Prashant Gandhi,
Jonathan Gordon,
Jesko Perrey, and
Sofia Serra

Five questions brands need to answer to be customer first in the digital age

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Having a consistent brand voice in the digital age is not easy. Here's how to think about the challenges and opportunities.

A strong brand voice is a living, breathing manifestation of your brand promise. This voice comes from a much deeper place than stringing together clever words and phrases to sell products. An authentic brand voice solves problems, delivers a great customer experience, and stands for something.

That's as true in the digital age as it was in the analog one. The problem is that it's much harder to have a strong and consistent brand voice in the digital age. The very breadth of consumer interactions with a brand—from viewing a product online to following posts on Snapchat to calling customer service—has fragmented and complicated how brands connect with consumers.

At its core, the issue is that many brand organizations haven't caught up to the realities of the digital age. While consumers swap out devices and surf across channels without thinking about it, many businesses are stuck in siloed functions. The brand team is off doing ad buys, while the direct marketing team is making SEO decisions, and the customer-service teams are reading from their own scripts. Even with the best of intentions, coordination is challenging because of separate reporting structures, narrow performance incentives, and no clear accountability.

Why does this matter? Because we know that customer experience is increasingly a decisive advantage in the business world. But it's hard to provide a winning customer experience when the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. That just leads to uncoordinated plan execution, frustrating customer experiences, and unfulfilled growth.

While most large companies are still in the early stages of developing a fully integrated marketing organization, we've found that the following questions are the most important ones to answer:

1. Are you thinking about customer journeys rather than just touchpoints?

The starting point for delivering value, not just talking about it, is understanding the end-to-end journeys your customers take to accomplish a task, such as buy a product, open an account, experience a product, resolve a dispute, adjust a service, etc. These journeys are often complex routes across websites, social media, stores, customer service, and myriad other interaction points.

In most companies, these interaction points are managed by multiple different functions within the business (sales, marketing, operations, store). That means a service agent will often have no idea what the customer has recently viewed online, for example. Or a form that a customer filled out online isn't available to the sales rep making a sales call to that same customer. The issue, of course, is that the customer doesn't see the business reporting structures and therefore expects you to act and speak consistently across all these touchpoints, in one voice and with all the same information at hand.

Understanding these journeys is crucial because they can become the unifying principle for the business. Employees stop thinking only about their own functions and individual tasks and instead start thinking about customer journeys in which the consumer is passed from one phase to the next. That requires an integrated process, so that each part of the business delivers consistent, timely, and relevant content as part of a complete customer journey experience.

2. How useful is your data?

Companies have plenty of data about their consumers. The problem is that the data often lives in different places and is owned by different functions. In addition, many companies tend to organize their data by product lines or channels and therefore struggle to get an overall view of their customers. Companies need to centralize their data to create a 360-degree view of the customer that becomes, in essence, the "golden source" of customer insight, i.e., a single view of the customer that everyone in the business agrees on and can access.

Creating this complete view is based on combining structured data—common sources of data that fit in prescribed models, such as billing and order-processing information—and "unstructured" data (e.g. social media, location-based data, images, and speech). That includes consolidating insights from owned, earned, and purchased media plus all of the operational measures from both front and back office. Data engineering is often required to get this done on internal technology platforms. Meanwhile, advanced analytics is generally necessary to piece together the channel-surfing routes, both online and off, that customers take on their path to purchase, and to attribute the most influential touchpoints where business can influence them.

A key issue is not just collecting and collating the data but making it easy for business users to access. Digital innovators are investing in marketing activation platforms that allow marketers to "self-serve" practical insights without having to call in IT support every time. This allows marketers to finally move beyond basic measurements (e.g., bounce rates, conversion) to address more fundamental business issues, such as "Why did our bounce rates fall when we changed TV ads?"

A large car manufacturer had exactly this issue of data access: many different groups within the organization owned their own data sets, which weren't shared broadly. The CMO decided to invest in a single database about customers that everyone in the business could use. But to do so required actively communicating the rewards and benefits of the system so that both dealers and functions within the company would share their data. That included explicitly laying out how the effectiveness of each participating group would be increased through the deeper understanding of their customers—from behaviors to predictive analytics. Actively managing this people angle is crucial to developing a unified data set in large organizations.

3. Do you truly understand why your customers are doing what they're doing?

Data allows companies to develop sophisticated pictures of their customers. Advanced analytics in particular has opened up a new level of customer insights, from predicting what they're likely to buy next to understanding what truly influences their decisions.

But relying only on data creates a blind spot. The best companies use behavioral economics and ethnographic research to power user-centered design thinking. This allows them to move away from more generic assumptions like demographics to much more nuanced and segmented understanding of customer motivations, which requires investing the time to see how customers actually make choices in live environments and observe what sorts of behaviors predominate.

Some companies insist that their executives routinely visit customers in stores or homes to develop this level of understanding. From these details, designers can develop relatable personas that bring customer segments to life. They often give these personas names and outline what they really want and how they feel. This helps employees to orient themselves to the customer and creates a common vocabulary.

At the same time, great insights are not valuable if they are not packaged, shared and turned into effective action in time. Even qualitative research needs to happen much more frequently than in the past since digital developments change consumer habits and perceptions quickly. As companies increase the breadth and depth of insights, it's crucial to understand how these insights align with the overall business strategy so that people don't get lost in the endless pools of customer data.

4. How relevant are your communications and interactions?

Tracking and linking all those interactions with consumers to understand what they really want is great, but those insights need to be connected to specific decisions and actions the business takes across different channels.

To help drive this activity at scale, companies are beginning to put in place personalization engines. These are data-driven systems that automate decision making, trigger actions based on customer activity, and iterate their communications based on what they learn. Data-activated marketing based on a person's real-time needs, interests, and behaviors can boost total sales by 15 to 20 percent while significantly improving the ROI on marketing spend across marketing channels.

In these campaigns, it's important to balance classic direct marketing, which communicates a product's features and value, with emotional brand storytelling, which delivers deeper and more lasting differentiation. This is where integration and consistent messaging can help carry a consumer through their entire journey without confusing or contradicting their experience, which leads to higher conversion rates.

5. Do you have the right people on your teams (and the processes and guidelines to support them)?

To effectively drive this integrated process, companies need to put in place cross-functional teams. One large fast-food restaurant made a conscious move away from organizing marketing teams by channel to focusing teams on customer segments. That naturally led them to bring together people with different and complementary skills. Effective cross-functional teams rely on having the right kind of talent on hand, of course. The best companies actively benchmark their capabilities to identify talent gaps. We've found that analyzing a company's Digital Quotient, for example, is helpful in isolating those digital gaps that drive value. Once identified, companies can then prioritize their hiring to fill in their talent gaps.

Other companies have created agile labs or "war rooms" with people from many different departments in the business (marketing, sales, design, product, operations, IT, legal, compliance etc.) working together to deliver specific customer journeys. That's because for all the planning, analysis, and new team structures, the reality is that effective integrated communications is a learning process.

Speed trumps perfection in war rooms as good ideas are rapidly developed, tested and adapted. Decisions can be made quickly because decision makers are actually part of the war room. A medium-sized e-commerce company might need just one such team, while large organizations can have as many as eight teams working at once.

To be successful, the war-room teams need executive sponsorship at the very top of the organization to remove roadblocks and empower them to get things done. In addition, companies need to put in place the right incentives—such as rewarding the full agile team for helping to deliver a successful customer experience, for example, rather than simply for individual task execution; accountability—by requiring that a product owner responsible for ensuring the new customer journey delivers against business outcomes;, and metrics, which should be independent and active function.

"When it comes to metrics, analytics should be an independent function and the source of truth for the team," says Neil Hiltz, head of global financial services for Facebook. "This group should monitor performance, work with cross-functional partners to improve performance, and continuously improve the system that measures the customer experience."

That organizational focus is clear at one large clothing retailer, which has centralized vendor-management governance and aligned incentives across the marketing team as well as agencies. Leadership also stipulated that all procurement of agencies be centrally managed rather than allowing brands to have their own agencies. They were also deliberate in either finding agencies with a broad view of the customer or in acting as a "control tower" to manage the various channels the agencies managed.

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Providing a great omnichannel user experience that builds value for the customer and the business is ultimately a strategic and organizational challenge. Core to getting it right is understanding that an omnichannel user experience is based on developing a two-way conversation with customers, not just speaking to them but also for them as their advocates within the broader organization. This requires marketing to actively build strong working relationships across the business (e.g. product development, customer care). How business leaders answer these five questions will determine in large part how effectively they'll be able to overcome those challenges. ◻