Aligning a Digital Marketing Strategy with the Consumer Decision Journey:

Applications for Small Business Start-Ups

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to utilize empirical research to recommend the most effective digital media channels to create a consumer decision journey (CDJ) driven digital marketing strategy for a small business or start up. A digital marketing plan was created for a small business based on the results of this study which will be used as a case study for how to align a digital marketing strategy with the CDJ model. An online survey employing quantitative and qualitative questions revealed digital media channels were in general preferred over traditional or offline channels throughout the CDJ. In addition, results from the study revealed the most effective digital marketing channels the subject brand should utilize at each phase of the CDJ. The digital marketing strategies included social media, customer review generation, search engine marketing, display advertising, and content marketing.

Introduction

If a business is trying to improve sales or build a brand, it must begin to think less from the perspective of the business and more like a consumer. The consumer journey involves micro-moments leading up to and following a purchase where the brand has an opportunity to interact with the consumer. This includes different touchpoints through marketing and advertising, customer service, delivery and shipping, product or service quality, and many other aspects. How can a business get into the mind of a consumer? A business should aim to control all of the different touchpoints a consumer may have with their brand and understand how these touchpoints create an experience for the consumer with their brand.

EMarketer forecasts that 2019 US digital ad spending will surpass traditional ad spending. By 2023, digital will surpass two-thirds of total media spending . "The steady shift of consumer attention to digital platforms has hit an inflection point with advertisers, forcing them to now turn to digital to seek the incremental gains in reach and revenues which are disappearing in traditional media advertising" ("US Digital Ad Spending Will Surpass Traditional in 2019", 2019). This project examines how businesses can improve the consumer journey by gaining an understanding of how their customers interact with their brand through digital media channels. Offline touchpoints and advertising through traditional forms of media are and will remain important channels for brands to reach and interact with their customers. The purpose of this project, however, will focus only on digital media channels and how a brand can best utilize these digital media channels in their marketing strategy to achieve their business goals. The outputs of this project acknowledge when the results deem that an offline channel may be preferred over a digital channel.

The following review of literature supports the fact that the emergence of new digital media has altered the consumer journey greatly compared to the traditional sales funnel used in marketing. The literature review examines in depth a new model for the consumer journey along with research advocating for the use of certain digital media channels throughout different phases of the consumer journey. However, there have been few empirical research studies on which digital media channels are recommended at each phase of the consumer journey. The literature also shows a need for a case study consumer-driven marketing strategy for small businesses or start-ups.

Literature Review

While digital media and online advertising have been around since the late 1990s, newer forms of digital media have emerged in recent years that present uncharted opportunities and challenges for marketers. The McKinsey & Company Consumer Decision Journey (CDJ), introduced in 2009, recognized that the traditional marketing funnel had evolved. The explosion of media and available products in the market required marketers to find new ways to get their brands included in the initial-consideration set that consumers develop on their own as they begin their decision journey. Instead of a linear path to purchase in the traditional marketing funnel metaphor, digital channels have created a circular decision-making process with an active evaluation phase where consumers are gathering information and research on their own (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009).

Building upon the foundation of the McKinsey CDJ, Google and Shopping Sciences introduced the concept of the Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT). ZMOT is a moment when you grab your laptop, mobile phone or some other internet connected device and start learning about

a product or service you're thinking about trying or buying ("Winning the Zero Moment of Truth", 2011). Essentially it is the individual research consumers perform every day through the power of the internet such as a Google search, Amazon product reviews, or YouTube video reviews. These micro moments have changed the customer buying decision journey and allowed word of mouth marketing to be achieved digitally ("Winning the Zero Moment of Truth", 2011).

Due to the technological advancements that allow for a more informed consumer, digital marketing channels such as search engine marketing (SEM), social media, email marketing, and display advertising have become important and valuable tools to brands and marketers. Before the introduction of the internet and social media platforms, television was one of the main platform marketers used to advertise to the masses (Council, 2018). Marketers now have the capability to both advertise to the masses as well as to specific targeted audiences through digital marketing channels such as search engines, social media networks, and mobile applications.

The New Consumer Decision Journey

For years touch points on a consumer's path to purchase or decision have been understood through the analogy of a funnel (Court et al, 2009). In Figure 1, the idea of the marketing funnel is represented by the fact that consumers followed a linear progression through various phases on the path to purchase. Consumers start with a number of potential brands in mind during the awareness phase, then marketing is directed at them as they methodically reduce that number until they emerge at the end with the one brand they choose to purchase (Court et al, 2009). This traditional funnel model is well-known as the "purchase funnel" or the "hierarchy-of-effects" model. In the funnel methodology only a small portion of consumers who have engaged with the brand will be moved to action (Avery & Teixeira, 2018).
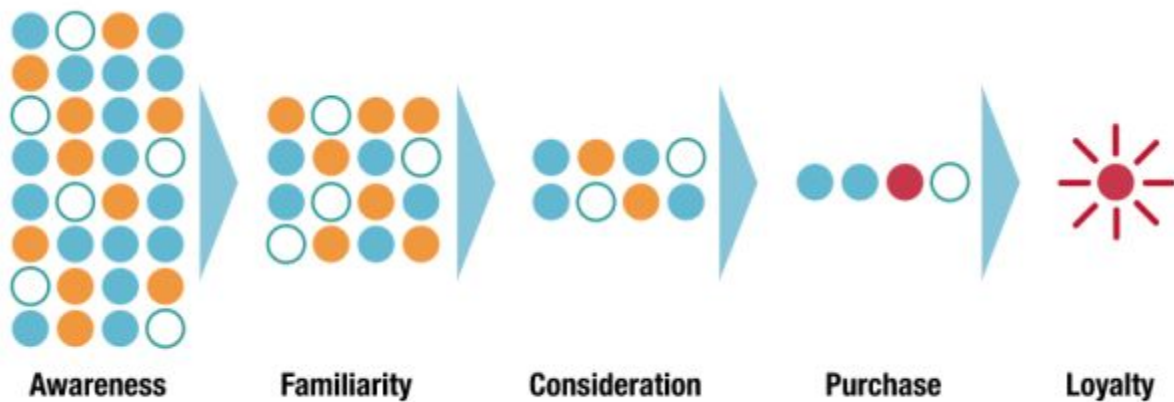
Figure 1 (Court et al, 2009)

The purchase funnel is outdated and ill-equipped to handle all of the touch points that now weigh into a consumer's purchase decision (Ling, 2012). Brand marketers could have never foreseen the touch points that now exist due to the internet revolution. With the proliferation of online sources it has become relatively easy for customers to gain more up to date information about the products and/or services before they make their purchase decision. Customers can now validate the claims of companies related to the products/services beforehand, which has created a new touch point for brands to communicate with customers (Ind & Riondino, 2001).

The McKinsey & Company consumer decision journey model accounts for new touch points that exist outside of the purchase funnel. Researchers examined the purchase decisions of almost 20,000 consumers across five industries and three continents. Their research found that the combination of new digital media channels, accessible products, and the emergence of an increasingly well-informed consumer demanded a new circular journey to model the consumer decision-making process. The circular journey model has four phases: (1) initial-consideration; (2) active evaluation, or the process of researching potential purchases; (3) moment of purchase; (4) postpurchase, when consumers experience them (Figure 2). Attribution modeling is an

analytics model used to understand the steps a customer takes before converting by assigning credit to digital channel touch points along the customer journey (Kurzer, 2019). Analyzing actual consumer paths to purchase through various attribution models has shown that consumers often go through complex, long, and interacting steps before conversion and purchase, consistent with the decision-making process of the CDJ (Batra & Keller, 2016).

David Edelman, the co-leader of McKinsey & Company's digital marketing strategy group, stated a CDJ-driven strategy has three parts: (1) understanding the consumer journey;(2) determining which touchpoints are priorities and how to leverage them; (3) allocating resources accordingly. Instead of focusing on how to allocate spending across media channels marketers should target stages in the decision journey (Edelman, 2010). To put a CDJ-driven marketing strategy into practice brands must have a thorough understanding of their consumer's behaviors. A major benefit of digital marketing is the massive amount of data collection that can be analyzed and interpreted to further define a brand's target audience. Brand's should use this digital data coupled with consumer research to build out their target audiences or create marketing personas. Marketing personas or sometimes referred to as buyer personas are fictional, generalized representations of the ideal customer. Personas help a brand relate to consumers as real humans going far beyond just demographic and behavioral data, introducing attributes such as motivations, fears, challenges, goals and more (Vaughan, 2018). The remaining literature will examine research on how consumers use new digital media and the best channels marketers should utilize to target consumers during the decision-making process.

Trigger and Initial-Consideration

At the beginning of the CDJ the consumer has identified a need for a product or service and has an initial set of brands that are in their consideration set (Ling, 2012). Before identifying this need for a service or product there is a trigger which motivates a consumer's impulse to buy. The impulse to buy can be triggered by various touchpoints. Interaction with peers triggers new customer needs (often for niche and highly personalized products) and alters buying attitudes (Mehta & Kaushik, 2015). A trigger can ultimately be described as the point in the CDJ when the consumer recognizes that they have an unmet need or want and begins to think about what kinds of products or services might satisfy it (Barta & Keller, 2016). An example could be an individual setting a New Year's resolution goal to take their health and fitness more serious and join a gym in order to get in the best shape of their life. At this point in the CDJ the consumer would then move into the initial-consideration phase as they begin to consider and then evaluate different options to satisfy their needs.
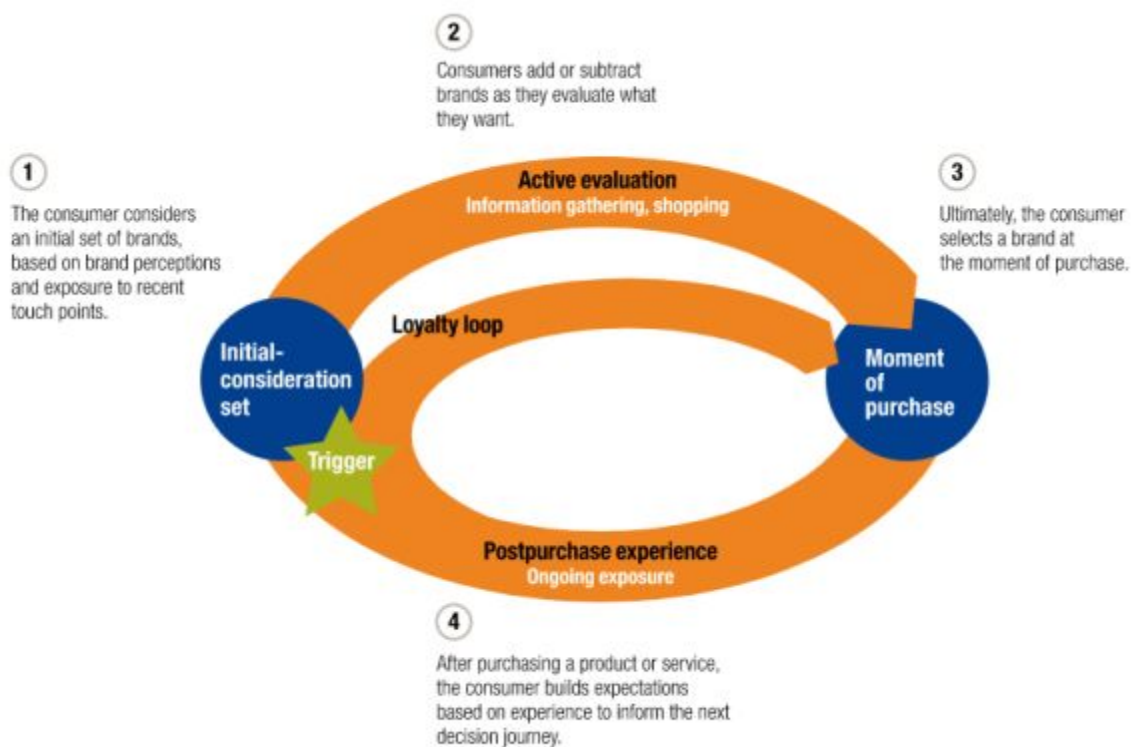

Figure 2 (Court et al, 2009)

The initial-consideration set phase at the beginning of the CDJ loop is similar to the awareness phase of the traditional marketing funnel. The difference, however, is that during the initial-consideration set phase the consumer is the one seeking out information. Rather than marketing being driven by the brand or "pushed" on consumers through traditional advertising, direct marketing, sponsorships, and other channels. Consumer-driven marketing means consumers seize control of the process and actively "pull" information helpful to them through new digital media channels (Mirchevska & Markova, 2011). Consumers do not necessarily passively receive brand information strictly through legacy mass media such as print or TV and store it in memory for later use. Rather, they now actively seek it when needed, through search engines, mobile browsers, blogs, and brand websites (Barta & Keller, 2016).

Brand awareness still matters as brands in the initial-consideration set can be up to three times more likely to be purchased eventually than brands that aren't in it (Court et al. 2009). Many communications objectives focus on creating general brand awareness, especially for new brands and products or services. Consumers are often very good at avoiding marketing, especially in their initial-consideration of product choices. To capture attention, therefore, marketing communications need to deliver engaging and useful content to consumers in convenient places at appropriate times (Avery & Teixeira, 2018).

Research indicates there are multiple digital marketing channels effective in raising brand awareness to be included in the initial-consideration set. The channel(s) selected for brand marketing strategy will influence how the audience resonates with that product or service, thus it is important to take into account the consumption habits of the target audience (Nechita, 2018). In 2016, Barta and Keller created a seminal comprehensive framework on integrating marketing

communications across the CDJ. Their conceptual framework will serve as a foundation for this study to determine the most effective digital marketing channels at each stage of the CDJ through empirical research. Barta and Keller's research proposed that search advertising and display ads are the vehicles best suited for raising brand awareness and salience. The brand needs to be highly visible during the consumer's initial-consideration phase through organic search and paid search ads, retargeted display and banner ads, and targeted social media paid ads. "For example, the obstacle- course brand 'Tough Mudder' targeted Facebook ads to consumers who were already into extreme sports, making them aware that this kind of product could meet their need for extreme sports" (Barta & Keller, 2016, p. 133).

Additional research argues that social media channels, beyond just targeted display ads, are the most effective approach to boosting brand awareness (Mirchevska & Markova, 2011). Marketers have several options within the social media landscape for branding including placing paid display advertising, participating in social networks as a brand persona, developing branded engagement opportunities for customer participation within social networks, and publishing branded content (known as content marketing or social publishing) in social channels (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Nechita suggests that building the brand online means, above all, building the social media brand. Utilizing influencers on social media is becoming more and more frequent and successful, particularly in niche communities (landscaping tools, beauticians, photographers, fitness fans, etc.). By associating the brand with influential personas or other brands in the field, brands can more quickly create a reputation and contribute to brand awareness. Influencers help create a domino effect of potential new customers becoming familiar with the brand (Nechita, 2018).

Rutz and Bucklin conducted a study in paid search advertising that supports Barta and Keller's assumptions that search advertising is a highly effective channel for brand awareness. Rutz and Bucklin ran a paid search campaign for a major lodging chain to discover that generic search activity such as "hotels" positively affects future branded search such as "Hilton hotels" through awareness of relevance. This demonstrates that by paying for search ads to be associated with non-branded search queries, brands can raise their overall brand awareness with the consumer. Research supports that non-brand paid search along with display advertising throughout the web and on social media networks tend to be the strongest tactics to reach the consumer during the initial-consideration set phase.

Active Evaluation

At the click of a computer mouse, consumers today have access to a previously unknown reservoir of information and knowledge as well as unlimited choice (Mehta & Kaushik, 2015). Contrary to the funnel metaphor, the number of brands under consideration during the active-evaluation phase may now actually expand rather than narrow as consumers seek information and shop a category. Brands may "interrupt" the decision-making process by entering into consideration and even force the exit of rivals (Court et al, 2009). Especially in cases when marketing a new brand, product, or service, there isn't a lot of experience so more attention should be spent on the active evaluation phase. Brands should focus on getting out there in a 'consider' phase, seeding people to somewhat experience it so they can create material that other people will evaluate (Ling, 2012). Research in creating the McKinsey CDJ discovered that two-thirds of the touch points during the active-evaluation phase involve consumer-driven marketing activities, such as internet reviews and word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations

from friends and family. The epicenter of consumer-driven marketing is the internet, crucial during the active-evaluation phase as consumers seek information, reviews, and recommendations (Court et al, 2009).

As more buyers move online to educate themselves on the market and available products, marketers ability to guide them through a sales process diminishes. "Today's buyer is in control, has access to numerous high-quality sources of information, and goes through a "buying process" at his or her own pace" (Mehta & Kaushik, 2015, p. 41). For this reason, it is crucial for online marketers to also guide, influence, and help inform the opinions and reputation of the brand through digital channels. Earned media and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communications are sometimes used interchangeably in the industry. eWOM communications can be expressed in different forms online such as opinions, ratings, feedback, reviews, comments, and experience sharing on the internet (Mishra & Satish, 2016). eWOM utilizes digital channels such as blogs, review sites (yelp.com), discussion forums (reddit.com), online e-retailers (Amazon.com, bestbuy.com), the brand's own website or product sites, and social networking sites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) (Mishra & Satish, 2016).

Earned media is a form of WOM communication shared via social channels that represents a valuable resource for brands. Social media can be a strong channel for forming opinions and reputation online. The average network size among social users, ease of spreading information within and across social networks, and the credibility associated with information shared consumer-to-consumer contribute to the value of social WOM communication (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Social media can prime a consumer's interest for an advertising message in another medium, or vice versa. Having multiple sources of the same message can also improve

message credibility and confidence in the advertised product (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Across

brands and for any one brand, consumers may backtrack, skip steps, or implicitly or explicitly

choose to reject the brand (Barta & Keller, 2016). Thus, it is vital to have an integrated digital

marketing strategy across channels.

Barta and Keller's research suggests that once again search engine marketing is a

successful channel during the active evaluation phase. As consumers are seeking to learn more

about various brand options that are capable of satisfying their needs, their search may include

visits to the brand's own website or third-party review websites. To further substantiate a brand's

claims, an information seeking consumer could utilize objective, third-party testing or

endorsements and testimonials from current and past customers (as in published reviews), friends

(via Facebook posts, e-mails, or personal conversations), or perceived experts or celebrities (via

ads, blog posts, tweets) (Barta & Keller, 2016). During this active evaluation phase brands

should look to add value to customers doing research or comparison shopping via search

engines. This could be done by serving serving search ads that optimize to display a business' or

product's reviews and direct the user to a landing page where they can read testimonials of users

who have used this product or service.

Beyond utilizing search engine marketing Barta and Keller determined a brand's own

website could serve as the vehicle most well suited for communication a brand's value

proposition. An integrated digital marketing strategy utilizing social media, search engine

marketing, and owned website channels would perhaps be most effective to reach consumers and

guide their research during the active evaluation phase.

Moment of Purchase

By targeting the consumer throughout their decision journey at their different stages, marketers can build brand awareness and consideration. The goal is to optimize consumer engagement—that is, the cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral investment consumers make in positively interacting with a brand. Brands secure this all-important consumer engagement by developing and disseminating relevant communications that will resonate with consumers and, ultimately, increase sales (Avery & Teixeira, 2018). Even though the CDJ has changed, the ultimate end-goal for all marketing objectives should be to influence the consumer's decision at the moment of purchase.

While evaluating which digital channels may be best suited to reach a brands target audience throughout their decision journey, brand's need to also account for the creative strategy that drives decision over others. Ashley and Tuten employed a content analysis of the creative strategies present in social media content shared by a sample of top brands. This study revealed that most brands utilized social content that can be categorized as functional messages (the utility of the product/service). However, their content analysis also found that strategies associated with customer engagement tended to be experiential (how consumers will experience sight, sound, taste, touch, smell); user image (consumer aspirations; i.e. "you deserve it"); and exclusivity (invitation only—only some people qualify—limited time—limited quantity) messages (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). In a previous study, the most important decision motivators were found to be entertainment (need for escapism, hedonism, aesthetic enjoyment, emotion); informativeness (need for resources and helpful information); and irritation (a demotivator, so consumers need to avoid distractions, anxiety, and things that dilute human experiences) (Luo, 2002).

Another creative strategy unique to digital marketing channels that helps motivate decision making is personalization. Personalization entails customer-oriented marketing strategies that customize and deliver individualized messages to the right person at the right time (Tam and Ho, 2006). In a 2018 research paper analyzing online relationship marketing, the authors concluded that online brand-consumer relationships are more personalized compared to offline brand-consumer relationships. Massive smartphone penetration rates have allowed marketers to advance their online marketing strategies through increased personalization, based on geotargeting or location-based marketing (Steinhoff, Arli, Weaven, and Kozlenkova, 2018). Barta and Keller claim mobile is the best channel for pushing persuaded consumers to action. Analyzing past research, the authors conclude when and where consumers use a mobile phone to shop has been shown to have important implications for how they shop (e.g., proximity to physical stores for a brand, physical presence of other brand users). Mobile consumers have been shown to be more likely to go directly to a retailer's site or app than to use a search engine and make purchases more by impulse than by product features. In addition, mobile ads and coupons tend to be more effective when personalized (Barta & Keller, 2016).

While making their purchasing decisions consumers frequently rely on other peoples' decisions (like friends, family, acquaintances, etc.). They listen to their recommendations, suggestions, and personal advice. New digital media channels have allowed the WOM conversation to move online. These recommendations, reviews, suggestions, advice of friends, acquaintances, family etc., which have always been important in the buying decision process of consumers have been amplified. Seventy-eight percent of consumers trust recommendations from other consumers (Trust in Advertising- a Global Nielsen Consumer Report, October 2007).

Examining case studies of different viral marketing techniques within social media, Kalpakcioglu & Toros (2011) found that digital WOM or eWOM marketing through the internet can spread more widely and much faster at significantly lower cost as compared to most if not all traditional methods.

In a study on the effectiveness of multimedia advertising for a chain of department stores, Danaher & Dagger (2013) found that specifically for digital media options, only email and sponsored Google search had an influence on purchase outcomes. Barta & Keller (2016) support the use of paid search ads as the most effective channel for influencing the moment of purchase phase as well. Analyzing past research, the authors conclude because consumers who search for less popular keywords expend more effort in their search for information and are closer to a purchase, they can be more easily targeted through sponsored search advertising. Higher positions of paid search ads can increase both the click-through rates and, especially, the conversion rates.

Postpurchase Experience

The postpurchase experience phase goes far beyond the traditional concept of brand loyalty. It shapes consumers' opinions for every subsequent decision in the category, so the journey is an ongoing cycle (Court et al, 2009). More than 60% of consumers of facial skin care products go online to conduct further research after the purchase — a touchpoint unimaginable when the traditional funnel was conceived (Court et al, 2009). Gupta, Laddha, & Singh (2017) conducted research to understand the new parameters in the CDJ and to evaluate which channel consumers are using for recommendation to their friends, family and colleagues. In the conventional process, after the purchase the relationship with the brand is focused mainly on the

use of the product. Since the time of internet evolution, this process has changed radically. Now consumers want to share their experience online after buying the product and it has created new parameters of brand advocacy and brand bonding. Repeat purchases only occur if the consumer feels highly satisfied with their purchase and the brand's ongoing communications. Brands can also utilize digital media for internal employee communications that improve the quality of their customer interactions, such as internal YouTube channels (e.gl., Best Buy's "Blue Shirt Nation") (Barta & Keller, 2016).

Barta & Keller's (2016) framework states that social media is the best for creating preference and later loyalty. Branded social campaigns provide additional touch-points to encourage ongoing interaction between the consumer and the brand story throughout the day, which can deepen consumer–brand relationships, help marketers uncover common themes in consumer feedback, and persuade consumers to engage with online content (Murdough, 2009). The utilization of social networking sites and digital WOM encourages high advocacy rates, so marketers need to focus more on these channels in order to get competitive advantage (Gupta et al, 2017). Brand advocates, commonly referred to as influencers, actively tell others about their experience with the brand and their associated lifestyle. Brand advocates or influencers are an indicator of customer value and the basis for WOM which is widely accepted and acknowledged as more efficient than other promotional tools (Gupta et al, 2017). Interaction with peers, such as influencers or brand advocates, triggers new customer needs (often for niche and highly personalized products) and alters buying attitudes.

Customer preferences and decisions are increasingly based on inputs provided by parties beyond the control of online marketers: peer reviews, referrals, blogs, tagging, social networks,

online forums and other forms of user generated content (Mehta & Kaushik, 2015). Social media has become an essential communication tool and the ability to participate in two-way conversations with consumers and build communities is unique to the channel. The two-way interaction in social media may give brands/companies better engagement control and allow them to react quickly to market developments (Shen & Bissell, 2013). Participation in an online community leads consumers to believe that they will receive reciprocal support from other members should they face difficulties in the future (Steinhoff et al, 2018). The authors suggest that brands need to focus on providing relevant content that offers value and enhances the customer experience. Additionally, brands could employ a systematic approach to encourage influential customers to engage in favorable WOM communications. Brands can make it easier to get their consumers to recommend the brand to others through Facebook likes, (re)tweets, viral branded content, Instagram, etc. (Barta & Keller, 2016).

Email should also be strongly considered as a channel for communicating with consumers during the postpurchase experience. The Return on Investment (ROI) on email marketing is approximately 700% to 900%. The facts that the open rate of email marketing is around 20% to 30%, that 90% of internet users access email, and that half of them use it on a daily basis make the channel a vital one (Wertime & Fermer, 2008). The rate at which emails prompt purchases has been estimated to be at least three times that of social media, and the average order value has been estimated to be 17% higher (Barta & Keller, 2016). Appropriate media at this stage for "purchase reinforcement" messaging might be a postpurchase email or retargeted banner or display ads on social media networks. Brands can also increase the

frequency and amount of consumption, as well as cross-selling and up-selling through targeted discount offers to existing customers via these digital marketing channels (Barta & Keller, 2016).

Implications for Start-Ups

New forms of digital media allow for brands to be taken directly to the consumer with digital marketing campaigns that resonate on a personal level in a more economical way (Mehta & Kaushik, 2015). Due to oftentimes limited funding and marketing budgets, start-ups and new businesses should consider digital marketing channels first for cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Startups have an extremely high mortality rate, often due to a lack of strategic planning, wrong marketing investments or inefficient resource allocation. Promotion and marketing in general is widely considered as the key to the survival, development and success of small or new ventures (Avino, Simone, Iannucci, and Schiraldi, 2015). Further, it may be more cost-effective and efficient to focus on certain phases of the CDJ as well. David Edelman explains "yet when we do the research, the more powerful places where influence tends to happen is at the top and the bottom of the map, in the 'evaluate' stage, when people are doing research and they are actually sampling what is out there about the brand" (Ling, 2012).

In many companies, different parts of the organization undertake specific customer-facing activities—including informational websites, PR, and loyalty programs. Funding is opaque. A number of executives are responsible for each element, and they don't coordinate their work or even communicate. These activities must be integrated and given appropriate leadership (Court et al, 2009). Start-ups and small business can take advantage by being nimble and coordinating their customer-facing activities more easily. Consumers' perceptions of a brand during the decision journey have always been important, but the

phenomenal reach, speed and interactivity of digital touch points makes close attention to the

brand experience essential and requires an executive-level steward. At many start-ups the

founder brings to this role the needed vision and the power to enforce it (Edelman, 2010).

Marketers ultimately only care about achieving their communication goals and moving

consumers along in their decision journey—any means of communications that would facilitate

those goals should be considered (Barta & Keller, 2016). Unlike traditional advertising methods,

digital ad campaigns can be deployed and optimized quickly. If one channel isn't performing

well, it's easy to turn off. If another is excelling, it's easy to double down. By looking at the data,

marketers can make agile moves to spend more on what's working and cut what isn't working

(Sofia, 2019).

Research Questions

1. Which digital media channels do consumers prefer to interact with during the

   initial-consideration phase?

2. Which digital media channels do consumers prefer during the active evaluation phase?

3. Which digital media channels are most ideal for driving a consumer decision?

4. How do consumers prefer to interact with brands during the postpurchase experience

   phase?

Method

The ultimate goal of this project is to develop a consumer decision journey driven

strategic digital marketing plan for a local small business. The digital marketing plan will be

used as a case study for my own future potential digital marketing consultancy. My client in this

case will be a local micro-gym which focus on mixed-martial arts style of training. During the

course of this project the client decided to close their doors and rebrand the micro-gym with a heavier focus on fitness and recovery due to a poor first two years of business. The timing of this pivot in business model for the client represented a unique opportunity for this study to examine the consumers wants and needs in the fitness industry rather than the wants and needs of the business itself.

Proposed stimulus: Due to a saturated fitness market in the Charlotte, NC region, a new brand with little to no awareness, as well as limited funding for marketing, their business has been unable to cut through the noise to reach consumers. According to the business owners they are only at 40% of their two-year membership goal. Surveys were conducted to inform the digital marketing plan and determine which digital marketing channels are best suited at each phase of the CDJ for the client's target audience. The digital marketing plan is a written document describing which digital marketing channels and tactics are recommended to reach the client's target audience and to help achieve their business objectives. Sections of the marketing plan are broken out by each phase of the CDJ. Each section also includes the recommended digital marketing channel for that phase, tactical strategy, targeting parameters, type of creative content, example or mock-up marketing collateral and key performance indicators to measure success. An additional output included in the CDJ driven strategic digital marketing plan includes a visual representation of the consumer journey in the form of a consumer journey map (CJM).

Sampling: Subjects for this study were selected based on a convenience sample because it is imperative that the sample has a familiarity with local micro-gyms to understand what about this type of service offering intrigued them to explore it further or what may have turned them away from ultimately making a purchase. The convenience sample was an email listserv including 156

emails consisting of any current or former members of the micro-gym, as well as any customers who attended a single class or signed-up for a free trial class. To increase participation, respondents were offered a chance to win a $100 Visa gift card.

Measures: The sample received a link to a Qualtrics online survey with questions designed to provide insight into preferred consumption of marketing messages through various digital media channels. The questionnaire is attached in the appendix. The questions are a mix of open and closed-ended questions assessing attitudes and opinions about digital marketing media and the fitness industry. In addition, open-ended questions ask for additional insight into the types of marketing messages and content respondents prefer.

Procedures & Analysis: Two days prior to the survey becoming available, an introductory email was sent to the subject list requesting their participation in this study and notifying them that they will be receiving a link to Qualtrics survey via email and directions on how to complete the survey. On the survey launch date, a reminder email was sent to let the subject list know the survey was available and that they would have one week to complete the survey. Drafts of both emails are included in this proposal in the appendix. To analyze the survey responses, I have utilized the automated data outputs provided by Qualtrics. Looking at frequencies and percentages, as well as other outputs such as the "word cloud" tool I will be able to determine the digital marketing channels and content that the client's audience prefers through each stage of the CDJ.

Results

Completed surveys were received from 26 participants, representing 17% of those recruited. Participants were evenly represented by gender, 54% female and 46% male. The breakdown of age is overwhelmingly young with 77% of participants between the ages of 25-34. Income data also skewed high with 50% of participants having a household income of $100,000 or higher. This could indicate the target audience for the fitness industry would be a younger more affluent audience. The survey questionnaire was designed to answer the stated research questions and determine the ideal digital media channels to be utilized in marketing to reach consumers at each stage of the CDJ.

Quantitative: The first research question sought to answer which digital media channels consumers prefer to interact with during the initial-consideration phase? To answer this question, I examined responses to the question that asked participants to consider how they first found out about their current fitness fitness facility/gym. This question gave participants five options for different channels they may have used to find out about their fitness facility/gym including an option for other for participants to write in an option that was not originally included. There were four respondents that selected 'Other' and all four wrote in a form of out-of-home (OOH) advertising. For the purpose of analyzing this data, 'Other' has been changed to 'OOH' in the table below (Table 1). Findings from this data show 46% of respondents discovered their current fitness facility/gym from friends or family which would be referred to WOM from a marketing perspective. The second most popular channel was online search with 27% of respondents.

Channel	# of Responses	Percentage %
Friends or Family	12	46%
Event or Festival	0	0%
Social Media	3	12%
Online Search	7	27%
OOH	4	15%

Table 1

The second research question aims to answer which digital marketing channels consumers prefer to use during the active evaluation phase. To answer this, participants were asked to rank which channels they preferred to research products/services before making a purchase. In this tiered ranking system, a 1 indicates the most preferred channel consumers would ideally turn to first, then their second and thirst choices. In addition the data also shows the channels that had the total most rankings across all three ranking tiers. Overwhelmingly online search was the most preferred channel with 73% of respondents ranking this channel frist. Customer reviews was the second most preferred channel with a total of 22 respondents ranking this channel. This data also influences research question three. As consumers move from the active evaluation phase into the moment of purchase stage they begin to show intent to purchase. Understanding not only which channels consumers are using to evaluate brands but to research products/services brands can be ready to capitalize during the moment of purchase.

Channel	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Total Times Ranked
Online Search	**73%**	8%	15%	25
Customer Reviews	8%	**54%**	**23%**	**22**
Friends or Family	12%	23%	15%	13
Social Media	8%	0%	19%	7
Online Forums	0%	8%	15%	6
In-store or In-person	0%	8%	12%	5

Table 2

The data in Table 3 displays which channel respondents ranked in order of how they prefer to consume content related to fitness. This data can be used in determining the answers to both research questions two and four. In the active evaluation phase it is important to determine where consumers are consuming content for research purposes while in the postpurhcase experience phase they may be consuming content seeking to interact with the brand to learn more information about the product/service they have purchased. Web browsing was by far the most preferred channel, followed by Instagram and YouTube, which are all digital channels. Again it is helpful to analyze the results of the total times a channel was ranked as this is helpful in determining not only which channel is most preferred but also which channel consumers turn to more than any other channel.

Channel	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Total Times Ranked
Television	0%	8%	15%	6
Web Browsing	**35%**	23%	**23%**	**21**
Podcasts	4%	23%	8%	9
Radio	4%	0%	8%	3
Instagram	12%	**31%**	12%	14
YouTube	27%	8%	15%	13
Facebook	8%	0%	0%	2
Reddit (Forums)	4%	8%	8%	4
Twitter	0%	0%	8%	2
Other (Email/App)	8%	0%	4%	3

Table 3

Qualitative:

Providing open ended questions for participants was essential in understanding a complex consumer journey that has many touchpoints. Responses to open ended questions revealed further insight into how consumers interact with brands throughout the CDJ and were helpful in answering the research questions.

To analyze what triggered participants to entered into the CDJ in the first place they were asked "what was your reason for seeking out this type of service?" Common themes were to improve their general fitness and either maintain or lose weight. Another theme was an emphasis on self care and wellness, going beyond just fitness respondents wanted to focus on their overall health.

In order to further understand the moment of purchase phase participants were directly asked to explain what ultimately made them decide to make a purchase at their current fitness facility/gym. Analyzing word cloud the largest decision drivers were location and price. Excluding location and price however, respondents listed a great customer and workout experience at the fitness facility/gym itself the reason for deciding to purchase.

When asked if there was any additional feedback respondents would like to share that would improve their customer experience with their respective fitness facility/gym another interesting insight was gleaned. Consumers tended to be more focused with their postpurchase experience and wanted the brand to continue to engage with them. Personalization was important as they wanted a staff that would greet them or personalized workouts to their needs. Furthermore amenities such as types of equipment are important to consumers after their purchase.

In addition to the in-person experience other participants suggested they wanted an online user experience with their fitness facility/gym and to continue to be engaged . One participant said "The quality of the website and the ease of accessing the schedule online are both critical." Another participant added to this sentiment claiming they would like to be included in a loyalty program.

Limitations

This study was successful in determining the ideal digital marketing channels to reach consumers during their decision journey for a fitness facility/gym service. The results of the survey identified preferred channels during each stage of the CDJ to inform a consumer driven

strategic digital marketing plan. This study was not without limitations however which should be taken into consideration when applying these findings to future CDJ digital marketing strategy.

The largest and most apparent limitation is the scope of this study. For the purposes of this study and to gain insight into the participants CDJ, a narrow scope focusing on a particular product or service had to be implemented. While there are general learnings that can be applied across industries, it must be acknowledged that a consumer's journey will be different based on the product or service. A CDJ based on a service such as a gym is going to look much different compared to a CDJ for a consumer packaged goods. For the purpose of this study a particular client was selected who was in need of a consumer decision journey driven strategic digital marketing plan.

In addition to the narrow scope in industry, this study also only focused on digital marketing channels. Offline or traditional marketing channels were acknowledged in the survey but the deliverable of this study will only take into account digital marketing channels. A CDJ will more-often than not be cross-channel and include many touchpoints that are both online and offline.

Discussion

This study revealed that the consumer journey has indeed evolved and that digital marketing channels play an integral role in the CDJ. For the micro-gym client who is the subject of this study, implications are clear on which digital marketing channels are optimal during the various phases of the CDJ. Further, there are implications that can be applied across industries to other small businesses and start ups looking to implement a CDJ driven strategic digital

marketing plan based on this empirical research and the accompanying digital marketing plan that could be used as an example case study.

WOM Still Relevant

WOM marketing has always been a powerful marketing channel and this study revealed that has not changed as the CDJ has evolved. In fact, WOM has perhaps become even more important as the WOM conversation has moved online and has a further reach than ever before. This study revealed in order to have your brand included in the initial-consideration set phase consumers are still turning to their most trusted resources for recommendations, family and friends. As WOM has transitioned to eWOM, moving online through social media, online forums, and customer reviews, brands must control the communication and conversations happening around their brand on these channels.

Once consumers move into active-consideration to begin their own research they continue to turn to online forms of WOM for trusted opinions and reviews on the product or service they might be considering. For a brand that may not have a strong brand name or much recognition, having advocates spreading the word on behalf of your brand through eWOM channels can build trust and catapult a brand into a consumer's initial-consideration set or active evaluation phase. Participants ranked customer reviews as their second most preferred channel when researching a product or service before purchase. When developing a digital marketing plan brands should have a eWOM strategy centered around generating and monitoring positive customer reviews through various placements including their own website, eCommerce platforms, online forums, search engines, and social media.

Just Google It

The phrase 'Google it' has become a common one in the modern lexicon. Googling has become a verb synonymous with searching online. Due to how powerful and convenient search engines such as Google, Bing, Yahoo and others have become, consumers often turn to this channel first when evaluating brands that provide solutions to meet their needs. In the results of this study, participants overwhelmingly ranked online search as their preferred channel to research a product or service before buying. Search engine marketing is perhaps the most vital marketing channel brands should focus on to reach consumers during the active evaluation phase of the CDJ.

A successful digital marketing plan should incorporate both paid search as well as organic search. Paid search will allow brands to show up in search results for non-brand keywords and build awareness that their product or service could provide a solution to the consumers need that they may have not been aware of before. Small businesses or start ups that may not have strong brand recognition should use paid search as a tool to associate their product or service with relevant search queries as a means to build brand awareness. Organic search can be used to optimize the brand's website and provide valuable content building trust with potential customers. With organic search small businesses such as a micro-gym should especially focus on optimizing their websites and business listings for local search. Further small businesses or start-up should build out valuable content that provides solutions to users' search queries asking questions or looking for solutions that are relevant to the brand's product offering. Search engine marketing represents a great opportunity for brands to present their value proposition in front of consumers who are actively researching similar products or services.

Display Value Propositions

There are many factors that ultimately drive a consumer to the moment of purchase. When asked this question in the survey participants mentioned price, location, and overall customer experience at their gym as the reasons for why they ultimately made a purchase. Knowing these purchase driving factors is important because it should influence the value proposition brands want to convey to potential customers through their messaging. Consumers will encounter many touchpoints throughout the CDJ and each of these touchpoints represents a moment for the brand to have a conversation with that consumer. As consumers move through the CDJ and into the moment of purchase, brands should utilize digital marketing channels as touchpoints to communicate their value propositions. Brands can understand purchase intent based on search queries through SEM efforts or interests and behavior data on a social network. Thus, brands need to utilize this digital data to retarget consumers during the active evaluation phase and capture consumer attention at the moment of purchase phase with timely and appropriate messaging that meets the consumer's needs.

Participants ranked web browsing and two different social platforms, YouTube and Instagram, as their top three preferred methods of consuming content relevant to the product or service offering for this case study. To drive consumers to decision during the moment of purchase phase of the CDJ, brands should utilize display ads by retargeting users as they browse the web or their favorite social platform. The messaging at this stage is critical and an emphasis should be put on the factors that consumers will find most valuable, in this example convenience, cost, and the customer experience. An example display ad may focus on a limited time offer of a week of free workout classes.

Build a Relationship

An important learning brands should take into consideration that goes beyond marketing is that today's consumers want to feel validated in their purchase. No one wants to feel buyer's remorse. The CDJ has become more complex with the consumer doing much more research on their end and more products to choose from than ever before. The postpurchase experience is about reengaging with the customer and providing them further value. Sentiment from the qualitative data suggested consumers want to be supported with customer service both offline and online during the postpurchase experience. Brands should look to utilize digital media channels to enhance their customer service and the first place to start is with their website. This can be accomplished by providing a superior user experience with features such as online chat support, helpful blog articles, or features specific to the business offering such as an online class schedule for micro-gyms. Therefore brands should look to have a healthy amount of content on their website that encourages their customers to reengage with the brand and spend time on their website.

The results of this study revealed web browsing and social media are the preferred methods for consuming content and content is still king. A strategy brands should employ in their digital marketing strategy is content marketing through various channels. An extension of the brand are social media accounts. Social media networks are a prime place for brands to build a relationship with their customers and disperse content. While on social media consumers are in the mindset to engage. For a micro-gym brand, platforms like YouTube or Instagram present a digital marketing channel that acts as a separate content hub to interact with and build a

community. A CDJ driven digital marketing plan should use social media as the main channel for engaging with their customers in the postpurchase experience.

Conclusion

This study revealed that through empirical consumer research brands can align their digital marketing strategies to the consumer decision journey. Further, it revealed while this case study focused on a specific industry, the CDJ has evolved and consumers tend to prefer digital media channels at each phase of their customer journey. While this study did have limitations as it focused on one industry, the implications of which channels consumers use during different phases of the consumer journey are applicable to similar sized small business or start up brands across industries.

Based on the results of this study, a strategic digital marketing plan can be created with recommendations for the most effective digital marketing channel at each phase of the CDJ. For this case study, during the initial-consideration set phase eWOM should be accomplished through customer review generation and social media advertising. As consumers move into active evaluation SEM is the most effective channel as consumers are researching solutions for their needs. At the moment of purchase brands need to focus on retargeting through display ads throughout the web and social media platforms. Finally, during the postpurchase experience brands should reengage with their customers and build a community through social media management.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questionnaire:

Intro

Your opinion is valued and your participation in this survey is greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance for your time. This survey is being conducted by Chace Black as a part of my thesis for the Master of Arts in Technology & Communication (MATC) program at UNC.

Your name will be kept anonymous and not associated with the survey results. Your answers will be used only for the purposes of this study. Please answer all questions to the best of your ability and elaborate on any open-ended questions if possible. At the end of the survey you will be prompted to share your name if you wish to be entered into a drawing for a chance to win a $100 Visa gift card.

Do you work out out a fitness facility/gym?

o   Yes

o   No

If yes, please identify the option that best describes the facility where you work out the most:

o   General Fitness Center (YMCA, Planet Fitness, etc.)

o   Personal Trainer

o   Crossfit

o   Yoga Studio

o   Spin Studio

o   Barre

o   Martial Arts Academy/Gym

o   Micro-gym (9Round, RockBox, Madabolic, etc.)

o   Other (please specify) _____

During which hours of the day to you prefer to work out at your facility?

o   Early Morning (5am-8am)

o   Morning (8am-11am)

o   Lunch (11am-1pm)

o   Afternoon (1pm-5pm)

o   Evening (5pm-8pm)

o   Night (8pm-11pm)

o   Latenight (11pm-2am)

How did you find out about your current fitness facility/gym?

o   Friends or Family

o   Event or Festival

o   Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc)

o   Online Search (Google, Bing, etc.)

o   Other (please specify) _____

What was your reason for seeking out this type of service?

_____

Identify the top 3 (1,2,3) following methods on how you prefer to consume fitness related

content (most preferred item = 1, 2nd most preferred = 2, 3rd most preferred = 3):

_____ Television

_____ Web Browsing

_____ Podcasts

_____ Radio

_____ Instagram

_____ YouTube

_____ Facebook

_____ Reddit (Forums)

_____ Twitter

_____ Other (please specify)

Identify the top 3 (1,2,3) following ways in which you prefer to research products/services before

making a purchase (most preferred item = 1, 2nd most preferred = 2, 3rd most preferred = 3):

_____ Online search

_____ Customer reviews

_____ Friends and/or family

_____ Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, etc.)

_____ Online forums

_____ In-store or in-person

What ultimately made you decide to make a purchase with your current fitness facility/gym?

_____

On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being not important at all, 10 being extremely important), please indicate how important each of the following features are to you when making a decision to join a fitness facility/gym:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Flexible hours ()										
Highly credentialed trainers/instructors ()										
Consistent class schedule/routine ()										
Cost ()										
Location ()										
Training equipment ()										
Amenities ()										

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with fitness facilities/gyms to help improve the customer experience (positive or negative)?

_____

What is your gender?

o   Female

o   Male

o   Prefer not to specify

Which category below includes your age?

o   18-24

o   25-34

o   35-44

o   45-54

o   55-64

o   65+

Information about income is very important to understand. Would you please give your best guess? Please indicate the answer that includes your entire household income in (previous year) before taxes.

o   Less than $25,000

o $25,000 to $49,000

o $50,000 to $74,999

o $75,000 to $99,000

o $100,00 or more

End of Questionnaire

First Email:

Hello,

My name is Chace Black and I am currently finishing my thesis for the Master of Arts in Technology & Communication (MATC) program at UNC. For my thesis, I am researching how consumers interact with small businesses.

To do this I have created a questionnaire that will aim to help a local small business better understand how to reach and serve their customers. Your participation in this survey will help gather data on how small businesses can better serve customers like you in the future. To show appreciation for your participation, those who complete the survey will be entered into a drawing with a chance to win a $100 Visa gift card.

In two days, I will email you a link to the online survey for you to take along with directions. The survey is only 14 questions, but I ask that you give it careful consideration and to please elaborate on any open ended questions if possible. The survey is user friendly and will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Thank you in advance for your help and support. Please be on the lookout for my next email on Thursday, November 7th. I look forward to hearing from you!

Chace Black

Second Email:

Hello,

     The survey for Chace Black's thesis project on consumer interaction with small businesses is now available. This survey is for research purposes and will help researchers gather data on how small businesses can better serve customers like you in the future. As a reminder, those who complete the survey will be entered in a drawing with a chance to win a $100 Visa gift card. Once the survey closes to participants the winner of the drawing will be notified via email. Below is a link to the online survey, your participation is voluntary. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. The survey will be available for one week, so I please ask you complete the survey within that time frame.

     Please be as honest and open as you can be on the survey, your name will not be associated with your survey results and the survey results will only be used for the purpose of this study. At the end of the survey you will be given the opportunity to share your name in order to be entered into a drawing for a chance to win a $100 Visa gift card. Specific questions about the study can be directed to Chace Black at chacelb@live.unc.edu. Thank you for your help and your participation is greatly appreciated.

Follow the link to the survey:

By clicking the link below you consent to your participation.

Link to Survey

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

https://unc.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0DMAekknJL30daB