In Their Shoes

By understanding the customer experience, marketers can take advantage of word-of-mouth communication.

By Gabriel M. Gelb and John M. McKeever

This is how one customer recently experienced a service company: "When I called those people the first time, nobody answered until the sixth ring, and then it was a machine telling me that 'all our representatives are busy helping other customers.' I held on, but I wasn't happy."

To avoid such unhappy customers and increase satisfaction and retention, organizations must strive to understand and manage expectations. And when those organizations go a step further by delivering exceptional experiences, they can take advantage of the most powerful weapon in the marketing communications arsenal: word-of-mouth referrals.

EXECUTIVE briefing

Personal recommendations are critical to ensuring the success of a service-oriented business. To help their organizations remain competitive, marketing managers must learn what the marketplace expects and receives throughout the total customer experience. Experience mapping—developed from in-depth qualitative interviews with a sample of customers and frontline employees—is the framework for creating exceptional experiences that convert users into advocates.

But how do they accomplish this? "Service quality is a design issue" is the keynote of the groundbreaking book *Delivering Service Quality* by Valarie Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry (The Free Press, 1990). It reveals: "With rigorous, detailed attention to customers' expectations for each step in a service process, it is possible to design quality into the service."

Addressing Service Failures

Many marketing managers have found that the service quality of most organizations is typically more disappointing than uplifting. Expectations and the customer experience can be managed only through the appropriate use of three channels: internal communication (company to employees), external communication (company to market), and interactions (between employees and customers).

Southwest Airlines best demonstrates the payoffs that internal marketing can generate. Because it offers low prices with a sufficient level of service quality, it carries more passengers than any other airline. Early on, Southwest pegged its future with its frontline employees. The mission statement says it all: "Above all, employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest customer."

Southwest's internal marketing plan, as explained in an article by Andrew J. Czaplewski, Jeffery M. Ferguson, and John F. Milliman (*Marketing Management*, September/October 2001), centers on "a vision that provides purpose and meaning to the workplace, competing aggressively for the most talented people, preparing employees with the skills and knowledge they need to perform … , motivating individuals through measurement and rewards, providing freedom to excel, and ensuring that organizational management understands the internal customer."

Although Southwest's success formula is obvious, too many organizations have failed to appreciate that the beginning stages of creating optimum customer experiences are internal. First, they must comprehend how frontline personnel disappoints customers. What will it take to understand where customers are coming from, what they expect, and how to deliver on promises in each interaction?

Where Quantification Falters

Customer expectations are set and adjusted based on perceptions and experiences. Unfortunately, managers are often left with research tools that don't adequately explore these attitudes and expectations. They are more disposed to measure how customers interact with their offerings, and spend less resources on the pre-buying environment.

The temptation is to reach for the latest quantitative-sounding tool. Statistical analyses presumably are managers' allies in determining what customers value most. However, quantitative tools are less useful in the complex, ever-changing service environment. Commonly used quantitative studies (limited information from a large sample) often take into account only a snapshot: the time period of the customer experience.

For those open to the dynamic nature of qualitative research, the trusted focus group is a frequently overused technique, designed to validate the organization's preconceptions. Focus groups fail to provide adequate insights about the customer experience, as each interaction and overall experience is unique (unless your participants visit the same outlets at the same time).

The inadequacies of mass quantification of insight are illustrated by two popular approaches: lifetime value of a customer, and measuring the strength of a relationship (a trust-based commitment model). Those who profess to measure lifetime values of customers are quick to display models, but the survey data to track real customers over time are lacking. "The lifetime value of a loyal customer can be astronomical," claims British publication *CRM Today*. Even Boston's Harvard Business School (HBS) has gotten into the act, offering "The

■ Exhibit 1
Holistic approach

Experience mapping:

→ emphasizes expectations prior to purchase.

→ recognizes the importance of frontline employees.

→ accounts for the multiple touch points through which organizations interact with their customers.

→ tracks attitude changes, if any, throughout the customer experience.

→ provides rich insights for change, through verbatim comments.

HBS Toolkit Customer Value Calculator." HBS notes that to employ this model, "the user must estimate how many existing customers will continue to buy."

Both the lifetime customer value model and the trust-based commitment model postulate that the road to marketing success is merely based on predicting how customers will react in the future. In reality, too much is always happening for those predictions to come true: customers' interest in yet-to-be-offered products and services, consolidations of corporations and business units, changes in customers' economic circumstances, and the trajectory of the economy. Thus, future-oriented quantification models falter.

A Solution Emerges

To what extent do managers invest in quantitative studies, to understand customer perceptions of value? Do they instead invest in gathering in-depth information from smaller samples? Compared with previous decades, managers are encouraged by the results of learning more from fewer customers. This often includes observational research such as placing researchers in homes to view product usage, and tracking customers in buying situations by videotaping their actions. Another powerful tool for understanding customers is "experience mapping."

Managers know, deep down, that they can't predict the strength of a relationship one year, five years, or 10 years from now. However, they can do a much better job of appreciating customers' total experiences with their products or services. That's the true voice of the customer.

Experience mapping responds to this need for in-depth exploration of (1) complex customer expectations and experiences and (2) the inevitable changes that occur when they interact with a company's employees or use its products. (See Exhibit 1.) Managers can grasp what customers are thinking before they are engaged, how well their expectations are met or exceeded, and how benefits are delivered through touch points. This approach stands in contrast to what researchers have been doing for years: attempting to learn how customers regard their organizations and products/services by asking a sequence of quantitative questions, each one delving into just one aspect of customers' experiences.

Experience mapping is particularly useful in service industries. It yields insights about how customers perceive treatment from frontline employees and what they bring to the table. The holistic experience, developed through individual interactions, forms the customer's evaluation of organizational performance and overall satisfaction.
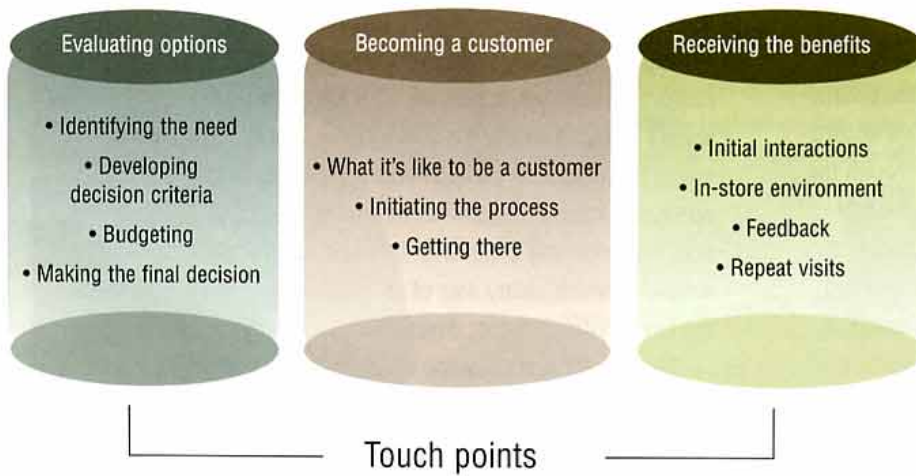
Using the Experience Map

From the customer's viewpoint, the experience is a series of episodes. His or her contact with a call center, advertisement, or product provides a basis to form opinions. The experience map enables customers to construct anecdotes—about the people with whom they interacted, their needs and fears, and opportunities for improvement. It also tracks how attitudes change with each touch point (see Exhibit 2). The map presents elements of the customer experience. Managers show it to customers, to elicit the broad range of pre- and post-sales attitudes. Aided by visual stimuli, customers and prospects can more easily recall and articulate their expectations—before, during, and after phases of their experiences. The map's design is based on organizational insights, but later validated by respondents.

Managers conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with a sample of customers and frontline employees, to understand the facilitators of and barriers to what customers believe is an ideal experience. The customers should comprise primary decision makers or users, and managers should expand the interviews to include those with key roles in the experience (e.g., friends, families).

Because of the variety of experiences and opinions, managers should compile complete transcripts of their interviews. These can serve purposes beyond the research objectives (e.g., creating a list of frequently asked questions). Managers should perform interviews in person, whenever possible. The richness of information in a face-to-face setting far exceeds the potential cost savings. For example, 20 experience mapping interviews can yield more than 100 pages of transcripts.

Experience mapping helps managers understand how their organizations' total

■ Exhibit 2
Experience map

Evaluating options	Becoming a customer	Receiving the benefits
• Identifying the need	• What it's like to be a customer	• Initial interactions
• Developing decision criteria	• Initiating the process	• In-store environment
• Budgeting	• Getting there	• Feedback
• Making the final decision		• Repeat visits

Touch points

To help customers recall their experiences across multiple touch points, we use an experience map.

Case histories

Be a patient. As administrators at The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center (in Houston) planned a new medical center, they sought patients' experiences to improve facility design and enhance services—for increasing patient satisfaction. Clinic administrators were especially interested in pinpointing why patients might become frustrated with the intake process, and seek competing (smaller) alternatives. The hope was that improving the patient experience would reduce that probability, and subsequently make patients advocates for the organization. By solving this patient "churn" problem, the healthcare system also would see an increase in the number of patients and patient referrals.

Administrators engaged key stakeholders, to isolate the reasons for premature termination of the intake process. This research found that many patients were frustrated; they couldn't anticipate the questions they needed to ask staff and their physicians. In effect, administrators weren't effectively managing patient expectations for this cumbersome intake process when initiating it. And when first encountering the medical center, potential patients believed it was cold and impersonal. But, as the experience mapping discovered, their attitudes changed as they met and interacted with nurses and physicians. They found them to be caring and warm.

With experience mapping, administrators and managers were able to identify and prioritize critical patient needs at each stage of the institution-patient interaction. "Experience mapping helped us recognize opportunities to improve patient services and refine key marketing messages," says Alicia Jansen, director of marketing programs.

A cross-functional team of administrators, managers, and operations personnel developed a host of solutions for enhancing the patient experience. It prioritized these solutions according to the voice of the customer, which it gathered through the process. In addition, it evaluated these solutions for ease of implementation. As a result of these efforts, the institution reported a decrease in the percentage of patients terminating the intake process. Also, their satisfaction increased over the time period, as they dealt with staff.

Customization confuses. Experience mapping is especially applicable to service firms such as those of attorneys, accountants, advertising/promotion, and property management—where a limited number of clients generates the most revenue.

Therefore, small-sample, in-depth interviews—starting with probing clients' initial awareness and expectations—are a viable tactic.

One service firm trumpeted its uniform approach to solving client problems. However, the experience mapping revealed that client expectations failed to match interactions with its service professionals. Clients were initially intrigued by the firm's basic promise. But in actuality, each of the professionals assigned to their accounts was proposing his or her own (individualized) package of options. This resulted in a number of confused and dissatisfied clients.

By capturing verbatim feedback from clients, the firm could more easily understand ramifications of the inconsistent experiences it delivered. Equipped with these insights, the firm was able to define the ideal customer experience—and use it as a promise when establishing relationships with new clients. The firm brought on board the professionals and persuaded them to subsume their own service approaches within its much-promoted theme.

Not everyone wants a Web site. Purchasing expensive, technically based products and services is never routine. As an innovator in its sector, a leading manufacturer and distributor of multimillion-dollar equipment was trying to identify opportunities to grow revenue, through a better appreciation of the customer experience. Like many others, it had a clear vision to Web-enable its operations to create value for customers. If successful, this initiative would significantly reduce account management and technical sales costs.

Before charging ahead with Web-based solutions, managers decided it was better to assess customer needs. In contrast to concept testing, they used experience mapping to understand customer workflow. It became clear that a technical salesperson wasn't engaged chiefly for convenience, but for risk management: The customer couldn't afford to make a mistake in this purchase process, regardless of how efficient it was. The products were not only expensive, but also used in extreme conditions—in which safety was of utmost concern. In fact, risk was the key emotional factor during the customer's decision making.

This insight supported the development of internal solutions rather than just a self-service portal (an intranet with product specifications, project planning tools, and pricing sheets). Such information technology would be better in the hands of technical salespeople and project managers, when recommending products.

■ Exhibit 3
Interview summary

Brand promise

Customer expectations	Touch point performance
• What are your customers' needs?	• How do the specific touch points influence customer attitudes and behaviors?
• What are their predispositions?	
• What criteria do they use to evaluate options?	• How well does each touch point reinforce the brand promise?

offerings are perceived from customers' points of view. Once managers aggregate the resulting insights, they can form multi-dimensional views of how customers interact with their service-oriented enterprises, products, and people. And they can determine what makes a customer experience exceptional, and how to deliver it consistently.

A framework helps summarize the information (see Exhibit 3). The contrast between customer expectations and realized experiences, as delivered by touch points, is a source of meaningful insight. For example, marketing communications might set expectations for superior customer service, which the target (customer) interprets as staff members being able to answer any questions without a call transfer. It is useful to synthesize findings across touch points, as cross-cutting themes often emerge. Managers can detail the specific touch points and assess their importance in the customer experience.

Focusing on the Customer

Like any other research technique, experience mapping is not a cure-all. But when standard techniques fail to lead to exceptional, talked-about experiences, marketing managers should consider the values of this method. They can more clearly focus on what customers expect at every touch point, and design employee training that capitalizes on the human desire to excel. ■

About the Authors

Gabriel M. Gelb is founder of and senior consultant at Gelb Consulting Group Inc. in Houston. He may be reached at ggelb@gelbconsulting.com. **John McKeever** is senior vice president of Gelb Consulting Group Inc. and an adjunct professor of marketing at the University of Houston. He may be reached at jmckeever@gelbconsulting.com. To join the discussion on this article, please visit www.marketingpower.com/marketingmanagementblog.