

**INTEGRATED INTERACTION: DESIGNING STRATEGIC TOUCHPOINTS
TO IMPROVE THE CROSS-CHANNEL USER EXPERIENCE**

Emanuela Ciuffoli

Università di Urbino "CARLO BO", Dipartimento DISCUM, Via Saffi 15, Urbino

Abstract

Successful brand strategies rely upon the capability of managing multiple touchpoints on a cross-channel user experience. The pervasivity of networking and the commodification of on-the-go internet connection are constantly transforming the landscape of communication and marketing management, asking for an "everyware" vision to content and service providing. I try to introduce the concept of Integrated Interaction as a tool to challenge the complexity of a cross-channel touchpoints approach. To make the most of this opportunity, organizations must take a holistic approach to addressing the Splinternet and its growing fragmentation. By considering and managing each touchpoint as an operant resource and a value producing event/act, brands can prioritize data, activities and connections. Integrated interaction could be thus explained as an organic mix of strategic and tactical processes combined to deliver a heavily coherent brand experience on a perspective of cross-channel touchpoints.

Key words: touchpoints, cross-channel, communication, user experience, networked public, brand management, splinternet, integrated interaction

1.1 SHOULD THE MANAGEMENT BE EVERYWARE?

Hand-held devices, mobiles and internet connection are being commoditized thus changing our perception of time, space and relationships. The rhythms of daily life are driven by tweets, facebook updates, pins on Pinterest and post on Tumblr. While going home by metro we check our e-mails, post on our blog and read the comments on tripadvisor in order to decide which hotel to choose for our next trip. We text messages and buy stuff on Amazon "on the go", avoiding wasting time and using the "always on" connectivity to fast-checking what we are interested in. We can verify online the price of a pair of shoes while watching it in the storefront windows or instantly share on instagram the picture of the new dress we have just been buying.

"Increasingly, many tasks we perform every day not only constantly require us to move between different media, but actually have us move from the digital to the physical environment and back. This is having a profound impact in the way the traditional disciplines of information retrieval and human-computer interaction are approached today. These were significant in a world where all interaction was in absolute propositions and conveyed through a stand-alone computer screen, but the rapid and relatively silent spreading of connection-capable micro-computers in an increasing number of devices has tilted the table. Computation is everywhere, and so are search and interaction" (Resmini n.d.).

The purchase journey is getting more and more complicated to manage by a lot of multilayered experiences and interactions whose effects are:

a) the constant remixing of the traditional distinction of the three different phases - pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase -;

b) the difficulty in measuring the efficacy of each interaction.

The influence of social networking and permanent connectivity on the consumption arena also relies on what has been identified, by the famous website trendwatching.com, as the F-factor (fans, friends and followers). The F-Factor determines our lives by shaping our culture in the direction of a social system of networked individualism (Rainie, Wellman, 2001), where each person tries to find other like-minded users to discover and experience the best services and products. Recommendations and reviews represent an answer to the infinite universe of purchase possibilities. Companies are thus trying to create efficient strategies to increase the value of word-of-mouth, digital rating and online brand reputation. Brands can in fact themselves be considered as social media and “part of the mundane context of action within which we become subjects” (Arvidsson 2006, p.11). In parallel to this, enriching its own “network appeal” means, for a brand, creating intangible assets and, as a consequence, increasing its financial weight.

Networking is pervasive and everyone experiences multiple interactions across different environments. Through networked technology, the very architecture of everyday life has been changed and, as Mitchell (1995) argued in his book *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*, people are no longer shaped just by their dwellings but by their networks. Networking includes, from my perspective, brands acting as subjects in the social arena: lovemarks above all, but also all those brands dialoguing and interacting daily with their publics. Let's think about how Nivea used open innovation for a great product launch last year. Throughout the entire process of research, evaluation and production, Nivea's R&D department worked with consumers, involving them in different ways. Co-creation and co-selection can be considered as the keys to success for the production of the Nivea's Invisible for Black and White deodorant. This approach is based on the idea that the network must be considered as the main structure and paradigm to mediated relationships. As one can imagine this redefines the goals and the scope of brand management because it configures a scenario where people can contribute to the Brand Content Generation, the Brand Content Activation and so far as the brands are involved in open innovation, even to the Brand design, funding and production (just think about web platform of social “preailing” as Zao Zao – shopzaozao.com -, in Asia, where users can not only support a designer with crowdfunding but also pre-order items and influence what will go into production).

Social networks, e-commerce, mobile apps and the digital wallet are completely altering the landscapes of our lives and of brand management. In short they are changing the way we experience and consume. As Meyrowitz (1985) already noticed by studying broadcast media, people and their behaviours are influenced and shaped by the properties of the dynamics introduced by media.

That's why, when dealing with this continuing blurring of boundaries amidst technology, social practices and disciplines, managers, user experience designers and communication professionals need to improve new specific tools and innovative visions. A holistic approach has to be taken into deep consideration for those who want to generate meaning and value for their consumers. In fact, in contrast to the fragmentation of platforms and devices, as argued by Greenfield, we have to think about a new paradigm of interaction, that is what he calls *everyware*. “In everyware, all the information we now look to our phones or Web browsers to provide become accessible from just about anywhere, at any time, and is delivered in a manner appropriate to our location and context” (Greenfield, 2006, p.1). In this scenario, in contrast to the simplicity on the level of user experience there is an underlying powerful informatics and hard work on interaction design and management.

The purpose of this paper is to map out the need for a shift from integrated communication plans to “integrated interaction” strategies based on a cross-channel touchpoint plan. Before introducing the concept of integrated interaction, I will begin by examining the main keywords to this approach.

- **CROSS CHANNEL.** According to the spreading changes in consumers' behaviours, marketing and communication need a reboot. The so called “multi-channel” user experience disrupts the marketing landscape and asks for a deep rethinking of the interaction points between brands and users. On the one hand, in fact, we are witnessing a fragmentation of the purchase experience, while on the other hand managers can invest in multiple tools to reach the goal of consumer bonding. If the multichannel approach focuses on the ability to make the consumer interact with the service or the product through a number of different channels, thus transforming the information delivery system in a multi-branched entity, the cross-channel approach can hold much more value and become a key-factor in marketing activities. What's becoming constantly relevant, in fact, is to understand the purchase journey in its new complexity and therefore to rethink the design of “inline” (on line + off line) behaviours. As underlined by the studies on information architecture: “Cross-channel is not about technology, or marketing, nor it is limited to media-related experiences: it's a systemic change in the way we experience reality. The more the physical and the digital become intertwined, the more designing successful cross-channel user experiences becomes crucial (Resmini n.d.)”.

In our daily activities we move from a digital to a physical store (or it could be the reverse), from device to device, across domains and thus bridging from online to offline experiences and back, in a non linear path driven by necessity, desire, curiosity and, in some cases, marketing! We can go window-shopping during the night, buy the item in the 24/7 e-commerce of the store and decide to pick the product up at the retail store. Our interactions with a brand are multiple, and are not always acted out on a brand-controlled or brand-influenced platform (I can check the recommendations on a blog and then decide to buy the item on the brand website). For this reason, providing a satisfying cross-channel experience should be considered as a main step for a trust-worthy engagement of the customer. In his recent study, Satall (2012) stresses the importance of integrating digital technologies and channels in order to support the wider shopping experience as a whole (and not as a struggle between e-commerce and retail).

- **SPLINTERNET.** Digital branding is going through a period of rapid and significant evolution. The era of a single platform strategy on the web is over. The so-called cyberbalkanization of the internet is a result of the ending of an easily compartmentalized architecture as an effect of a large-scale fragmentation of devices, data access, and technology standards. What has happened to a technology like Flash after the introduction of the iPhone's standards is a clear example of this process.

Content providing teams and interaction management are constantly challenged and asked for new skills because of this Splinternet effect. They have to cope with customers asking for satisfying experiences in digital walled garden (lets think about all the log in processes we encounter when surfing the web and the implications of conflicts between the big players – Google, Adobe, Apple, Facebook, etc. - of the market) and on a multiplicity of digital devices. This hyper-fragmented media ecosystem also constitutes a big knot for measurement and tracking capabilities, targeting and web analytics to get their teeth into. The success of a communication campaign has become really hard to measure because it's difficult to process qualitative and quantitative data extrapolated through different tools. How to standardize measurements? How to attribute success to the various activities and to the user engagement on the different platforms?

The main question here is how to transform this disruptive ecosystem into an opportunity and an advantage for the management. To put a comprehensive approach to harnessing the benefits of

fragmentation into effect, proactive organizations should start by mapping the platforms and the interaction points, then planning a cohesive strategy to develop, adopt and improve subsequent technologies, on one hand and organizational and measurement components on the other.

- **BIG DATA.** The diversity of technologies, platforms, analytics and insights, leads to a growing amount of data. Volume, velocity and variety represent the three keywords to understanding Big Data. Each brand is daily “submerged” by high-speed, heterogeneous large scale data. Google analytics, facebook insights, sell in and sell out data are just a little part of a complex amount of information every brand has to cope with. Since several pieces of information are not structured, a lot of questions need to be answered by those companies accepting the challenge of developing strategic and concerted efforts to use these data as a value for success. Companies are trying to understand how to store, backup and restore data, but also how to collect, catalog and process them quickly in order to plan marketing strategies and develop efficient organization models without spending too much on it (keeping the costs low is really complicated when referring to the analysis of big data).

I have to stress that for Italian brands this really is a big bet, if we consider the typical small size of our companies and the lack of culture on data researching and data correlation studies. The biggest challenge will thus be to shift from Bid Data to Good Data, that is to say, to understand among this fragmented and overwhelming amount of data which are the right data to study and work on.

- **NETWORKED PUBLICS.** “*Networked publics* are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Networked publics serve many of the same functions as other types of publics – they allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family. While networked publics share much in common with other types of publics, the ways in which technology structures them introduces distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments. The properties of bits – as distinct from atoms – introduce new possibilities for interaction. As a result, new dynamics emerge that shape participation (boyd 2010, p.39)”. These new dynamics impose proactive brands to take advantage of participation, and to some extent, to transform it into an intangible asset for improving equity. If one thinks about brands like Ducati, Nike ora Nutella, it's easy to understand they are part of the generation of networked publics. Bringing together communities of consumers on the same platforms, they both work as spaces and as imagined collectives. The mediatization of consumption combined to the rise of brands as social realities has led to the generation of what we could call “brandcasting”, a complex system where brands are both content provider and context. Since they “work” as social environment, they also exist (and are perceived) as the specific mediated place, where we can experience those contents. When specifically speaking about social networks, “the diversity of technological features provided on SNSs is conducive to initiating and nurturing direct and indirect interactions between organizations and the public. Thus, organizations strive to adopt all possible media platforms to increase their public exposure, establish a positive image, and engage existing and potential members. As SNSs are being incorporated into people’s everyday lives, it is likely that the “franding” practices on SNSs can lead to longer-term user engagement and commitment to organizations and their brands” (Wang, Meng & Dong 2012) . The effects of these activities directly refers, of course, to brand bonding and brand trusting.

The implication of all these transformations in the technoscape in the mediascape (Appadurai 1996) and the deep remaking of social and consumption behaviours depict a situation where it is and it will be fundamental, for brand management, to develop new ways of mixing production, distribution,

retail, marketing and communication. The relationship between brand and consumers is getting complicated because of the multiple inline (on line + off line) points of interaction. Each day a single consumer can get in touch with a brand, mixing these points and experiencing pre-purchase and post-purchase services at the same moment. This means, for example, that in-store activities are more and more connected with digital contents such as reviews, social networks comments, dedicated blogs, apps, and so on.

The spreading of “consumer focused” marketing strategies, such as the researches and studies on interaction design, represent a sign of the need for new approaches to the user experience and the processes of brand generation. For the last twenty years theorists have begun to recognize a new trend in marketers' decisions. A new way of thinking has led to: Relationship marketing (Levitt 1983), Permission marketing (Gobé 1999), Customer Relationship Marketing, Holistic Marketing (Ottesen 2001, Kotler 2007), Inclusive Branding (Schmidt & Ludlow, 2002), Total Business Communication (Brioschi 2006), and a lot of other “communication and interaction based” perspectives. All of them underline the relevance of building a brand experience which should be greater than the sum of its parts. Leaving the image of a paternalistic brand that knows what is better for its customer behind, these approaches believe that dialogue and interaction between the brand and its publics should always be designed and activated by focusing on the consumer's journey of purchase and on its own media pattern. This vision could also represent a smart reaction to the so called “consumer empowerment”, the psychological state of mind of the consumer usually accompanied by the ability in making their own choices, to escape pushing marketing strategies and by the increasing knowledge on media and brands.

1.2 INTEGRATED INTERACTION: A HOLYSTIC APPROACH

When reading the literature, there are a number of different definitions of brand touchpoints. A brand touchpoint can be generically defined as “a point of interaction involving a specific human need in a specific time and place” (Risdon, 2011). From this perspective the focus evidently relies on the need of the customer and on the ability of the brand to answer properly to this need. Even if within an organization we can find many teams working on different levels, the customer should be given a coherent experience and not disparate feedbacks in different moments or on different channels.

Other definitions I have come across while studying this subject tend to focus on the moment of selection, such is the case of the one proposed by Stone et al (2002, p.40): touchpoints are “*the points at which products and services are purchased or serviced*”.

Spengler and With (2009) describe touchpoints to be all the different contact points at which brands are experienced by their public, that is to say, customers, non-customers and other stakeholders. Retail stores, websites, employees, customer care front offices, call centres, recommendations from friends, products, and magazines are all good examples. This definition enlarges the scenario to the whole public of a company, introducing also non-customers and stakeholders. Taking into consideration all the people interacting with the brand is really useful, for example, when dealing with B2B markets or with those products requiring a prescription (medicines, etc.).

In the era of “attention economy”, managing the touchpoints by providing services means finding a new way to negotiate the consumer's attention and, most of all, engaging with him/her in a positive, emotional relationship. As emphasized by Laura Minestrone (2011), we are witnessing a shift from the concept of medium to the concept of touchpoint, where the point of interaction substitutes the medium itself. The touchpoint can be thus considered as the interface of a product, a service or a brand. The passage from transaction to interaction is fundamental when considering the entire value chain (Minestrone, 2011) and the whole process of consumption.

Following the emerging trend of a “service-dominant logic” for inbound marketing (Lusch, Vargo, 2009), a touchpoint could be described as “service as content”, that is to say a coherent and efficient service provided by a brand in the whole of its manifestations. This study follows its own definition: “touchpoints include all the interaction points offering a service to customers, non-customers and stakeholders and producing value and information for the company”.

According to Duncan and Moriarty, we must therefore “consider the following postulates:

1. Brand touchpoints are operant resources (i.e., “producers of effects”) and value producing events/acts.
2. A service is a communication experience.
3. Interaction produces information, which is a source of added value.
4. The co-creation of positive value at touchpoints creates and strengthens relationships.
5. Varied and multiple touchpoints create a value field that can also be described [...] as “a continuous series of social and economic processes”.
6. Cross-functional management is needed for a value field of successful interaction.
7. Consistency in brand messages (and service) anchors relationships. (2006, p.237)”.

Maybe one postulate should be added: 8. Cross-channel experience should be designed to avoid the fragmentation and to encourage cohesion.

Living a brand experience signifies being exposed to touchpoints and, as a consequence, having a relationship with the performance of a company. Using a product or commenting it on a blog represent therefore important moments when to verify the brand performance, both from the customer's and from the brand's point of view. If users can be considered as contributing intermediaries and active participants in the ecosystem of a brand, the brand itself should deliver contents/services throughout its touchpoints in order to strengthen its relationships.

Referring to two of the points explained in the first part of this article - cross-channel user experience and networked publics - it's important to stress that working on a profusion of non strategic touchpoints could be really dangerous for a company. The Splinternet requires much more attention on prioritising the contact points and on deciding on which of them to invest. The total brand experience has to be perceived as a continuum in the social life of an individual. As a part of networked publics companies are obliged in embracing both the roles of object and subject of mediated relationships.

The strength of the brand relationship online relies on the consistency of its strategic design of a holistic cross-channel user-experience. By first mapping the effects of each touchpoint and then understanding the relationships that it will play, the management of a company can decide where to produce value and where to improve the services. This is why the organization model has to be capable of transferring information and analysing data coming from a lot of sources with the main goal of delivering a purchase experience perceived as a whole.

As argued by Resmini and Rosati (2011, p.42) “this shift toward cross-mediality gains momentum all the time, and design we must, as the lack of coordination between communicating or mutually supporting channels is bound to affect the whole process. When multiple interactions are designed as unstructured and unrelated, but are in fact perceived as one single experience by the user, as McMullin and Starmer point out, structural gaps and behavioral inconsistencies are common and unavoidable, and the sheer cognitive load and awkwardness of switching back and forth between noncommunicating and apparently diverse touch points hampers the final user experience”.

Integrated interaction could be thus explained as an organic mix of strategic and tactical processes combined to deliver a heavily coherent brand experience on a perspective of cross-channel touchpoints. Brands have to configure cohesive processes converging on interactions and contacts points in order to create the basis of engaging. Working to deliver meaningful cross-channel user experiences form the structure of branding in the era of “always on” connectivity and hyper-channel users.

So many different fields and domains are mixing into the complex area of brand management, where digital strategies, information design, networking, service providing, blend, that a new approach to the organization of information inside a company should be taken into consideration. This doesn't translate in a simple enlargement of the team involved in the process of decision making, but in a continuous mash up of skills and competence.

Communication, marketing, services, product features: all of these levels should be planned as seeds in a breeding ground, interacting to produce a new dynamic flow of “brand life”!

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Journal of International Scientific Publications:
Media and Mass Communication, Volume 2

ISSN 1314-8028, Published at: <http://www.scientific-publications.net>

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