was not enough to ensure that every customer enjoyed the same Perfect Pint every time—anywhere. Research in the UK suggested that consumers often were presented with a less-than-perfect pint at the point of consumption. Guinness Brewing GB (Great Britain) recognised this as a major challenge, involving a total management of the supply chain. Hence, they needed to address the challenge of ensuring a consistently perfect consumer experience at the point of delivery.

The 'Perfect Pint' team carefully mapped and measured the entire product delivery process, from brewery to consumer. They recognised that a key challenge was motivating their intermediaries—the publicans—to deliver a perfect customer experience for their consumers. The team drew up a detailed programme that, when implemented, would consistently deliver the 'Perfect Pint'. This involved four main stages including ensuring: the quality of the raw materials being supplied to Guinness; the quality within the brewing and packaging processes; the publican serves the perfect pint; and that the customer is educated in how to enjoy the consumption experience.

During the first two stages, quality control involved rigorous purchasing and checks on manufacturing standards. All employees were educated to share the 'quality vision' and were trained to understand how every person plays a vital



role in the quality chain. During the brewing process, samples were tested at every stage.

The 'Perfect Pint' team, however, found that often, problems developed once the beer arrived at the licensed premises. Guinness, like other cask beers, is a 'live' product and needs to be handled carefully. Frequently, the beer was not stored and presented correctly in the pubs and, even though this was not directly within the control of Guinness, it was critical to the quality delivered to the consumer. The team undertook considerable research to ensure consistency of quality in the final stages of the supply chain. The results of this work included guidelines for the publicans on all aspects of the 'pub dispense quality'. These guidelines include advice on the correct gas mixture when pulling the pint, the ideal dispensing temperature, cleaning beer lines, washing glasses and the perfect presentation. Guinness also put considerable research and development effort into the areas of dispensing equipment and methods used in pulling pints.

The 'Perfect Pint' team also recognised the important role of the pub staff that pull the perfect pint and deliver the customer experience. The famous 'two-part pour' that is required to deliver a perfect glass of Guinness needs practice. Detailed instructions and training were provided by Guinness to ensure that the Perfect Pint was dispensed properly and drunk correctly by consumers (see Figure 2). Publicans needed to understand their role in delivering the perfect customer experience and the benefits to them in terms of

customer loyalty. Every person involved in producing and delivering the Perfect Pint was trained to recognise their responsibility in ensuring that the customer experience is consistently excellent.

'Hold the glass at a 45 degree angle close to the spout to prevent large bubbles from forming in the head. Pull the tap fully open and fill the glass 75 per cent full. Allow the stout to settle completely before filling the rest of the glass. The creamy head will separate from the dark body. To top off the pint push the tap forward slightly until the head rises just proud of the rim. Never allow the stout to overflow or run down the glass.'

But achieving the 'Perfect Pint' did not stop there. Research showed Guinness that consumer education was also critical if the consumption experience was going to be consistent—every time. Guinness needed to communicate to consumers their part in securing the 'Perfect Pint'. Point-of-sale laminated cards were used that explained, on one side, how to pour the Perfect Pint, and on the reverse side, the correct serving temperature and a ruler that allowed consumers to measure the correct thickness of the head on their pint. Consumers were also targeted with a highly successful advertising campaign that extolled the virtues of waiting for a perfect pint—as it takes between 90 and 120 seconds for a perfect pint of Guinness to settle. This activity needed to emotionally involve customers in playing their part in co-creating the perfect pint. Thirsty customers now wait patiently for their Guinness. They have become educated



Figure 2 The 'Perfect Pint' of Guinness



and involved and are now part of the process. They are now convinced that if it is worth having the perfect pint, then it is worth waiting for.

This strategy, based on the cross-functional involvement of all aspects of Guinness' operations, has successfully delivered the 'perfect' customer experience. It has propelled Guinness to achieve its highest ever share of the total draught beer market. Guinness recognised that the presentation of beer is critical in terms of ensuring repeat purchase—and this requires a total integration of all aspects of the supply chain—including the consumer. The Perfect Pint project, launched initially in the UK, has been so successful that the approach has been applied worldwide.

DISCUSSION

Achieving a perfect customer experience is a highly desirable goal for organisations wishing to improve customer loyalty and enhance profitability. In this concluding section of the paper, we discuss managerial insights from our research, comment on the limitations of this study and discuss future research opportunities. Drawing upon our research and the case studies described above, we suggest that organisations seeking to deliver an outstanding or perfect customer experience should especially focus on the following issues:

Recognise the problem and the opportunity for improvement: The research by Bain & Company, highlighted in Meyer and Schwager,²⁵ points to a huge gap in perceptions of many organisations regarding the experience they are delivering to customers. If only 8 per cent of customers described their experience as 'superior', yet 80 per cent of the companies believed that the experience they have been providing was 'superior', problems with inferior customer experiences are simply not being recognised by organ-

isations today. The starting point is to undertake detailed research, by customer segment, into customer's perceptions of their service experience and to identify opportunities for improvement. TNT and Guinness identified key areas for improving the customer experience, which, when addressed, led to increased customer loyalty and improved financial returns.

Identify opportunities for co-creation: The Guinness case suggests how the customer can actively participate in achieving the perfect customer experience. This builds on ideas discussed within the service-dominant logic literature,¹⁷ whereby the customer and supplier actively engage in co-creating value. Guinness found that their direct pub customer (the intermediary) as well as the final consumer needed to be 'taught' their role in creating an enhanced customer experience. Supplier and customer working together to co-create value and to improve customer experience is an opportunity that relatively few companies have explored.

Utilise mapping tools to improve the customer experience: Both TNT and Guinness mapped out the perfect customer experience to understand and identify opportunities for improvement. Several tools can be used to undertake this task including: process mapping,^{34,35} service-blueprinting,³⁶ customer activity cycles^{38,39} and customer-firm touch point analysis.⁴⁰ These techniques are useful in highlighting opportunities for improving customer experience, identifying failure points, re-engineer processes and support differentiation. Another outcome can be enhanced employee understanding of their role in achieving a perfect experience for their customers.

Carefully managing customer 'touchpoints': Both cases demonstrate the benefits of managing each customer touchpoint and how this contributes in providing an improved customer experience. TNT



mapped out the perfect transaction and then identified how, at each stage, the customer experience could be enhanced and managed. For example, they identified inconsistencies in the information collected by drivers at pick-up and delivery. This information is vital, so that packages can be tracked—a key concern for customers. The solution was to equip every driver with a computer-linked hand-held device that ensures consistent information is collected from the customer and is instantly transferred to a database that can be used to centrally track each parcel.

Introducing appropriate metrics for measurement of customer experience: The TNT case study illustrates the importance of considering appropriate measures that reflect the customer experience, at each step of the customer interaction. In addition to considering customer satisfaction, TNT also focused on customer dissatisfaction, which allowed the company to identify new important areas for enhancing the customer experience. Traditional measures of customer satisfaction may fall short of understanding deep, unmet needs of customers. Organisations need to consider other appropriate measures, such as the net promoter score, which may more accurately reflect their assessment of customers' experiences.

Ensure a consistent customer experience within and across multiple channels: The multiple channels by which a customer can engage with the product or service should be carefully managed to provide a consistent customer experience. A comprehensive multi-channel integration strategy, that has the support of both management and staff, is essential for any company wishing to maintain a first-class level of customer experience within and across its channels. A multi-channel strategy offers greater scope for respecting customers' channel preferences, therefore enhancing the company's attractiveness

and, ultimately, their ability to deliver the 'perfect customer experience'.

Determine how customer requirements differ across the relationship lifecycle: Consumers will have different needs at different stages of the relationship lifecycle. Thus, the perfect customer experience needs to be considered at the first encounter with the customer as well as during subsequent activities in the customer relationship. This is obvious in both the case studies described in this paper. Guinness recognised the critical importance of consistency in the early phases of the lifecycle in moving occasional drinkers to loyal consumers. Similarly, TNT recognised the importance of providing special assistance to new users of its services.

Recognise the need for cross-functional integration: One of the most important lessons from both the cases is that delivering a 'perfect customer experience' requires a deep knowledge of customer needs, and this can only be achieved when all staff and departments in an organisation collaborate in a cross-functional manner. The value of using a cross-functional team is highlighted in the Guinness case study.

Understand the economics of customer segments: The desired customer experience may vary by customer segment and each of these will have different levels of profitability. Understanding the different profit contributions of customer segments is essential in considering the feasibility of delivering the perfect customer experience. It may be that an organisation will choose to migrate from customer segments where the economics of delivering superior customer service are not financially worthwhile.

Achieve brand consistency with all communications programmes: In order to provide an outstanding customer experience, it is critical to achieve consistency in the brand communications the company has with all



its various channels. Decisions should be made on whether to emphasise rational perspectives such as those adopted by TNT or emphasise a more emotional experiential perspective adopted by Guinness. This involves ensuring that the communications and services a customer receives through different channels are relevant, coordinated and coherent, tailored to their particular interests and cognizant of their previous encounters with the company.

Enhance employee motivation to achieving superior customer service: Aside from the benefits to the customer of delivering a 'perfect customer experience', TNT found that the journey towards delivering outstanding service helped motivate staff and improved employee satisfaction. The mapping of the 'perfect customer experience' gave employees greater understanding of customer needs and enhanced both their performance and enjoyment of their role in delivering improved customer satisfaction.

In common with most research, and case study research in particular, this paper has limitations that point to further research opportunities. We have reviewed only two case studies. Additional case studies that consider other industry sectors should provide further insights into how the 'perfect customer experience' can be achieved and managed. Other companies seeking to deliver a perfect customer experience include car brands such as Mercedes-Benz and Lexus and equipment manufacturer Océ.

Our study has highlighted the importance of understanding how the perfect customer experience varies according to stages in the relationship lifecycle as well as by segment. The two case studies do not explore in detail how the organisations approached these issues. Further work that addresses the perfect customer experience by lifecycle stage and customer segment would be especially helpful for managers faced with this issue.

This paper also highlights the need for appropriate measurement tools that help manage the delivery of the customer experience. Further work is required that explores and develops appropriate metrics for managing the customer experience in different contexts.

A final interesting area for research is how the co-creation of value can enhance the customer experience. Guinness recognised that the customer is important in helping deliver a superior experience and has found a means of educating them to engage in this role. Further work is needed in identifying examples of other companies and how they have used co-creation to contribute to enhancing their customers' experience.

Research on the concept of the perfect customer experience is at an embryonic stage. As companies start on their journey to achieving a perfect customer experience, they will benefit greatly by benchmarking other companies that have successfully created outstanding customer experiences. This paper represents an initial step, identifying case studies of companies that have successfully embarked on this journey highlighting important managerial lessons from these initiatives.

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