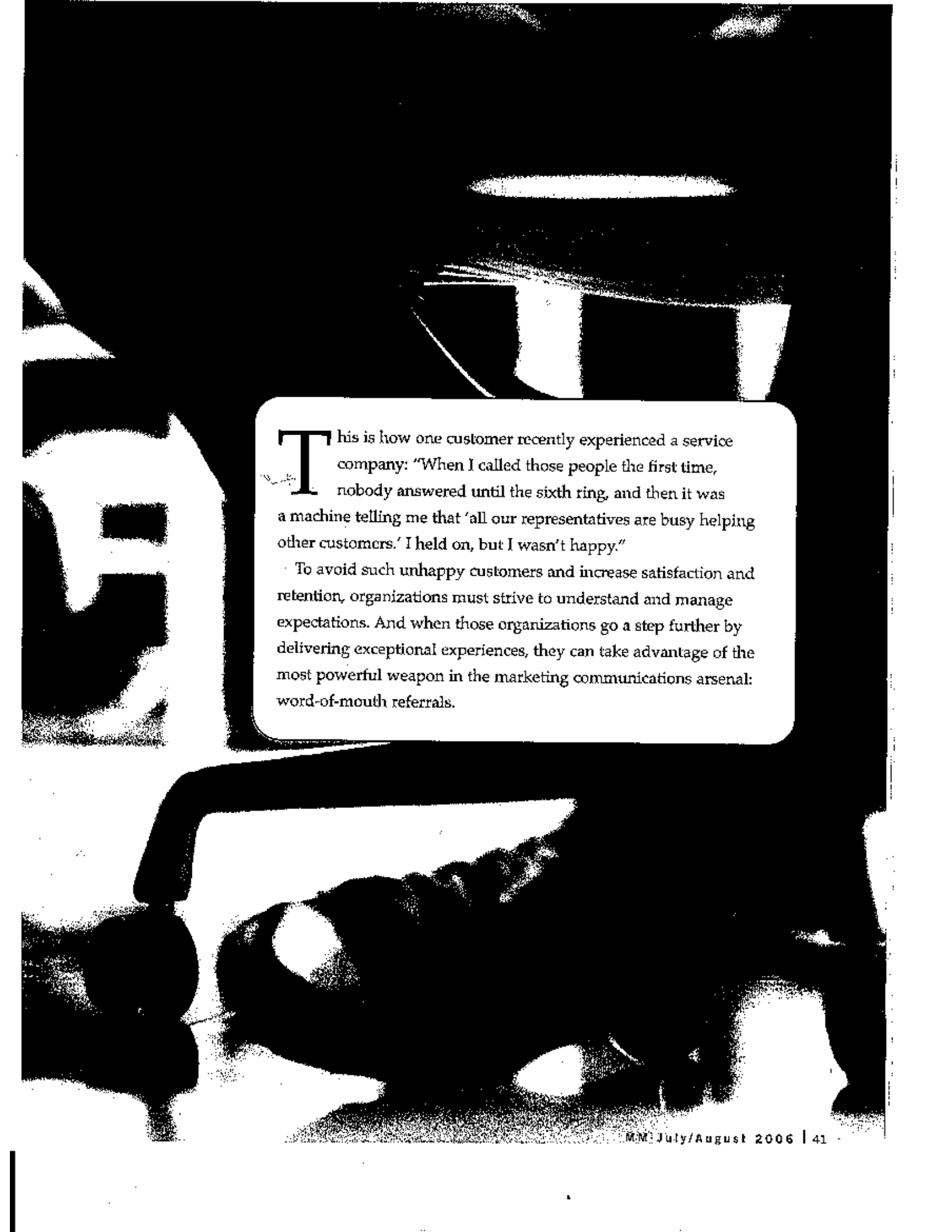




In Their Shoes

By understanding the customer experience, marketers can take advantage of word-of-mouth communication.

By Gabriel M. Gelb and John M. McKeever



This is how one customer recently experienced a service company: "When I called those people the first time, nobody answered until the sixth ring, and then it was a machine telling me that 'all our representatives are busy helping other customers.' I held on, but I wasn't happy."

To avoid such unhappy customers and increase satisfaction and retention, organizations must strive to understand and manage expectations. And when those organizations go a step further by delivering exceptional experiences, they can take advantage of the most powerful weapon in the marketing communications arsenal: word-of-mouth referrals.

EXECUTIVE briefing

Personal recommendations are critical to ensuring the success of a service-oriented business. To help their organizations remain competitive, marketing managers must learn what the marketplace expects and receives throughout the total customer experience. Experience mapping—developed from in-depth qualitative interviews with a sample of customers and frontline employees—is the framework for creating exceptional experiences that convert users into advocates.

But how do they accomplish this? "Service quality is a design issue" is the keynote of the groundbreaking book *Delivering Service Quality* by Valarie Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry (The Free Press, 1990). It reveals: "With rigorous, detailed attention to customers' expectations for each step in a service process, it is possible to design quality into the service."

Addressing Service Failures

Many marketing managers have found that the service quality of most organizations is typically more disappointing than uplifting. Expectations and the customer experience can be managed only through the appropriate use of three channels: internal communication (company to employees), external communication (company to market), and interactions (between employees and customers).

Southwest Airlines best demonstrates the payoffs that internal marketing can generate. Because it offers low prices with a sufficient level of service quality, it carries more passengers than any other airline. Early on, Southwest pegged its future with its frontline employees. The mission statement says it all: "Above all, employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest customer."

Southwest's internal marketing plan, as explained in an article by Andrew J. Czaplewski, Jeffery M. Ferguson, and John R. Milliman (*Marketing Management*, September/October 2001), centers on "a vision that provides purpose and meaning to the workplace, competing aggressively for the most talented people, preparing employees with the skills and knowledge they need to perform ... , motivating individuals through measurement and rewards, providing freedom to excel, and ensuring that organizational management understands the internal customer."

Although Southwest's success formula is obvious, too many organizations have failed to appreciate that the beginning stages of creating optimum customer experiences are internal. First, they must comprehend how frontline personnel disappoints customers. What will it take to understand where customers are coming from, what they expect, and how to deliver on promises in each interaction?

Where Quantification Falters

Customer expectations are set and adjusted based on perceptions and experiences. Unfortunately, managers are often

left with research tools that don't adequately explore these attitudes and expectations. They are more disposed to measure how customers interact with their offerings, and spend less resources on the pre-buying environment.

The temptation is to reach for the latest quantitative-sounding tool. Statistical analyses presumably are managers' allies in determining what customers value most. However, quantitative tools are less useful in the complex, ever-changing service environment. Commonly used quantitative studies (limited information from a large sample) often take into account only a snapshot: the time period of the customer experience.

For those open to the dynamic nature of qualitative research, the trusted focus group is a frequently overused technique, designed to validate the organization's preconceptions. Focus groups fail to provide adequate insights about the customer experience, as each interaction and overall experience is unique (unless your participants visit the same outlets at the same time).

The inadequacies of mass quantification of insight are illustrated by two popular approaches: lifetime value of a customer, and measuring the strength of a relationship (a trust-based commitment model). Those who profess to measure lifetime values of customers are quick to display models, but the survey data to track real customers over time are lacking. "The lifetime value of a loyal customer can be astronomical," claims British publication *CRM Today*. Even Boston's Harvard Business School (HBS) has gotten into the act, offering "The

■ Exhibit 1 Holistic approach

Experience mapping:

- emphasizes expectations prior to purchase.
- recognizes the importance of frontline employees.
- accounts for the multiple touch points through which organizations interact with their customers.
- tracks attitude changes, if any, throughout the customer experience.
- provides rich insights for change, through verbatim comments.

HBS Toolkit Customer Value Calculator." HBS notes that to employ this model, "the user must estimate how many existing customers will continue to buy."

Both the lifetime customer value model and the trust-based commitment model postulate that the road to marketing success is merely based on predicting how customers will react in the future. In reality, too much is always happening for those predictions to come true: customers' interest in yet-to-be-offered products and services, consolidations of corporations and business units, changes in customers' economic circumstances, and the trajectory of the economy. Thus, future-oriented quantification models falter.

A Solution Emerges

To what extent do managers invest in quantitative studies, to understand customer perceptions of value? Do they instead invest in gathering in-depth information from smaller samples? Compared with previous decades, managers are encouraged by the results of learning more from fewer customers. This often includes observational research such as placing researchers in homes to view product usage, and tracking customers in buying situations by videotaping their actions. Another powerful tool for understanding customers is "experience mapping."

Managers know, deep down, that they can't predict the strength of a relationship one year, five years, or 10 years from now. However, they can do a much better job of appreciating customers' total experiences with their products or services. That's the true voice of the customer.

Experience mapping responds to this need for in-depth exploration of (1) complex customer expectations and experiences and (2) the inevitable changes that occur when they

interact with a company's employees or use its products. (See Exhibit 1.) Managers can grasp what customers are thinking before they are engaged, how well their expectations are met or exceeded, and how benefits are delivered through touch points. This approach stands in contrast to what researchers have been doing for years: attempting to learn how customers regard their organizations and products/services by asking a sequence of quantitative questions, each one delving into just one aspect of customers' experiences.

Experience mapping is particularly useful in service industries. It yields insights about how customers perceive treatment from frontline employees and what they bring to the table. The holistic experience, developed through individual interactions, forms the customer's evaluation of organizational performance and overall satisfaction.

Using the Experience Map

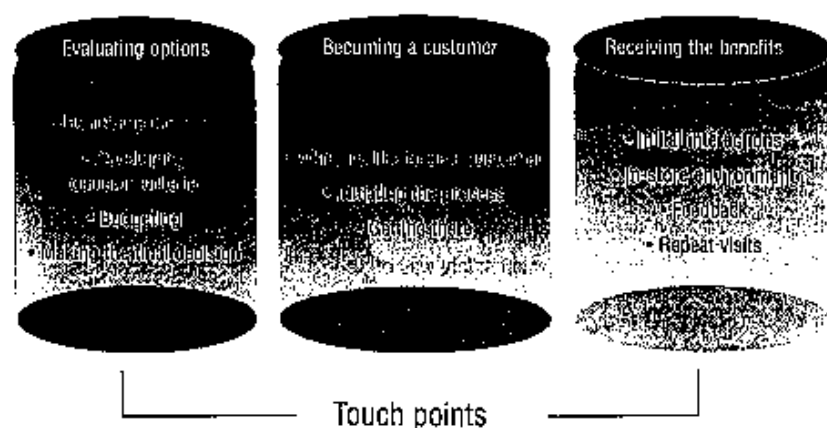
From the customer's viewpoint, the experience is a series of episodes. His or her contact with a call center, advertisement, or product provides a basis to form opinions. The experience map enables customers to construct anecdotes—about the people with whom they interacted, their needs and fears, and opportunities for improvement. It also tracks how attitudes change with each touch point (see Exhibit 2). The map presents elements of the customer experience. Managers show it to customers, to elicit the broad range of pre- and post-sales attitudes. Aided by visual stimuli, customers and prospects can more easily recall and articulate their expectations—before, during, and after phases of their experiences. The map's design is based on organizational insights, but later validated by respondents.

Managers conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with a sample of customers and frontline employees, to understand the facilitators of and barriers to what customers believe is an ideal experience. The customers should comprise primary decision makers or users, and managers should expand the interviews to include those with key roles in the experience (e.g., friends, families).

Because of the variety of experiences and opinions, managers should compile complete transcripts of their interviews. These can serve purposes beyond the research objectives (e.g., creating a list of frequently asked questions). Managers should perform interviews in person, whenever possible. The richness of information in a face-to-face setting far exceeds the potential cost savings. For example, 20 experience mapping interviews can yield more than 100 pages of transcripts.

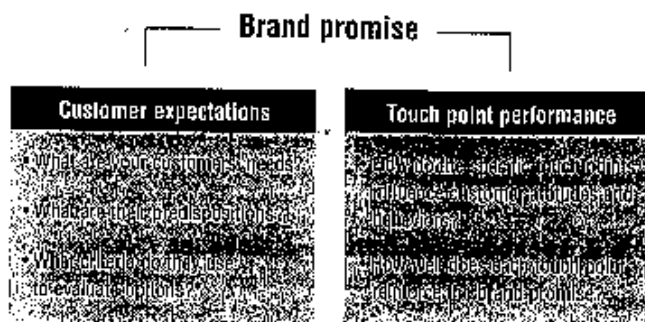
Experience mapping helps managers understand how their organizations' total

■ Exhibit 2
Experience map



To help customers recall their experiences across multiple touch points, we use an experience map.

■ **Exhibit 3**
Interview summary



offerings are perceived from customers' points of view. Once managers aggregate the resulting insights, they can form multi-dimensional views of how customers interact with their service-oriented enterprises, products, and people. And they can determine what makes a customer experience exceptional, and how to deliver it consistently.

A framework helps summarize the information (see Exhibit 3). The contrast between customer expectations and realized experiences, as delivered by touch points, is a source of meaningful insight. For example, marketing communications might

set expectations for superior customer service, which the target (customer) interprets as staff members being able to answer any questions without a call transfer. It is useful to synthesize findings across touch points, as cross-cutting themes often emerge. Managers can detail the specific touch points and assess their importance in the customer experience.

Focusing on the Customer

Like any other research technique, experience mapping is not a cure-all. But when standard techniques fail to lead to exceptional, talked-about experiences, marketing managers should consider the values of this method. They can more clearly focus on what customers expect at every touch point, and design employee training that capitalizes on the human desire to excel. ■

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