Activating the CONSUMER JOURNEY for Brand Media Strategies

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The consumer journey evolution

How does a consumer today find, select and purchase a product or service? Where do they go for information, who or what influences them most, and how do brands who want to reach these consumers successfully connect with them along their pathway to purchase?

For many marketers, the ‘consumer journey’ is a helpful framework for developing a consumer-based view of the brand or category experience, pre, during and post purchase. By mapping out the consumer’s changing needs, behaviors, motivations and sources of influence, marketers can better align messaging, content and media investments to specific moments along the journey in order to have maximum impact.

Over the years, the ‘journey’ has been rethought, redesigned, and even criticized more recently by those who claim in this new world of exponential media, it’s unrealistic to try and map out a pathway that is no longer controlled by the brand, but by a more participatory consumer and dynamic marketplace. However, frameworks can provide instrumental value as long as there are some basic universal truths that can help connect theory to practice and execution.

The consumer journey, although no longer a simple linear funnel or pathway still provides us with a clear set of working principles, from which we can establish ideas, challenge hypotheses and develop smarter communication approaches.

More importantly, in this world of real-time communications, the journey becomes a valuable tool for mapping out ongoing consumer behaviors and developing highly connective strategies across a brand’s ecosystem of owned, shared, earned and paid media.

Brand Lens on the Consumer Journey

For marketers seeking to connect with consumers in this hyper connected world, they should develop responsive, action-oriented strategies that actively mirror the consumer behaviors along their pathway.

The diagram below illustrates the consumer journey within the inner red circle, from brand discovery, through preference, purchase and ultimately brand recommendation. The red circle also highlights the active behaviors consumers engage in during their path to purchase, from needing or wanting, to evaluating, deciding, using and sharing.
The outer blue teal circle illustrates the 6A brand strategies that correspond to consumer activity along the journey: Anticipation, Attraction, Appeal, Activation, Appreciation, and Amplification.

**Brand Anticipation & Attraction**

Almost all consumer journeys begin with a consumer need (e.g. something is broken and needs replacement, someone is sick and needs a remedy) or a want (e.g. upgrade to a new phone, more fashionable clothing, etc).

The brand strategy during this consumer phase is to **ANTICIPATE** the need or want, and **ATTRACT** the consumer to a certain brand, product or service. Anticipating consumer needs or wants entails social listening, data mining or other forms of consumer intelligence or trends research to uncover unmet opportunities. Creating attraction is being visibly present and magnetic in the consumers’ natural environment through a range of media, from out of home billboards, to experiential/events, store window display, TV, mobile ads, direct mail, social media or search engine marketing.
Brand Appeal

Typically after consumers discover new product(s), they begin evaluating their options, value versus cost and short or long term needs. The corresponding opportunity for the brand is then to create appeal so the consumer develops a preference for the brand and engages/participates. Creating brand appeal could entail the use of media such as branded video, rich media display, customer stories, curated content, celebrity/influencer endorsements or sponsorships.

Brand Activation

Once the consumer establishes their brand preference and begins deciding on their final product choice, the brand strategy is to activate the consumer so they follow through and purchase. Activation is critical because it is often in these last final moments; consumers get distracted, abandon their shopping carts, or are converted to a lower cost brand or special promotion. Activation strategies could include personalized offers, timely discounts, customization options, customer support, in-store kiosks or mobile commerce applications.

Brand Appreciation

After the purchase when the consumer starts using the product or service, the brand should appreciate the customer by recognizing and/or rewarding brand loyalty. Neglected customers can easily become unhappy customers, so it is essential to nurture the customer relationship to boost repeat sales, as well as to encourage users to become brand advocates. Appreciation strategies could entail special access to exclusive content, invitation to membership clubs, discounts for repeat purchases, or benefits for recommending and sharing the brand or product.

Brand Amplification

Ultimately, to reach even more prospective consumers and drive further brand discovery, a critical goal for marketers is brand recommendation (often measured by Net promoter score). Brand fans are often sharing their experiences with the products they love, so making it easy to find and pass along great content through amplification is important. To fuel positive word of mouth, amplification strategies could include retweeting or reposting customer reviews, paid sponsored stories on social media, native content advertising, or traditional PR.
Creating Meaningful Connections

As we continue shifting to a more real-time communications world, brands with successful media strategies are best able to actively connect with consumers across the full ecosystem of Owned, Shared, Earned and Paid media (OSEP)

Illustrated in the diagram below is the consumer journey, along with various OSEP media touch points where content and data can be leveraged to influence consumers along their pathway to purchase and engagement.

Throughout the entire consumer journey, **earned media** such as social mentions, likes, reviews, and content sharing, plays a highly influential role driving consumer discovery, preference, participation and purchase.

In conjunction, **paid media** (such as TV ads, print, display, video) and **shared media**, (partnerships, franchises, sponsorships) enable brands to reach and connect with consumer needs/wants on a mass level and drive brand discovery. Further along in the consumer evaluation phase, **owned media** (such as brand website, blog, or retail store) tends to influence purchase decision and usage.

The consumer journey is circular, as satisfied customers recommend the brand and will repurchase more products/services. Paid media (such as social ads, influencer endorsement) can also help to amplify positive experiences and extend consumer sharing and discovery to new audiences.
Ultimately, brands integrating owned, shared, earned and paid media seamlessly together along the journey can better optimize their media spend, improve consumer experiences and increase business results.