

## **Master or Subservient? Influencing the creation of experience** **Paul Hudson**

This paper looks at the implications of serving customers in an environment where the customer has increasing control and choice over how they access and digest information. This shift in power away from the company to the customer challenges the traditional notion of 'customer service' from an essentially command and control model to one of co-creation of experience and ultimately brand perception.

This is by no means meant as a comprehensive coverage of topics, more a high level 'tour' of a number of issues and themes identified at a social, environmental level and translated into a number of key impacts for organisations.

The paper explores three central themes;

### 1) Illusion of Control

Firstly I will explore some of the key influences that are changing the environment in which organisations operate, explaining the shift in the balance of power, away from companies towards the customer.

### 2) Finding Influence

After discussing the increasingly 'illusory trick' of control, I will introduce ways of how we need to begin to think about customer relationships – I will argue that instead of discussing traditional methods in a 'command and control' manner, instead we need to talk in terms of 'finding influence' – in other words, how can we begin to influence in a positive way.

### 3) Implications for Organisations

I will finally discuss the implications that these themes have on organisations and introduce a variety of concepts, models and thoughts on ways we can begin to respond.

## **The Illusion of Control**

***"Control is to some degree illusory since people frequently overestimate their control, even in situations governed by chance"***

[Thompson, 1999; Sundar & Nass, 2000]

As the quote suggests, business has always liked the illusion of control, business structure and organisation has long since appeared to prosper on what is essentially a 'command and control' model. Yet, in reality much of this 'control' is illusory.



It is not appropriate to think of the customer in terms of a unit or a number – something we can manipulate or somebody we can ‘do unto’. That in itself leads us to consider notions of ‘channels’ – things we can use to push messages through to get to the customer. In some way, our overriding paradigm is that we can control the customer.

Experiences evolve around Brand. Brand is important as a symbol, as a signpost. It is worthy of much thought in so much as it helps create a position, it helps us imagine qualities or provoke emotions. But in reality how much can we ‘control’ the creation, definition and perception of our brand? Brand is not a thing. It does not actually exist. By which I mean, it is not fixed, not static. It only exists in the form of an image or a set of words. In no way can we actually ‘pin it down’ or ‘nail it’. It is ephemeral, fluid, dynamic.

In essence it is the ‘joint-construction’ of company and customer. It is created through communication, a ‘joint-construct’; effectively the brand’s meaning is co-created through their mutual and ongoing ‘dialogue’ and relationship. In reality it forms, alters, mutates and evolves by people outside the company, by customers and non-customers. It is defined in their own minds and in the conversations they have with one another.

And today for a number of factors, we appear to have even less control than at first it appears.

### **Technological change**

While the technology is new and radical, the real change is in the shift of people’s behaviour. They suddenly have infinite options immediately available to them, with the touch of a button; people can find vast amounts of information, products or services. It is easier and quicker than ever to compare prices, seek out more detailed information, arm yourself with facts and figures. Our own research has shown many times how people increasingly arm themselves with information before they speak with customers, how the Internet has empowered them to become ‘experts’ in just about every aspect of their lives – in extremes, self-diagnosing ailments before consulting their GP. In small ways already, the GP – patient relationship is being reframed, with the power relationships shifting.

### **Self-Assembly / DIY Culture**

This information and interactivity also plays into wider trends, that of individuals Self-Assembling their identity. In an environment which is increasingly frenetic, unstable, uncertain and more fluid, individuals increasingly feel the need to make connections and build identity through the use of technology. Individuals increasingly expect control of their own image, their own identity and wish to build and project this on their own terms.

This trend of self-creation combined with the interactive power of technology and wider control over information empowers individuals as never before.

## **Media message and fear**

Bombarded with information, media and choice, individuals increasingly seek out 'coping' mechanisms, methods of filtering and sifting what is relevant to them. They become increasingly protective of time and money, increasingly cautious about what and who to believe. Our need for filtering and ordering, leads to a desire for us to order the content and messages ourselves – increasing our desire for control.

At the same time, the constant streaming of many media voices and messages, leads to an uncertainty of what is real and what is not, which media message to believe. In such a media world, we increasingly become cynical as to what to believe, who is on our side and who is not?

In part, this is also linked to an increasing fear about security and safety. This combined with the power of the media leads to a much heightened sense of fear and anxiousness. In some way, people are actively trying to 'put distance' between themselves and brands, trying in some small way to 'insulate' themselves. By doing this, they make it harder for brands to penetrate this 'outer skin' and in doing so, seek to take charge and control.

## **Importance of networks (and word of mouth)**

The 'DIY culture' combined with the technological change allows individuals to create their own 'mutated' forms of reality – again, raising questions as to 'what is real' – even to the extent of, 'is there such a thing as reality?'

All of the trends touched upon, leads to an increased importance of 'social networks'. Networks can be defined as a series of nodes, linked together in an ever changing set of dimensions. You locate yourself within these networks by constantly checking, defining, re-defining your own positions within them – they are relative. You define yourself through your relationship with the other nodes. This is borne out by the vast and increasing amount of evidence about the increasing importance of 'word of mouth' – for example the recent MRS conference where a whole session was dedicated to proving that word of mouth marketing was more important today than it was 20 years ago.

The individual has a need to seek out, filter information and make sense of what is real to them. They need to test out and experiment with aspects of their identity, fixing it and publishing it. As they move through this increasingly networked world, they can build a picture and make an assessment of which messages and reputations they believe, matching them against their own experiences and building new realities.

This has 3 key impacts to organisations: 1) The locus of Power and Influence has moved away from the company towards the community, 2) Any Brand is therefore even less 'controlled' and is even more ephemeral than any point before and 3) experience of Brand and the chance to 'get it right or wrong' are even more crucial than before.

## Finding Influence

I believe that when we talk about 'customer experience' and 'experience management', that we are in some way falling into the very same mistake that I have just begun to outline – that in fact we are creating ourselves the 'mirage of control', through the language and the actions we use, we do in part add to the illusion, creating a whole essence of 'command and control' language – we invent processes, systems, databases, manuals.....all give us the sense that we are, in some way, in control of a relationship - that we can determine, direct or 'do unto', the customer.

At best, all we can do is influence. So instead of talking in such 'positivistic' terms, I would argue we need to use a new set of language, a new set of reference points. We must talk in terms of 'influence', creation and appropriateness - how do we 'find influence', what are the *appropriate behaviours*, how can we *co-create* the *appropriate experience*.

## Influence through Involvement

***"Let us make a special effort to stop communicating with each other, so we can have some conversation"***

[Judith Martin, Miss Manners]

"As you enter a party, you notice a woman talking at the centre of a group. The woman at the centre is well dressed and appears funny, engaging, yet each story she tells is about herself. None of the stories, you realize, are really engaging in a dialogue with those around. Aside from a few acknowledgements of others' interjections or questions, she's just ploughing ahead in her own monologue. It's not long before many of the audience get bored and leave"

As the story illustrates, conversation is a two-way creation – for it to have the most impact, it must fully engage both parties. The first aspect of influence that I would argue we should look at it is that of 'true involvement'. Relationships are a 'two-way' dialogue. Only momentarily can they be sustained by one party 'talking at' the other. As with the woman at the party, obsessed by references to herself, the other parties begin to walk-away. In essence, they were not involved and could easily walk-away.

Involvement is based on reciprocal exchange. Reciprocity is a crucial part of any true two-way relationship. What deepens it and allows it to evolve, is an element of gift giving, the act of sharing and 'giving-up' for the benefit of the other party. Not just physical gifts but also time, feelings, emotions. In fact, one of the greatest gifts anyone can give is time.

With a paradigm of 'command and control', it is actually relatively easy for a company to view the customer as an outside party, someone to do something to, to communicate to. And yet, in a conversation or in a more personal relationship on a human level, we

don't talk 'at people' and where we do we recognise we are in danger of people walking away as with the lady at the party. Relationships develop by the two parties meeting in a variety of locations, by each party giving up a part of themselves in the process, revealing a bit more of their personality. Furthermore, a relationship is deepened by giving things up, exchanging gifts of value or of time or of emotion.

In the same way a company needs to develop more than a 'one way' communication and develop a more two-dimensional view that not only has elements of feedback but looks to truly involve customers in a real dialogue. In each 'space' in which the customer touches the organisation, they need to feel this conversation, being able to recognise gifts of emotion, time and effort. This will help engage and deepen the relationship rather than leaving it on a one-way, command and control approach where the customer actually tries to resist or insulate themselves.

### **Influence through Appropriateness**

***"The excellence of a gift lies in its appropriateness rather than in its value"***  
[Charles Dudley Warner, Eleventh Study, 1873]

The second influence is that found through 'appropriateness'. Reciprocal exchange and giving of gifts is one thing but as the quote indicates, the perceived value and influence it has on the receiver has far more to do with its appropriateness than the absolute face value. If you consider your own experience of birthdays and Christmas, or indeed personal relationships, it will ring true that you value gifts of meaning, which resonate with your own personality.

What is appropriateness? How should we think about it? It is best thought of as context – Context is everything. What makes sense and meaning to a person is highly individual – does it make a connection to them at a human level? Any action can only be interpreted in relationship to its individual situation, environment and point in time – its context. Our ability to make sense of decisions and options will vary depending on the situation, on how a variety of influences come together at that particular instance or moment. The context of a decision or of an experience combines a number of 'background' personal factors as well as a number of 'locational' factors such as where and when the experience, the conversation or the decision takes place. In 'Advances in Consumer Research', Belk sets out a number of situational variables that affect consumer behaviour, which he summaries as being the physical setting, the social setting, the temporal perspective, the task definition and their previous antecedent status. Each of these he argues affects the context in which the experience takes place. We used this model directly in research with clients and did indeed find that each has a strong and varying influence across the situations which we tested.

In the last year, we have further refined and developed this approach by developing the Frequency & Resonance model through the Social Laboratory. This model was first used as a means to understand influences on decision making and how these varied in a number of different decision moments. The model has been further tested and used directly with clients, proving to be a strong model of context. The model itself is focused



around five building blocks – these come together at a particular point, at a particular time – through a specific instance.

The Frequency & Resonance model seeks to understand context through analysing how they come together, how they play out as influences on behaviour, decisions and form expectations and perceptions of experience. It is tremendously powerful in being able to force thinking and understanding about the role that context plays and how companies can best find the 'points of influence' – how can they build the appropriate actions, appropriate behaviours that make the most connection with that individual in that instance – i.e. does it 'resonate' – or make a 'connection'.

Each 'touchpoint' or conversation is influenced by these core blocks and can be analysed as such. Together they can be used to describe how the context changes and how the moment can have most 'meaning' or add most value to the individual. It is about finding the most value and then mapping out the most appropriate behaviours and most appropriate actions (or gifts!) that will have most value in that specific context.

### **Influence through Connection**

***"...our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives. For a story to truly hold a child's attention....it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality"***

[Bruno Bettelheim]

Stories have been central to how we have made sense of things and give meaning to our lives for centuries – central to the human art of conversation and relationships is the art of story-telling. We make sense of the world and of events or things – even products and brands - by telling stories. Stories are not just a one-way street, by their very nature they involve a 'cast list', a series of characters and dynamics that evolve with the story. There are different acts, different chapters and as the story is told and re-told, as it is played out with different audiences, the story changes and moves on. One of the powers of story-telling is that they are fluid, dynamic and evolutionary. By their nature, they are not static or one-way. Each version is different to the last, dependent on its setting and the way in which the characters and audience interact.

Relationships evolve in the same way, through a number of episodes that have a common bond, appropriate behaviours and appropriate actions at the right times – a series of appropriate episodes that build to a tapestry that deepens the relationship. As a story has chapters or acts, relationships evolve across a series of episodes or moments. The power of a story is how it resonates with its audience. The most powerful and enduring stories are those that have a form of commonality between teller and recipient, one where the participants are able to form a mutual bond.

For this reason stories are therefore an ideal way of thinking about 'brand relationships', they can be seen as a series of evolving episodes, that combine to provide a relationship (hopefully, if each episode is appropriate, a relationship with meaning!) - a tapestry, an inter-woven dialogue, a story that builds over time.

As we think of the relationship in this way we are recognising that it evolves, that it is dynamic and not fixed and crucially that it involves two parties and has to *have meaning*.

This way of thinking also continues to move us away from the prevailing 'command and control' approach, and begins to build a new dialogue that incorporates the need to influence through first involvement, secondly through appropriateness and finally through connection / meaning. This view is also capable of recognising the influence that stories play back in the individual's social network. As I explained at the beginning, individuals use stories to make sense of things, to help build our own personal identities and explain what we associate with and what we don't. We use stories as a means to developing our own understanding and interpretation of events. In an ever more fluid and unpredictable world, our own social networks play an ever-more important role in this process – word-of-mouth. In talking about brands as developing stories and the need for them to 'make meaning' with individuals, we are also recognising the role that the brand relationship plays in an individual's social network.

## **Implications for Experience Management**

***"To create long-term, two-way relationships, companies must begin to engage with consumers as people and with marketplaces as communities"***  
[John Winsor, Beyond Brand]

The point of consumption now becomes the place of experience. This often is at the point of contact, the point of experience. We must seek to find influence in the moments, influence that is appropriate with two way, reciprocal involvement. The two parties must co-exist in that mutual space for the length of the moment.

Imagine two circles, the organisation in their space and the individual in theirs. Where the moment of touch exists, the crucial question is how close are these two circles? Traditionally, we could characterise them as being joined by a line, by a channel, through which we might 'communicate' a set of messages to the other. I would argue, too much of today's 'customer service', brand thinking and advertising is set on this approach – to do unto the customer.

Perhaps, we've got cleverer, perhaps we could imagine the two circles now being joined by lines going both ways – we've become 'interactive' and allowed messages to be sent both ways. But how much are we actually together? We should instead imagine the two circles as a Venn diagram – how much can we shift the two spaces to overlap – to co-exist?

This 'space' should be seen as an episode and we must therefore understand the appropriateness of the behaviours and actions involved. We must ask questions about the context of the customer space, to understand what influences their behaviour and more importantly how we must act and behave to build mutual benefit and therefore

move the two circles closer together. We must also ask questions to understand what barriers exist within the organisation, what processes, measurements, training etc. are there to either support or stop the organisation acting appropriately, acting as the customer would find most appropriate. What is stopping the organisation circle moving to co-exist with that of the customer.

As we continue this thinking, we must also think about the role of reciprocity – how can our actions and behaviours become *mutual*, how can we create a true two-way dialogue that has benefits on both parts? How can the ‘conversation’ (physical, virtual etc.) be used to exchange and agree mutually beneficial actions?

We must think in terms of the relationship as an evolutionary process, linking each of these episodes together and how together they add most meaning to the individual.

### **Implications for Innovation and Research**

There are also implications for innovation and research processes, which must recognise the need for a ‘true’ two-way dialogue. The customer must be engaged in an ongoing conversation – either during the evolution of the relationship and each episode or as part of a more defined effort to evolve ideas together - a form of ‘co-creation’, helping to engage with individuals and communities.

***“Context is all important as ‘the background conditions change without the researcher being able to state in advance which aspects one should hold constant in order for predictions to operate’”***

[Bent Flyunjerg, Making Social Science Matter, 2001]

***“It’s about inviting the right customers to participate in an open, informed process based on solid guiding principles”***

[John Winsor, Beyond Brand]

We must set the creative process of innovation and research ‘in-situ’, trying to understand the context and the influences around it. We must be looking to understand the story of the customer’s life, how the individual relates to the brand relationship.

***I notice increasing reluctance on the part of marketing executives to use judgement, they are coming to rely too much on research and they use it as a drunkard uses a lamppost – for support, rather than for illumination”***

[David Ogilvy]

Further we must use research intelligently, not just for the sake of creating data points but as a means to inform our judgement. Information is not the same as knowledge. All too often research is commissioned as though it was the data itself that created knowledge. There is a difference – information is indeed the foundation of good knowledge, but information in itself is best thought of as a series of discrete blocks of data, it is how the blocks are put together, how they are explained and related to the



particular situation that develops knowledge. In this way, our judgement is central, building from a variety of different angles and perspectives.

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