

Multi-actor touchpoints in the customer journey

Lisa Lundin

Linköping University

Daniel Kindström

Department of Management and Engineering, Linköping University

Harald Brege

Department of Management and Engineering, Linköping University

Cite as:

Lundin Lisa, Kindström Daniel, Brege Harald (2022), Multi-actor touchpoints in the customer journey .
Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy, 51st, (107426)

Paper from the 51st Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 24-27, 2022



Multi-actor touchpoints in the customer journey

Abstract: This paper explores how B2B firms can manage the value creation process at multi-actor touchpoints in the customer journey. We argue that B2B firms can benefit from opening up their touchpoints to multi-actor interactions between the customer, firm, partners and other customers, answering recent calls for broadening the scope of customer journeys to also include such multi-actor touchpoints. In our research we perceive the value creating process as the actors, activities and resources involved in the emergence of value through the customer journey. An ecosystem perspective is adopted to increase understanding of how firms can enhance the value creating process through the B2B customer journey. By empirically examining an industrial ecosystem, our tentative findings point towards the importance of balancing the number of touchpoints as well as designing touchpoints depending on the customer's needs and requirements to manage the value creation process.

Keywords: customer journeys, value creation process, multi-actor touchpoints

Track: Business-to-Business Marketing & Supply Chain Management

1. Introduction

Value is a fundamental concept for marketing (Eggert et al., 2019), and the ability to manage the value creating process consequently becomes a key aspect in business marketing (Anderson et al., 2009). Today, value is increasingly seen as being realized through customer experiences accumulated over time, as a function of past, present and future experiences (De Keyser et al., 2015). Hence, value creation occurs before, during and after an exchange (Holmqvist et al., 2020; A. Payne, 2020).

The growing interest in customer experience has resulted in an increasing focus on customer experience management, with the goal to optimize interactions from the customer's perspective (De Keyser et al., 2015). Customer experience management can be seen as the strategic actions taken to design customer experiences and improve the firm's ability to continuously enhance the same experiences (Holmlund et al., 2020). A firm cannot however create customer experiences by themselves but instead need to design firm-controlled touchpoints that can enable customer experiences, or develop methods to understand, monitor and respond to customer-controlled touchpoints and consider opportunities for introducing firm-controlled touchpoints accordingly (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

Although customer experience management traditionally tends to start at a touchpoint level, organizations have been shifting their attention from managing discrete touchpoints to managing the entire customer journey (Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The touchpoints are the building blocks of a customer journey and can be perceived as instances of interactions between actors (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). Consequently, the customer journey is seen as the sequence of touchpoints a customer goes through, adding up to the entire customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer journeys are becoming a key concept for service and marketing research (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and has also been recognized as a top research priority (MSI, 2020), driven by the notion that creating positive experiences will result in improvements in the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Today, touchpoints are often realized by multiple actors working together, and not only through dyadic interactions between suppliers and customers (Larivière et al., 2017). Additionally, customers themselves take an increasingly more active role in initiating and managing touchpoints with providers, but also with other actors such as other customers. This wider ecosystem, involving a broader set of actors (e.g., other customers, third-party partners), work together and consequently new opportunities for value cocreation emerge

(Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Therefore, the scope of customer journeys should extend beyond a narrower dyadic customer-firm relationship towards a wider ecosystem perspective.

Previous research has indeed emphasized the importance of partnering with stakeholders in order to manage external touchpoints (e.g., Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). However, expanding the number of touchpoints initiated by external actors might lead to difficulties in managing the customer journey (Kranzbühler et al., 2018; Verhoef et al., 2009) and thus some caution might be warranted.

This paper explores how B2B firms can manage the value creation process at multi-actor touchpoints through the customer journey. In this we attempt to go beyond individual, single, transactions to involve multiple interactions over time, realized by multiple actors working together. Hence, the study aims to contribute to value creation, as well as B2B marketing, literature by proposing novel insights into how firms can enable value creation opportunities at different touchpoints during the customer journey through activities that underlie specific exchanges of resources.

A qualitative case study design through an in-depth case study of a selected industrial firm, its customers, partners, and external actors was adopted as it provides means of developing theory by utilizing in-depth insights of empirical phenomena (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

2. Conceptualization of value cocreation through the customer journey

The customer journey can be considered as a process comprising several stages a customer goes through across multiple touchpoints. The customer journey is expanded to entail different types of touchpoints at each stage (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), involving several actors thus recognizing a wider ecosystem perspective. To effectively manage customer relationships, it becomes important for firms to consider the role of other actors throughout the customer journey, including additional firms cocreating or facilitating parts of the customer solution (Tax et al., 2013). According to Adner (2017), all actors who play critical roles in the value creating process can be seen as forming an ecosystem. Hence, in this study, the actors that facilitate or cocreate value during the customer journey form an ecosystem.

This begs the question of who is responsible for the touchpoints and how the touchpoints directly, or indirectly, influence the customer experience (Larivière et al., 2017). Touchpoints are typically differentiated based on the actor who initiates the touchpoint. A

touchpoint can be initiated by the supplier, customer, partner, or even other external actors (Witell et al., 2020). Firm-initiated touchpoints such as providing content on a supplier's website or actions to initiate rebuy-processes when a product approach end of life are designed by the supplier, whereas customer-initiated touchpoints are customer interactions that the firm usually do not have complete control over (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Such customer-initiated touchpoints can involve customer-to-customer activities (e.g., recommendations or shared experiences) and customer feedback (e.g., customers give feedback on a new product and service) (Beckers et al., 2018). Touchpoints initiated by partners are interactions jointly managed by the firm and one or more of its partners. Partners can include technology firms, focusing on e.g. search engine programming, loyalty programs, or referral activities (Nam and Kannan, 2020). Touchpoints initiated by external actors could involve consultancy services (Witell et al., 2020), other customers' activities on social media platforms, independent information sources, or even regulatory environments that may influence the process.

Touchpoints involve activities in which the actors exchange resources, as well as collaborative practices in which the actors jointly perform activities (A. F. Payne et al., 2008). This is similar to Breidbach and Maglio (2016) who demonstrated that actors in complex B2B systems either perform independent tasks, joint activities, or facilitate resource exchange at interactions during the value creation process (see figure 1). For example, a customer can independently use resources that represent a potential for value creation while the firm or other actors may facilitate this value creation process by providing access to certain resources (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). When value is cocreated, suppliers, customers and potentially also other actors interact and exchange resources. For example, a value proposition can be cocreated by using customer information e.g. customer data to customize the offering together with the customer and based on the customer's needs. Hence, joint activities form opportunities for cocreation of value. In order to widen the so-called 'joint sphere' (Grönroos & Voima, 2013) it becomes important to find new opportunities to further engage customers to enable value cocreation.

As customers are exposed to multiple touchpoints, initiated by either the supplier, or other actors beyond the supplier's control, a supplier needs to understand a broad range of touchpoints within, as well as outside, their control (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Bolton et al., 2018; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) to manage the value creation process. However, more

research is needed to understand how firms can manage these touchpoints, and the activities underlying specific exchanges of resources that enables value creation.

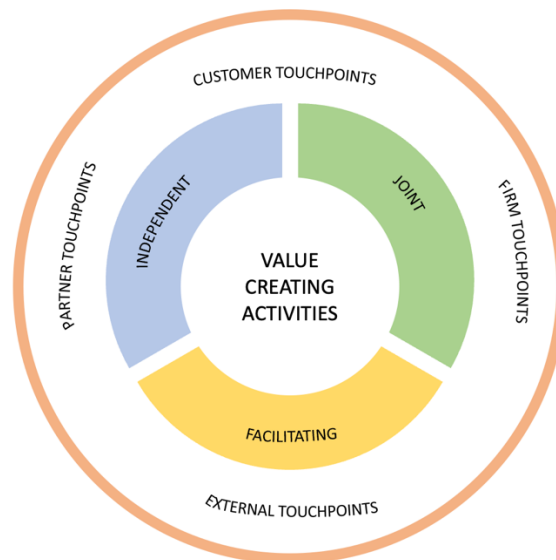


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of multi-actor touchpoints in the value creation process.

3. Conclusions and implications

By mapping an industrial ecosystem and the involved actors (roles) influence relative the customers' journey, our preliminary conclusions point to novel opportunities for firms to manage the value creation process. Tentatively our study implies a need for partnering with external actors, that the customer encounters through the customer journey and that influence the customer's opportunities, in order to be able to create value. However, except touchpoints initiated by partners or external actors, introducing more firm-initiated touchpoints can lead to increased control over the customer journey, enabling the firm to move the customers forward in a preferred direction. Our study also provides insight into how an internal ecosystem, i.e. coordinated internal firm functions and roles, can stimulate firm-initiated touchpoints enabling an exchange of resources as well as joint value creation with the customers. In addition, a firm can facilitate for customers to take an increasingly independent role in the value creation process by enabling more customer-initiated touchpoints thus reducing the complexity of the processes as well as reducing costs. In this, our study also points to the importance of balancing the number of touchpoints initiated by the firm and the customer to be able to manage the customer journey and thus enable the creation of maximum value.

References

- Anderson, J. C., Narus, J. A., & Narayandas, D. (2009). *Business market management: Understanding, creating, and delivering value* (3. ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Becker, L., & Jaakkola, E. (2020). Customer experience: Fundamental premises and implications for research. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48(4), 630–648.
- Bolton, R. N., McColl-Kennedy, J. R., Cheung, L., Gallan, A., Orsingher, C., Witell, L., & Zaki, M. (2018). Customer experience challenges: Bringing together digital, physical and social realms. *Journal of Service Management*, 29(5), 776–808.
- Breidbach, C. F., & Maglio, P. P. (2016). Technology-enabled value co-creation: An empirical analysis of actors, resources, and practices. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 13.
- De Keyser, A., Lemon, K. N., Klaus, P., & Keiningham, T. L. (2015). *A Framework for Understanding and Managing the Customer Experience*. MSI Working Paper No. 15-121. Cambridge, MA: Marketing Science Institute. <https://www.msi.org/working-papers/a-framework-for-understanding-and-managing-the-customer-experience/>
- Dubois, A., & Gadde, L.-E. (2002). Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553–560.
- Eggert, A., Kleinaltenkamp, M., & Kashyap, V. (2019). Mapping value in business markets: An integrative framework. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 79, 13–20.
- Følstad, A., & Kvale, K. (2018). Customer journeys: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, 28(2), 196–227.
- Grönroos, C., & Voima, P. (2013). Critical service logic: Making sense of value creation and co-creation. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 41(2), 133–150.
- Holmlund, M., Van Vaerenbergh, Y., Ciuchita, R., Ravald, A., Sarantopoulos, P., Ordenes, F. V., & Zaki, M. (2020). Customer experience management in the age of big data analytics: A strategic framework. *Journal of Business Research*, 116, 356–365.
- Holmqvist, J., Visconti, L. M., Grönroos, C., Guais, B., & Kessous, A. (2020). Understanding the value process: Value creation in a luxury service context. *Journal of Business Research*, 120, 114–126.
- Homburg, C., Jozić, D., & Kuehnl, C. (2017). Customer experience management: Toward implementing an evolving marketing concept. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 45(3), 377–401.

- Kranzbühler, A.-M., Kleijnen, M. H. P., Morgan, R. E., & Teerling, M. (2018). The Multilevel Nature of Customer Experience Research: An Integrative Review and Research Agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20(2), 433–456.
- Larivière, B., Bowen, D., Andreassen, T. W., Kunz, W., Sirianni, N. J., Voss, C., Wunderlich, N. V., & De Keyser, A. (2017). “Service Encounter 2.0”: An investigation into the roles of technology, employees and customers. *Journal of Business Research*, 79, 238–246.
- Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding Customer Experience Throughout the Customer Journey. *Journal of Marketing*, 80(6), 69–96.
- MSI. (2020). Marketing science Institute research priorities (2020-2022). https://www.msi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/MSI_RP20-22.pdf.
- Payne, A. (2020). Toward a comprehensive framework of value proposition development _ From strategy to implementation. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 12.
- Payne, A. F., Storbacka, K., & Frow, P. (2008). Managing the co-creation of value. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36(1), 83–96.
- Verhoef, P. C., Lemon, K. N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., & Schlesinger, L. A. (2009). Customer Experience Creation: Determinants, Dynamics and Management Strategies. *Journal of Retailing*, 85(1), 31–41.