Improve the online fashion shopping experience

Poor site navigation, lack of product information, an over-complicated ordering process, over-zealous demands for personal data and technical failure contribute to high online shopping basket abandonment. **Professor Chris Bones** of **Good Growth** uses a typical example from online fashion shopping to highlight the problems and demonstrate best practice to improve the customer experience by ensuring purchase relevance and smooth simplicity

Our work across the globe suggests that a significant proportion of customers feel let down by online shopping journeys – so much so that, of those who look at a product page, 95% do not buy. At a time when everyone is talking about customer experience, is anyone really doing anything significant about it for online shopping? If anecdotal evidence from friends and family over the peak period from Black Friday to the New Year sales is to be believed, the answer to that question may well be 'no'.

More significant from an empirical perspective is our experience over the past

12 months which demonstrates how much value there is still to be captured from doing nothing more than understanding customer frustration and investing in testing alternative experiences to try to address it.

In 2017 across a range of sectors, the problems that customers played back to us suggest a few common themes that continue to frustrate them as they look to buy products and services. According to the work we have completed for multiple global brands, 45% of people had difficulty finding products online, 19% cited low stock availability, and 11% a poorly designed product page as a major frustration. Technical issues hindered purchases for up to 30% of people, with 11% blaming unclear or unattractive delivery terms, as the reason they abandoned the transaction. Ten per cent of people said that their purchase was thwarted by substandard site navigation, with 6% pointing to a lack of available product information. Interestingly, only 9% blame the price of the items as the reason behind prematurely ending the purchase cycle.

That 45% of users fail to buy because they cannot find a desired product represents a significant lost opportunity and also suggests that the current 'best practice' approach to serving thousands of products to users through hundreds of categories and sub-categories isn't working. Having worked extensively in fashion, we can confirm that as far as the vast majority of online customers are concerned, over-segmentation (e.g. smart jeans, casual jeans) is a frustration.

That we frequently find technical issues to be a major cause of failures suggests that e-commerce retailers may be focusing on technological innovation over the essential activity of maintaining basic site functionality. It's no good having the latest gizmo if the basics don't work.

There are many organisations that talk a good game but fall some way short of our expectations. Having worked over the past six years with brands including *The Economist*,

GAME, Odeon/UCI, Fitness First, Virgin Active, L.K.Bennett, JD Williams, *Financial Times*, Channel 4, Time Inc., Regus and BUPA, we have been exposed to a considerable amount of customer feedback from all over the globe. From this experience, we can tell you a story of customer engagement against which you can judge how your current online execution matches up.

MAEVE'S MOMENT OF MADNESS – A CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE FAIRYTALE

Maeve is looking for a gift for her partner Lesley. She's looking for a jumper and because she wants to start with a range of potential choices, she starts by searching on Google. (Despite the hype about apps and social media, just under 0.6 billion searches that lead to a customer landing on a website for the largest 150 retailers are carried out in the UK every month. That's 9.1 searches for every UK resident per month (using the ONS figures for UK population from 2016).)

She starts on her smartphone (on our all-client index, traffic to websites from smartphones now sits at around 50% of all traffic to websites). She clicks the link for a smart-looking blue cashmere cardigan from a retailer from whom she's previously bought successful clothing items for Lesley; this puts her, however, on a page that displays a range of women's fashion items. She then spends five minutes looking for cardigans in the specific style and colour she saw displayed in the search results and fails. The site is image-heavy and takes ages to load, so she's now frustrated and losing connectivity. She stops searching and makes a mental note to look when she gets home.

At home and on her tablet (on our all-client database, desktop/laptop/tablet users are twice as likely to be actively shopping compared to those on smartphones), it's back to Google and a classic search for the

retailer's site takes her to the home page. Knowing what she wants, she explores the navigation options but can't find cashmere cardigans. She tries the search engine, but it produces nothing apart from a helpful assertion that she made a mistake and could try spelling cardigans correctly. An extended piece of forensic detective work enables her to stumble upon the product by accident. The retailer tells her this is a cashmere short woollen jacket-style jumper; clearly, she should have known this.

The product page was organised to help someone looking for a size 10 pink short woollen jacket-style jumper make an easy purchase. A size 14 blue one becomes a battle of wits, especially when Maeve wants to understand whether it is washable. As she clicks on the add-to-basket button, the site then takes her off into a world of additional products recommended for her in a thoughtful and personalised way: she was unmoved by the Kim Kardashian scent on promotion and thought she understood why she was being recommended to buy a new handbag though

didn't want it, but the recommendation for a set of bath towels, a chandelier and erotic soap were just random. (Our research shows 95% of customers bail out at the product page stage of an online journey.)

So Maeve, still apprehensive about the washability of the cardigan (yes, she was still insisting on calling it that), but confident that Lesley would love it, set off to check out. This started by insisting that she opened an account she will probably never use again and then offered her a comprehensive form to complete, enabling the retailer to fill in every field on their expensive and underutilised CRM software. The payment process put her in a circle of death where she missed several hidden required items and every time she put one right she was required to enter nearly every important thing again.

Exhausted, Maeve felt at least that she had avoided wasting her lunchtime at work and could now let the delivery process take the strain. She had hoped for completion too soon. You see, the retailer had chosen a courier that didn't offer any flexibility and wanted her

to stay in all day to receive it, as they insisted on making it a 'sign for' parcel. As a result, the parcel isn't delivered and the redelivery options that didn't require her to stay at home were completely inconvenient, including heading for the depot some 24 miles away from her house.

When it finally arrived, she discovered that it was too small and to return it required her to take it to a collection point some eight miles from home. Despite this, within an hour of it being delivered, she was sent an email asking for a product review and another some hours later asking for a review of the courier. She did look for an opportunity to give a simple feedback to both, however the 35-question email from the retailer seemed a rather big ask for an item she ultimately didn't want. These emails continued for some weeks afterwards until she finally unsubscribed out of sheer irritation.

That week she went to the shops and bought the cardigan she wanted: it took her 10 minutes and the shop assistant called it a cardigan.

So, what does good customer experience look like?

In order to deliver a customer experience that actually meets the needs of the customer, businesses should first target customer interest. Amazon is the master of this – using specific searches, directed to a specific page.

Landing pages are also vital in terms of starting customers off on the purchase cycle, with Apple paving the way here. For most people, shopping is intuitive, and it is necessary for businesses to provide effective navigation (think John Lewis), a search function that actually helps the customer find what they are looking for (Argos), and product pages that deliver (L.K.Bennett).

Again, Amazon is leading the way when it comes to ease of payment, with a frictionless checkout that forbids the CRM system from driving the deal. Delivery should also be high on the agenda post payment, including a hassle-free courier service (think DPD) and easy handling of returns (Boden).
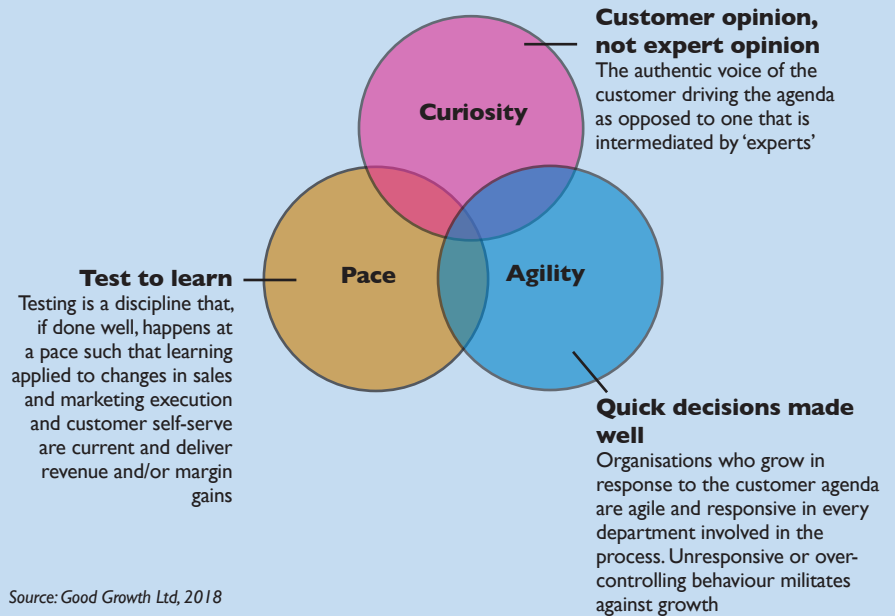
Ultimately, an organisation needs to form a lasting relationship with its customers and not solely look for their approval. JD Williams excels at new customer engagement, while eBay is known for effectively handling reviews and referrals. French Connection offers its customers simple, open feedback forms which enables them to act on the feedback they receive.

There are some agencies out there claiming that the answer to improving customer experience is personalisation. We believe that the key word is relevance. You cannot personalise for people you don't know. Actually, it's pretty difficult to personalise for people you do know – after all, how many of us have actually bought something recommended to us by Amazon or any other site where we can arrive as a known quantity? The cost of personalisation is significant and unless you have very significant scale, you may well not recoup the investment in the substantial modelling that is required.

Generating a return on personalisation investment is further complicated by recurring patterns of customer behaviour. While users may visit multiple times before transacting, the preference of guest checkout, particularly for smaller retailers, restricts the ability to capture user details.

In addition, much of personalisation relies on the logic that because I bought

FIGURE 1: THE THREE PILLARS OF A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC CULTURE

Customer opinion, not expert opinion
The authentic voice of the customer driving the agenda as opposed to one that is intermediated by 'experts'

Curiosity

Test to learn
Testing is a discipline that, if done well, happens at a pace such that learning applied to changes in sales and marketing execution and customer self-serve are current and deliver revenue and/or margin gains

Pace

Agility

Quick decisions made well
Organisations who grow in response to the customer agenda are agile and responsive in every department involved in the process. Unresponsive or over-controlling behaviour militates against growth

Source: Good Growth Ltd, 2018

'x' last time, I want to buy 'y' this time. Or even 'because I told you a year ago I was interested in 'x', I am still as interested'. These assumptions come with significant risk: all you know is something from a point in time; you know nothing about any subsequent sales engagement. In fact, customers are more likely to respond to a simpler nudge based on relevance – the sharing of what others actually bought in addition to the item they have put in their basket. Amazon is reported as attributing 35% of its revenue to their smart algorithms that link what other customers did to your interest.

What will make you an authentic customer experience leader in 2018? Simply put, getting your organisation to become obsessed about the customer, not the sale. To lead in customer experience means you have to start and finish with the customer: they should inform all that you do, set the agenda for ideas to test, and their feedback should drive innovation.

To do this requires a customer-centric culture. Our research suggests that what drives this is are three things: Curiosity, Pace and Agility (Figure 1). Breaking this down into behaviours that make a difference, we have created a culture measure for digital

organisations that looks to identify the gaps that need closing in order to ensure the customer, and their experience, are front and centre in what you do. So, curiosity should incorporate methodical, data-driven results that put the customer front and centre. Agility should prioritise commercial value and enable rapid change through measuring input. Pace needs to be based on a test-and-learn strategy, with acceptance that there may be failures along the way.

There is no silver bullet to transforming customer experience, but digital does give organisations the opportunity to build insight quickly and cheaply. This then allows the testing of ideas in real time and on real customers to find ways of unlocking value.

The year 2018 promises to be an equally torrid one for many businesses across a range of sectors. Investing in the above approach, as opposed to additional technology, can create value and ensure that, as new technology is introduced, it has a better chance of achieving its promised rewards.