TRACKING HOLISTIC CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN REAL TIME

Conference topic: Methodological challenges in service research

ABSTRACT

Purpose – Both scholars and practitioners commonly understand customer-firm relationships using a linear process from problem recognition to purchase, with an emphasis on the customer's response to firm-controlled stimuli. S-D logic suggests two problems with this. First, FP9 - that all actors are resource integrators - suggests the need to look beyond company-controlled encounters to customer-controlled encounters (usage, peer-to-peer etc). Second, the phenomenological nature of value (FP10) suggests the need to track customer perceptions in real time. We propose and pilot a real-time experience tracking method to address these weaknesses. We apply the method to segment UK customers on how they engage with brands in four service categories.

Methodology/approach – Over four weeks, 400 consumers sent a structured text (SMS) message whenever they encountered one of four service brands – their main bank, telecommunications provider, health provider and supermarket. This included both brand encounters (e.g. call centre, surgery) and indirect ones (e.g. conversation, social networks). The text included measures of experience quality and positivity. Further qualitative data was collected via an online diary. We segment the sample by their pattern of encounters, and profile the segments using a range of psychographic and demographic variables.

Findings – We describe 9 segments. Far from being Pavlovian dogs responding passively to marketing communications, customers enact a profusion of engagement behaviors, from helping other customers to contributing to service design. Psychographic covariates of segment membership include technological sophistication, network competency, shopping enjoyment and wellbeing.

Research implications – Our study explores implications for empirical research of SD logic-informed views of experience (Lemke et al. 2010; Macdonald et al. 2009) and engagement (Mollen & Wilson 2010). We confirm that customers assess their experience holistically and in real time, and that they respond actively through co-creation behaviors. We propose extensions to explore more complex resource integration across networks.

Practical implications – Our method may help market researchers to track the relative impact of all brand encounters on relationships, and hence help marketing managers to allocate resources across the marketing plan.

Originality/value – Existing market research methods tend to focus on parts of the customer journey in isolation. Also, many methods such as surveys are retrospective: the explanatory power added by real-time perceptions demonstrates the drawbacks of this. Furthermore, in viewing all brand encounters symmetrically, our method allows study not just of purchase outcomes but also of customer engagement behaviors, consistent with the S-D notion of resource integration.

References
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