

# Overcome the cliché of Customer Experience



*Adding granularity to make Customer Experiences measurable and actionable.*

Patrick Burggraaf

## 1. Introduction

The concept of Customer Experience has become overused as to almost a cliché, but it remains, or still remain, an important management or board objective.

According to HBR, still ninety three percent of business leaders today say that delivering a relevant and reliable CX is critical to their overall business performance. But many organizations are still struggling to see a clear connection between customer experience and the promised impressive financial results. This is due to many reasons, maturity, organizational alignment, understanding of what the optimal experience is for their customers? Or even does the organization has a clear definition of CX and a way to discuss this internally.

Recently I wrote an article (<https://www.patrickburggraaf.me/digital-customer-experience-elasticity-part-i>) about the relationship between CX and business economics. My hypothesis is that the impact of CX on profitable growth is not endless and that there is a certain optimum, which btw is different for industries and markets of course.

But let's go back to the topic of this post. How to overcome the cliché of CX.

You hear more and more voices putting CX into question. Recently, I read research from Thompson from 2018 with some pressing quotes He mentioned that "It is time for CX to put up, or shut up". And "Customer experience will be a fad without a better business case".

Next to the pressure on the impact of CX, we can ask ourself this interesting, but also important question: how novel is the focus on Customer Experience actually,

because it seems highly related to prior and existing streams within marketing, such as customer satisfaction, service quality, relationship marketing, customer relationship management, customer centricity, and customer engagement. So, does that mean that we must come up with one definition of CX? Or should be do better in articulating the value of CX for businesses, or...

When I was Googling on a definition of CX, I got close to a billion results back. When looking into literature I found multiple definitions, and one was striking and worth sharing. The following definition was built upon the most prevalent definitions across different research traditions.

*"CX is a nondeliberate, spontaneous response and reaction to an offering-related stimuli embedded within a specific context"*

The broadness of this definition does not provide us much help to build and measure CX programs, and not even to mention on how to connect this with business performance. When I looked at CX from another angle, and for those who have read the book the Intuitive Customer from Shaw and Hamilton, will probably recognize. They state, in short that;

*"Customer experience is a trace left in the memory of a human associated with a branded product or service and one that will influence – consciously or not – the future behavior when engaging with the respective brand."*

This definition emphasizes a behavioral result within the mind and not just a description of the interaction

from an outsider perspective. It also highlights the importance of different situational factors. This article gives you an idea how we could add granularity to the broad CX definition. My goal is to make CX more understandable and actionable so that anyone regardless of their discipline can understand and use it, but above all, discuss it in their organization.

### *Granularity in the definition of CX*

My understanding of CX is based on different insights from academic research on CX, behavioral economics, combined with my own experience and view on CX.

Firstly, I'd like to make a clear distinction between an experience and a memorized experience, or different said, a memory. An experience lives in the present, savoring each moment and is controlled by the conscious part of our brain, while a memorized experience is constructed from narratives and stories of our experiences and often part of our subconscious brain.

When breaking down customer experiences, there are three categories. An expected experience, a live perceived experience and a memorized experiences. A bit of an open door probably, but it is important to understand the customers expected experience otherwise you will be quite off when preparing and delivering to the customer.

The live experience are the moments along the customer journey where you have the opportunity to influence the customers conscious part of the brain. Where people do logical thinking, but unfortunately not make the decision, but I will come back later this. The memorized experiences are a crucial part of customer experiences and often forgotten. This is the part where we, as individuals make decisions and is the place where we keep our experience alive via stories. It is the internal storyteller and remembers us on the most important experience we lived in the past.

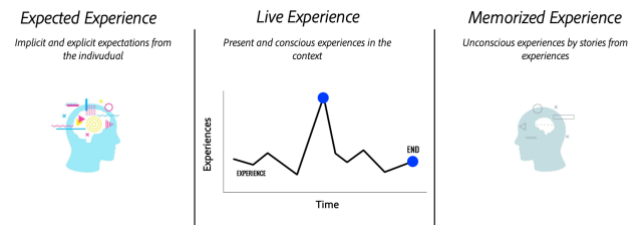


Fig. 1 Breaking down Customer Experiences

## **2. Present and conscious experiences**

Live experiences, or also known as, conscious experiences, emerge from the context of the experience and comprises four essential elements; an individual, an experience partner, a touchpoint, and a certain journey stage (or point in time). A change in any of these elements, results in a different experience. For instance, shopping in a brick-and-mortar store during your holiday in Hawaii versus online shopping when you are at home. Make sense, isn't?

Experiences are subjective, only an individual knows what it is like to experience the situation while in it. An individual makes sense of the input from the experience context and integrate their response into different dimensions for a conscious experience. The content of the experience, or experience content, is stored as a memorized experience. For example, when two persons are shopping in Hawaii, the experience of one is different than the other, although you might think the experience context from both is the same, but it isn't. The social context of the two persons might be different which make the experience inherently different between both. Same goes for the memory of the experience when we look back a month later. And maybe this all sound obvious, or not new to you, but it is important to realize that CX and its value are fully comprehensible only from a single customers point of view.

Experience content emerges through the individuals processing and 'sensemaking'. An experience exists in the present moment and occur during a single interaction with an experience partner at a touchpoint during the customer journey. For instance, an experience moment is created when an individual asks a question to a host in the store while she is considering buying a new dress. The experience partner is the host of the store, the touchpoint is physical, and the journey stage is pre-purchase.

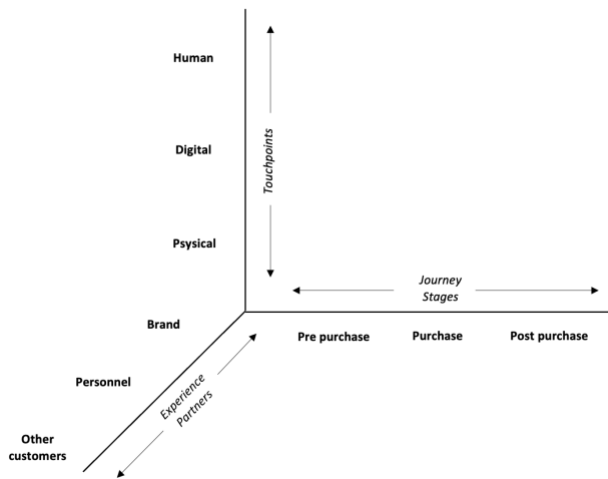


Fig 2. CX building block - Touchpoints, Experience Partners and Customer Journey

When we put these elements in a simple diagram, many variations arise when building experience content. On the X axis the journey stages with pre purchase, purchase and post purchase are shown. The Y axis the Touchpoints physical, human, digital and the Z axis represents the experience partners like the brand, other customers.

This building block of present CX reflects the array of individual interactions between the organization and the individual that serves different purposes such as information gathering by browsing on the website, payments in the store, usage of the product etc. These are critical to Customer Experience formation because without any interaction, there can be no CX. One element is not added in this figure, the control of the CX.

There is a difference between an interaction which is controlled by the organization or not. Brand controlled are those that are designed and controlled by the brand. For example, the website, the store, an advertisement, the host in the store in Hawaii. The not controlled interactions are controlled by the customer or others like for instance influencers or other customers.

To conclude, I would define live and conscious Customer Experiences as an individual's subjective and constructed response to an interaction with an experience partner at a touchpoint in a customer journey stage.

Although this sounds obvious to you, this definition and exposition provides a framework for discussing CX in your organization. When we look at CX from an omnichannel context, it is crucial to see CX as a multidimensional construct which requires a measure that applies to all situations or contexts of any interaction. And to be frank, we are often not good at this yet. Most of us are organized around touchpoints, or journey stages and we lack the ability to measure the entire value of CX across the touchpoint, partners and stages.

Organizations should look more to upstream and downstream as creators of CX. Think about how to put CX in product development, in employees, etc.

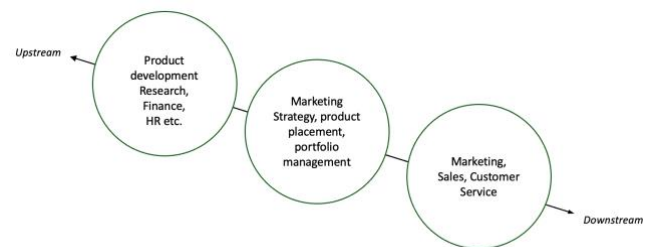


Fig 3. Up and downstream Customer Experience

Let's switch gears a bit and talk about a probably less know part of Customer Experiences, memorized experiences. Experiences lives its life continuously. It has moments of experience, one after the other. And you can ask: What happens to these moments? Well, unfortunately, the answer is simple: They are lost forever.

### 3. Memorized Experiences

Most of the experiences are completely ignored by the remembering part of our brain. The subconscious mind. Our subconscious mind, the part where the memorized experiences live, tells us stories. According to Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize-winning psychologist, a story is what we keep from our experiences. Especially the changes, significant moments of experiences and the endings define a story. Endings are very important and according to Kahneman the ending of an experience dominates.

I wrote an article lately (April 2023) <https://www.patrickburggraaf.me/digital-experiential-value-conscious-and-unconscious-state-during-the->

[purchase-and-in-use-phase](#)) about the conscious and unconscious mind and the impact of experiences and I argued that organizations should focus on what goes on in customers mind delivering the optimal value. I used the example of a small failure in delivering the best possible customer experience. You could argue indeed that when there is a bad ending in an experience, it will end up in a bad memorized experience. Or differently, you could say a normal experience, so the customer gets exactly what she/he expected, is not stored, and get lost. So, in that sense, what is the value of that experience?

Maybe it is better that a part of the journey is not perfect, and you take the opportunity to end with an unexpected perfect customer experience which is stored in the memorized experience?

Research have shown that rehearsing information immediately after being given may be all you need to make an experience a permanent story. An example of rehearsing could mean for instance a call center agent that performs a wrap-up summary before ending the call. Or for an online interaction, this could mean a follow-up email, or in a chat session it could be a summary at the end before ending the chat.

Whatever form it takes, the recap should include a quick summary emphasizing the high points and moments of the interaction and how the experience met the Customer's needs and expectations. So, think about adding rehearsals when you are designing your Customer Experiences.

Back to the part where about organizational controlled and non-controlled. The examples where a brand decides to recap the chat for instance is an example of organizational controlled. For forming better memories, it is even better if the customer does the recap. These non-controlled can be added for instance by requesting an online review, a testimonial, or for the Customer to take a survey or let influencers connect with your customers.

When customers have a great experience with a product or service, but if something unpleasant or disappointing happens during the significant moments of the experience, or at the end of that experience, that

unpleasantness is the part that customers remember and it most likely ruin your Customer Experience.

*Food for thought I would say...*

The memorized experiences, the part of the subconscious mind, does more than remembering and telling stories. It is the one that makes decisions. It the part how we decide what we trust, what we believe and what we value. It is the part that notices things co-occurring and ties them together. It is the result of repetition and reinforcement.

When building a brand or positioning a product, making a brand or product promise is crucial and to succeed and make it memorable, brands should repeat it over and over again.

In the end, it is the organizations job to write the Customer Experience script and memorize it. Then, organizations should put on their play every day with every customer which ultimately build customer loyalty.

My advice is to figure out what you want your Customer Experiences to mean to people, what you want them to remember about those moments and experiences and be consistent about that. Ensure that every time customers have an encounter with your organization that those elements you want remembered are there and repeated consistently—because that's how you win playing the memory game. And use the CX building blocks I introduced with the touchpoints, experience partners and journey stages as a framework for consistency and discussion.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Customer experience is a multidimensional construct that involves different components, and it requires to take individual customer expectations, live, and present experiences and memorized experiences into account.

My three key take aways for this article are;

Conscious experiences emerge from the context of an experience and comprise four key elements, an individual, an experience partner like your brand or an influencer, a touchpoint, and a customer journey stage.

It is important to use these four elements in your internal discussions and alignment because these classifications are the same for all parts of the organization.

Second, only individuals know and feel what it is to experience while in it. CX and its valence are fully comprehensible only from a single customer's point of view. Measuring experiences requires collecting subjective data that can be analyzed individually or aggregated. It is crucial to have a so-called traveling measure across upstream and downstream elements of the total customer experience. That will allow you to measure, steer and get insights on the impact and value of customer experience for your organization.

Lastly, peak moments of an experience and the ending of an experience are crucial for how people remember you. Almost all moments of experiences are lost, but you can increase the memory of experiences by rehearsing it. For instance, by adding a question or summary at the end of an interaction. Or make the most significant moments in the experience memorable so they will likely be stored as a story in the memory.

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