

Building better brand experiences in the touchpoint revolution

By [Roz Calder](#), issued by [Kantar](#)

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It's increasingly said that today's brands are the sum of consumer experiences - and that marketers are in the business of selling customer journeys rather than simply stand-alone products. The problem they face, though, is that very few people are interested in buying complete, off-the-shelf, predefined customer journeys. In an era of personalisation, they want to assemble their own: using the touchpoints of their choosing for the purposes of their choosing and at the moments of their choosing. But if brands are the sum of these autonomous experiences, to what extent can they still be planned, built and managed? How can marketers control experiences when they cannot predict in which context, through which touchpoint, and in what order, those experiences will happen?

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How touchpoints overturned planning

Digital technology is revolutionising the role of touchpoints in people's lives by exploding the traditional path to purchase, in which a consumer would expect to go through several predetermined steps before buying a product through an established channel, in an established way. This path to purchase helped to organise the marketing department itself, with brand, shopper and customer marketing all working through their own set of self-defined touchpoints that seemed exclusive to their part of the process. But this ordered marketing reality has come to an end. Marketers are surrounded by a swarm of rapidly multiplying touchpoints through which people can interact with their brands – and they can no longer predict which of those touchpoints will be used for which purpose.

Why should a social media platform just be used for customer service or brand engagement when a 'buy now' button can be added to it? For that matter, why should a store be used solely for buying things when forward-thinking brands can build entire, immersive experiences using them? People don't stop having brand experiences just because they are using an e-commerce platform or walking down a supermarket aisle. And they won't settle for having one type of brand experience on one channel (an awareness-raising TV ad or a piece of social media content, say) and then being forced to migrate to another channel to complete a purchase.



Coherent brand experiences need a unified view of touchpoints

If marketers are to cope with this world, they need to start by breaking down the silos that exist within their own organisations. Before such silos were a hindrance to creating coherent brand experiences; now they are simply untenable. To do this effectively, they need insight teams and market researchers that can back them up with a unified view of touchpoints themselves. To consumers, a brand interaction is a brand interaction, whether they are trying to buy from that brand, ask it a question, or engage with a piece of its content. Those experiences are unlikely to feel coherent and recognisably branded, if the people planning them have completely different views of the touchpoints where the experiences happen.



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Why touchpoint planning needs to start with the audience

A common view of touchpoints within the marketing department is an essential starting point, but it won't in itself solve the biggest problem that the touchpoint revolution creates for brands. People expect their brand experiences to be relevant, customised and value-adding within the context of the touchpoint where they take place. They also expect each touchpoint to be inherently flexible, to play the role that they want at a given time: completing a purchase through Twitter or WeChat, or in response to the ad they just watched on Facebook. How can brands balance this with the need to stay coherent – and differentiate themselves from the other brands scrambling to offer every experience at every touchpoint?

Delivering relevant, branded touchpoint experiences becomes a lot more manageable when marketers clearly understand the needs of the people they are delivering those experiences for – and which touchpoints matter most to those people. The problem they currently face is that the technology used to reach audiences across digital touchpoints has tended to obscure any meaningful sense of who they are targeting and why. When brands' use of programmatic is driven primarily by behaviour, it becomes blind to the people they are interacting with – and the experiences those people might want. Instead, marketers find themselves delivering the same experiences across all touchpoints, driven solely by the last action that people took. At a time when they need to be increasingly nuanced and responsive, this is the wrong way to go. When brands base their programmatic targeting on digital segmentation they tend to transform their results, because they focus on creating relevant moments with the people most likely to buy from them.

How emotional linkage can re-create brand journeys

Turning autonomous touchpoint experiences into a coherent journey with a brand requires marketers to focus on the element that defines people's experiences: emotion. [It is the emotional connection that brands are able to create consistently with their chosen audiences that gives them their power](#): an influence over both immediate, instinctive decision-making and more conscious rationalisation of choices. When marketers talk about brand consistency, it is the components of their brand that produce these emotional responses that they need to focus on. When understood and managed in the right way, emotion can run like a consistent thread through the different experiences that a brand weaves for different touchpoints. [Consistent emotions deliver consistent brand experiences](#).

Marketers must match the emotive needs of their target audiences with the emotive meaning that their brand represents: the bold and adventurous brand promise of Red Bull, for example, Audi's promise of refinement and class, or the scientific expertise that exudes reassurance for pharmaceuticals companies and detergent brands. They can then plan to deliver relevant touchpoint experiences in a way that connects with this inherent emotive meaning. Audi retail showrooms, for example, are temples to design and technology that consciously echo the brand's emotive promise; its Twitter feed is filled with video shot in a similarly sophisticated style, and surrounded by text in font colours that reflect the symbolism of the Audi brand and logo. In China, that same refined aesthetic runs across Audi's Tmall storefront, bringing its brand equity to an eCommerce environment, with a minimalist feel that stands out from other auto brands.



Plotting a differentiated brand experience

The brands that have mastered emotional coherence in this way benefit from an inherent irresistibility amongst their chosen consumers, and typically enjoy twice the market share of their competitors. They are brands to which people are instinctively drawn, which can be chosen with little conscious thought but whose choice is still a deeply satisfying one that aligns with people's deeper motivations. However, such irresistible brands never get this way by attempting to be all things to all people. They differentiate like they mean it, and are prepared to have well-defined emotive appeal rejected by some in order for it to resonate more strongly with their chosen audiences.

As marketers seek to negotiate a confusing array of touchpoints to give consumers the experiences they value, they need to be prepared to differentiate to a similar degree. Competitiveness will increasingly depend on optimising a range of touchpoints for conversion, and enabling people to take the path to purchase of their own choosing. However, when all competitive brands offer the option to buy through all channels, it is brand equity that will exert most influence over the choices that consumers actually make. Building and managing that brand equity is as important now as it has ever been. If they are to succeed, marketers must see touchpoints not just as an opportunity to deliver the right functions, but also to generate the right emotions. In doing so, they can find creative ways to stretch their emotive appeal and build recognisable brand experiences – no matter which journeys people choose to take.



About the author

Roz Calder is a founding director of NeedScope International which is now part of TNS [Brand & Communication](#) practice area. Having worked with major global companies to help them build powerful brands, Roz is now responsible for the development, marketing and global application of [NeedScope](#) with a particular focus on activation.

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