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Experiential Marketing:A Review of Its Process for Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract:

It's a truism thinking that a company's brand is its most imperative asset. But brands have never been more fragile. The reason is simple: consumers are enormously well informed and far more likely to explore the real value of holistic experience they get in the moment of truth of their interaction with the organization than to rely merely on logos. Frontiers of thought in marketing communications are incessantly re-ideating consumer's experience to influence consumer's satisfaction and loyalty. Companies have long tried to establish the premises of the ultimate customer experience because it can lead to the highest level of customer satisfaction, and customer satisfaction from an experience is increasingly becoming a differentiating factor in generating customer loyalty. However satisfaction is subjective in nature. Providing a perfect experience to generate satisfied customers first time and then every time is very challenging. Sneaking a quick look into these frontiers, this paper tries to review the future of pleasant consumer-experience as a tool to satisfaction and loyalty. It tries to emphasize on the need of continually re-visioning innovation as a tool to generate inimitable experience and discuss the catastrophe of discontinuity that hounds the holistic experiential phenomenon.

Keywords: Experience, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, catastrophe

1. Introduction

Experiential Marketing is a phenomenon of significant importance in modern marketing. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) postulated the significant idea that consumer behavior has an experiential facet and proposed the experiential perspective as a substitute to the customary information processing view to comprehending consumer behavior. Since then there has been an increasing recognition of the concept of Experiential Marketing amongst academics and practitioners of the marketing.

However the conception of the idea of providing customers a unique experience is not new. The import of word experience in context of marketing can be traced as a brainchild of economist Lawrence Abbott (1955) who noted, 'What people really desire are not products, but satisfying experiences' (Holbrook, 2006). Schmitt (1999) established that the concept of experiential marketing has evolved as a response to sophisticated and educated 'prosumers' who appreciate and recognize marketing that is relevant to them as an individual and which satisfies their need for novelty and excitement. Over the years the notion of customer experience evolved as a synthesis of exemplar budge in the ideas of the customer, relationship marketing, customer lifecycle concepts, service framework theories, customer spending psychology and service sciences, management and engineering (Ojiako & Maguire, 2009). Even as academics have further developed these initial contributions (Grewal, Levy and Kumar 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009; Healy et al. 2007; Frow and Payne 2007; Arnold and Reynolds 2003; Carù and Cova 2003; Winsted, 2000; and Thompson and Haytko 1997), marketing practitioners and consulting gurus have long displayed a similar interest in customer experiences and consistently advocated the importance of experience marketing with key contributions by Carbone and Haeckel (1994), Pine and Gilmore (1999, 1998), Gilmore and Pine (1997) and Schmitt (2003a, 1999a and b).

The upsurge and persistent interest in experience marketing is due to the current challenges faced by marketing practitioners. These challenges include the increasing difficulties of differentiating goods and services in the marketplace (Carbone and Haeckel 1994), the recognition of the importance of customer experiences in the development of customer advocacy (Allen, Reichheld and Hamilton 2005), overexposure to advertising from traditional media channels forcing communication to focus on new ways to gain consumers' attention and reach them with their messages (Mortimer, 2009), moreover that functional product benefits are becoming interchangeable which makes it more difficult for companies to differentiate on functional product features (Fransen and Lodder, 2010) and strive to achieve competitive advantage (Gentile, Spiller and Noci 2007). Thus with quick commoditization of goods and services, the customer experience that a company create is the only factor to create differential for any organization.

2. Key Concepts of Experience Marketing

Schmitt (2010) uses the nomenclature "key concepts" to explain the vital aspects of experience marketing that are: 1) experiential value, 2) different types of experiences, 3) extraordinary experiences, and 4) experience touch points.

3. Experiential Value

Consumers today are seeking value, choice, and a great customer experience. Market trends also show that the role of customer experiential value has attracted growing attention among practitioners in the retail industry. Douglas & Craig (2000) broadened the traditional conceptualization of experiential value to incorporate three spheres: extrinsic versus intrinsic value; active versus reactive value; and self- versus other-oriented value. In a shopping context, extrinsic value is acquired from satisfying utilitarian consumption goals such as saving money, whereas intrinsic value is derived from an enjoyable and playful shopping trip (Caru & Cova, 2007). On the other hand, reactive value refers to a situation when customers appreciate the physical shopping environment or respond positively to service personnel. Active value, in contrast, results from customers' efficient manipulation of the shopping resources to satisfy their functional or affective needs (Kim, 2002). Consumers today with such hedonistic lifestyles are seeking experiential value that can be primarily hedonic (pleasure seeking, consumption as an end in itself) or instrumental (rational, problem solving, need driven) or a combination of the two (Lofman, 1991). While making a purchase decision they sometimes behave rational while sometimes they behave like the emotional beings who also want intangible values such as sense of control, fun, aesthetic pleasure and enhanced self-esteem' (Haeckel, Carbone, & Berry, 2003)

4. Different types of Experiences

Consumer and marketing research has shown that experiences occur at various levels. Schmitt (1999) purported five types of experiences called Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) namely sense, feel, think, act, and relate. The sense experience embraces aesthetics and sensory qualities, the feel experience comprises of moods and emotions. The think experience includes convergent/analytical and divergent/imaginative thinking. The act experience refers to motor actions and behavioral experiences. Finally, the relate experience refers to social experiences, such as relating to a reference group or culture. The five experience model by Schmitt is correlated with Dubé and LeBel's (2003) pleasure construct that distinguish four pleasure dimensions: intellectual pleasure, emotional pleasure, social and physical pleasure, and Pinker's (1997) mental modules that talks of sensory and behavioral components. On the basis of where customers fall along the continuum of the two dimensions "level of active/passive participation" and "level of immersion versus absorption", Pine and Gilmore (1998) organize experiences into four broad categories as entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist.

5. Extraordinary Experiences

Rich and meaningful interactions between the company and the customer provide impetus for co-creating extraordinary and superior experiences. These superior experiences unravel the opportunities of competitive advantage to the firm. Pine and Gilmore (1999) described superior experiences as those which 'a customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time'. While Pine and Gilmore discussed superior experience as a key for success of any business, the concept of providing Perfect Experience caught the attention of several researchers. D. Wolf delineated the 'perfect' customer experience as one that 'results in customers becoming advocates for the company, creating referral, retention and profitable growth' (cited in Frow & Payne, 2007, p. 92). The concept of 'perfect' customer experience includes the complete interaction over the lifetime of the customer relationship starting from acquisition to consolidation to enhancement (Frow & Payne, 2007).

6. Touch Points

A customer experience does not begin and end at a transaction, visit to a website, or conversation with customer service. Touch points, moments of truth or points of contact can be defined as all different ways a brand interact with and makes impression on customers. A brand interaction communicates a brand image to the consumer. It includes all the communications, human and physical interactions an organization has with its customers. Each touch-point gives an opportunity to reinforce and strengthen the brand essence.

7. Process of Experience Generation

Experiences occur when consumers search for products, when they shop for them and receive service, and when they consume them (Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan 2002; Brakus, Schmitt, and Zhang 2008; Holbrook 2000). Product Experiences occur when consumers interact with products—for example, when consumers search for products and examine and evaluate them (Hoch 2002). The product experience can be direct when there is physical contact with the product (Hoch and Ha 1986) or indirect when a product is presented virtually or in an advertisement (Hoch and Ha 1986; Kempf and Smith 1998). Shopping and Service Experiences occur when a consumer interacts with a store's physical environment, its personnel, and its policies and practices (Hui and Bateson 1991; Kerin, Jain, and Howard 2002). Experiences also take place when consumers consume the products. The delivery and marketing of consumption experience differ from traditional product (Etgar 2008; Gilmore and Pine 2007). First, the importance of outcome in experience consumption is well acknowledged in both marketing and social psychology literature (Omodei and Wearing 1990). The studies have instituted that outcomes, or the gratifications of end goals, positively affect a person's subjective experience (Deci and Ryan 2000). Second, consumption experience gives PROCESS a vital importance. Many consumers engage in the consumption of experiences not only for a particular outcome but also for the process through which the outcome unfurls.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed an experience to occur "when a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event". In recent studies, Service Logic has emphasized customers as co-producers of service processes and creators of value for themselves (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) have also put across customer experience as a process of co-creation of unique experiences by customers with the company. Baron et al. (2009) define experience marketing as "the creation of a memorable episode based on a customer's direct personal participation or observation".

Engaging the customers leads to empowerment of customers for co-creation of services. According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy(2004), value is not added to goods, or created by services, but is embedded in the actual personalized experiences created through active participation of customers. Kambil, Friesen and Sundaram (1999) proposed the definition for co-creation as co-creation of value by a firm's customers. Sanders and Stappers(2008) see co-creation as an act of collective creativity. Vargo, Maglio and Akaka (2008) underline the reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship between the firm and the customer in terms of knowledge and skills. Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) have studied the interaction between firms and consumers and found that the interaction between the firm and the consumer is the locus of economic value extraction by the firm and the consumer, and this interaction is the basis of consumer experience. To truly enhance customer experience it is important to know the series of activities customers engage in, in their process of consumption and understand the subconscious sensory and emotional elements derived from each of these activities and what the customer desired to experience (Berry & Carbone, 2007).

8. Experience Marketing for Customer Satisfaction

The need for differentiation as a strategy of competitive advantage which drives much of experience marketing is a prerequisite of generating customer satisfaction. Westbrook and Reilly (1983) defined customer satisfaction as an emotional response to the experiences provided by and associated with particular products or services purchased, retail outlets, or even molar patterns of behaviour such as shopping and buyer behaviour, as well as the overall marketplace.

Churchill and Surprenant (1982) illustrated customer satisfaction as the outcome of purchase and use resulting from the buyer's comparison of the rewards and costs of the purchase relative to the anticipated consequences. In order to gauge customer satisfaction of services, most scholars in their studies have relied on the disconfirmation of expectations paradigm (Zeithaml et al. 1993; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988, Bitner 1990; Swan and Trawick 1981). The theory underlying the disconfirmation paradigm states that consumer satisfaction is a function of consumer's expectations. It works on the assumption that each customer has prior performance expectations from the service. Customers judge satisfaction on the basis of comparison between the expectations and actual performance. If expectations are met or exceeded, it results in satisfaction. When performance falls short of expectations, dissatisfaction results (Bitner 1990).

The disconfirmation paradigm has achieved some degree of success as a tool to explain and predict customer satisfaction with services (Bitner 1990; Swan and Trawick 1981). However customer satisfaction is a very dynamic construct and it is subject to change. Disconfirmation paradigm though explains the satisfaction well; it doesn't speak much about divergent and discontinuous behavior sometimes shown by the customer. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework developed for this research.

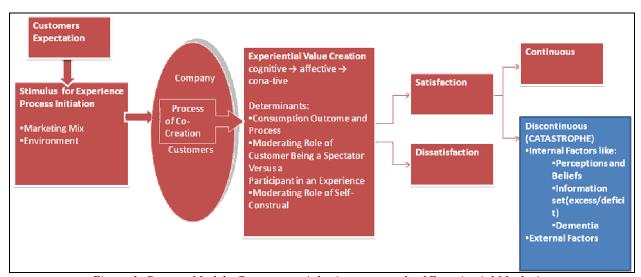


Figure 1: Process Model –Customer satisfaction as a result of Experiential Marketing

The process model of customer satisfaction proposes new dimensions of learning in field of experiential marketing. The most important parts of the model (Fig. 1) are: 1) stimulus moderated by customers expectations, 2) interaction between the customer and company (Co-creation model for Experience generation), 3) experience value creation and 4) satisfaction either continued or discontinued.

As stated by the Stimulus-Response Model or black box model to understand buyer behavior, stimuli for initiation of a buying process may come from the marketing mix offered by the company or the environmental factors like economic, social, technological and legal environment. Stimuli lead a consumer to enter into the experience process with some understated expectations in the mind. However experience generation is a result of co-creation generated by active participation from both company and the customer. Experiences, good or bad, result in changes in attitude or behavior. Customer attitude consists of three components: cognitive (mental images, understanding, interpretations), affective (feelings, emotions), and conative (intentions, actions, behaviour). The most common sequence that takes place when an attitude forms is cognitive \rightarrow affective \rightarrow cona-tive (Clow, Baack 2007). This sequence can form a meaningful and relevant experience and generate value in the mind of the customer. The value that is generated in the process is affected by roles of outcome and process in the evaluation of experience consumption which in turn is dependent not only on consumers' role in the experience (participant vs. spectator) but also on costumer's self-construal (independent vs. interdependent). This value can be either positive or negative, making the customer feel satisfied or leaving him dissatisfied. Oliva, Oliver, and MacMillan (1992), write, "a core element in customer service is the satisfied consumer. With the proper degree of consumer involvement, such a customer will behave in a way that will contribute to the marketer's success through repeat purchasing and positive word of mouth." Satisfaction thus generated can be either continuous or discontinuous.

Customer satisfaction from an experience is increasingly becoming a differentiating factor in generating customer loyalty. However satisfaction is subjective in nature. Providing a perfect experience to generate satisfied customers first time and then every time is very challenging. An experience is satisfying or not, depends largely on the expectations of customers. Also a link between satisfaction and loyal behavior cannot be easily discerned. Coyne (1989, p. 73) pointed "Dissatisfaction with a single transaction is unlikely to cause the customer to switch loyalties. Conversely, a single transaction producing a state of excitement is unlikely to lead to new loyalty". Thus satisfaction from the repeated consumption of a service can be either continuous or discontinuous in nature. What sounds and seems to be hypnotic for the first time becomes the essential and elementary requirement in the consequent time, thereby losing its charm to create a wow factor in the mind of the customers. So when the customer comes for the service second time (after a wow experience first time) in a state of over arousal, there is a steady fall-off in performance following over-arousal. Therefore there are sudden changes or discontinuity in consumer behavior even though the underlying causative forces are essentially continuous. This sudden change or discontinuity is termed as catastrophe.

Discontinuity of behavior can also be experienced in experience consumption, where process and outcome can be incoherent to each other that are even with a pleasurable process the outcome may be unpleasant or vice-versa. For example in case of watching a match on television, the process (match) can be very interesting however the outcome (favourite team loosing the match) may not be as desired. In such situations, it is important for marketers to know whether consumption evaluations are likely to be relatively favorable because of the enjoyable process or relatively unfavorable because of the unpleasant outcome. In this example, an individual will have sudden change of behavior from "satisfaction" to "dissatisfaction" and vice versa. The transition from the state of satisfaction to dissatisfaction does not take place at the same point for different customers. Also the intensity of catastrophe is affected by nature of service being consumed by the consumer. The level and degree of experience management would be high in following propositions:

- For services where a slight decrease in level of perceived performance (from moderate to low) will result in a catastrophic decrease in likelihood of continued satisfaction.
- For services where a slight increase in level of perceived performance (from moderate to high) will result in a catastrophic increase in likelihood of continued satisfaction.

The reasons for this catastrophe can be attributed to individual consumer's internal factors or the external. Internal factors can be consumer's own perceptions and belief, information set (excess or deficit information) or a condition of dementia. Dementia is a condition that results in change that take place in the brain and affects the consumer's memory, mood and behavior. External factors include environmental factors, nature of service, competitors strategies etc.

Rene Thois's Catastrophe Theory shows potential for modeling such phenomena in experiential marketing. It can be used as an indicative constituent in a company's experience generation strategy. Though there are several models that explain catastrophe, cusp model is the most popular in behavioral sciences. It helps to review the factors that deserve the most attention for achieving continued customer satisfaction. The model can be used to determine strategies for regaining lost customers or once satisfied now dissatisfied customers. For example, if a customer drops from point of satisfaction to point of dissatisfaction the company can improve the entire experiential dimension to move the customer back from dissatisfaction to satisfaction.

Voluminous researches have tried to go beyond basic "black box" models and have tried to represent the behavior of a consumer in the context of ladder of loyalty, decision trees, and flow diagrams; the discontinuous behavior and approach to handle it, eludes the boundaries of the model. Most Experience generations model follow a basic assumption that there is a smooth transition through and between stages in the process. However as the consumer behavior is studied more analytically, it soon becomes evident that the transitions from one stage to another are often sporadic. More commonly observed are sudden shifts, and divergent behavior. Present Experiential Marketing models are not equipped to handle and explain this flux and discontinuity. A mechanism for describing this catastrophe must be included in experiential marketing process. Catastrophe model provides the scope to explain such divergent and fuzzy behavior, therefore it will be advantageous to scrutinize the applicability of the catastrophe models in the future researches.

9. Conclusion

Experiential marketing aims at generating pleasant experience first time and then every time providing continued satisfaction. Noticeably missing from research attention has been the effect of catastrophe leading to discontinuous satisfaction in the field of experiential marketing. While companies seeking to implement Experiential Marketing efforts will face a number of challenges, they can increase their likelihood of success by viewing the outcome satisfaction with a holistic approach and taking into consideration both continuous and discontinuous aspects. Frontiers of thoughts and researches in this discipline are continually re-visioning innovation as a tool to generate inimitable experience but the catastrophe that hounds the holistic experiential phenomenon represents the promising platform for further research.

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