The experience cycle

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In this article, we contrast the "sales cycle" and related models with the "experience cycle" model. The sales cycle model is a traditional tool in business. The sales cycle frames the producer-customer relationship from the producer's point of view and aims to funnel potential customers to a transaction. The experience cycle is a new tool, synthesizing and giving form to a broader, more holistic approach being taken by growing numbers of designers, brand experts, and marketers. The experience cycle frames the producer-customer relationship from the customer's point of view and aims to move well beyond a single transaction to establish a relationship between producer and customer and foster an on-going conversation.

We acknowledge the sales cycle model has value. And designers need to be familiar with it. But when the sales cycle comes up as a topic of discussion in a client engagement, designers should also think of the experience cycle as an alternative frame—and should introduce it into the discussion. We believe the experience cycle is a more useful model not only for designers but also for marketing and sales people, because it is more likely to lead to an experience of lasting value for customers, and thus greater long-term value for producers.
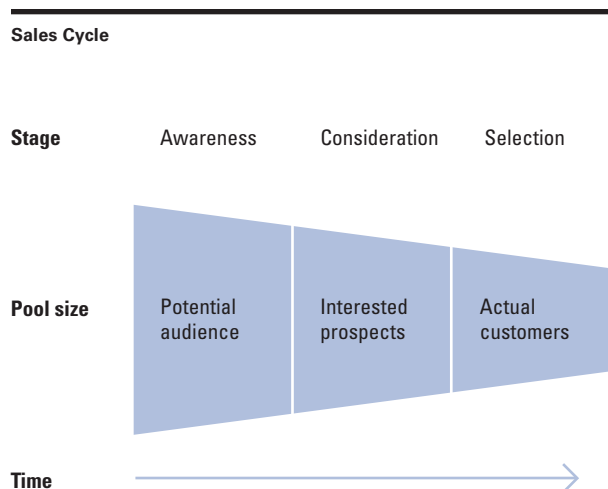
The "sales cycle" is a model commonly used in business. It often frames the basic structure of marketing and sales activities, providing a practical template for planning.

The sales cycle describes the series of steps leading to a sale (or purchase), including awareness, consideration, and selection. The goal is to push customers to buy—advertising to increase familiarity, informing to build knowledge, offering incentives to close a deal.

The sales cycle also refers to the time required to complete the sales process. The length of the sales cycle varies depending on the cost, complexity, and context of use of the product being sold. For example, a hospital information system might have a three-year sales cycle; a new game console might have a sales cycle lasting a few days or weeks.

The sales cycle does not have a single, canonical form. Many variations appear in the literature, and in practice people often tailor the model adding or subtracting steps to fit their own situations. A common characteristic of

Sales Cycle

Stage	Awareness	Consideration	Selection
Pool size	Potential audience	Interested prospects	Actual customers
Time			

Goal	Action	Measure
Where seller wants buyer "to be"	What seller does	What seller watches
Adoption stage	**Sales stage**	**Research stage**
Aware of seller + offering	Publicize + advertise	Recognition score + # of inquiries
Understand features + benefits	Inform + educate	Reputation + quality scores
Interact + decide to try	Close + transact	Sales $ + % repeat purchases
Increase use + effectiveness	Service + support	Usability scores + maintenance records
Advocate + influence others	Reinforce + reward	Net promoter + satisfaction scores
Suggest changes + additions	Listen + adopt	# of unexpected uses of product

sales cycle models is the funnel shape, a visual analogy to a process that begins with a large pool of candidates, narrows to a group of interested prospects, and narrows again to those who purchase. The funnel model is useful in managing a "sales pipeline." Defining a series of steps in the sales process creates opportunities for setting goals, tracking performance, and analyzing effectiveness, which makes forecasting more reliable and enables improvement of the process.

This model updates the sales cycle, framing stages in the process as goals the seller has for customer thinking and adding actions the seller may take to achieve those goals and measures of their effectiveness. This model also adds a stage for customer feedback, important for product improvement and innovation.

Related to the sales cycle model are models of decision-making and technology-adoption. Rogers[6] articulates a five-step innovation-decision process:

– Knowledge
– Persuasion
– Decision
– Implementation
– Confirmation

Kotler and Armstrong[4] articulate another variation on the decision process:

– Problem recognition: Perceiving a need
– Information search: Seeking value
– Alternative evaluation: Assessing value
– Purchase decision: Buying value
– Post-purchase behavior: Value in consumption or use

Defining the first step as problem recognition may imply the "problem" has an objective existence, independent of the customer—and the producer. Framing the decision process as problem-solving suggests the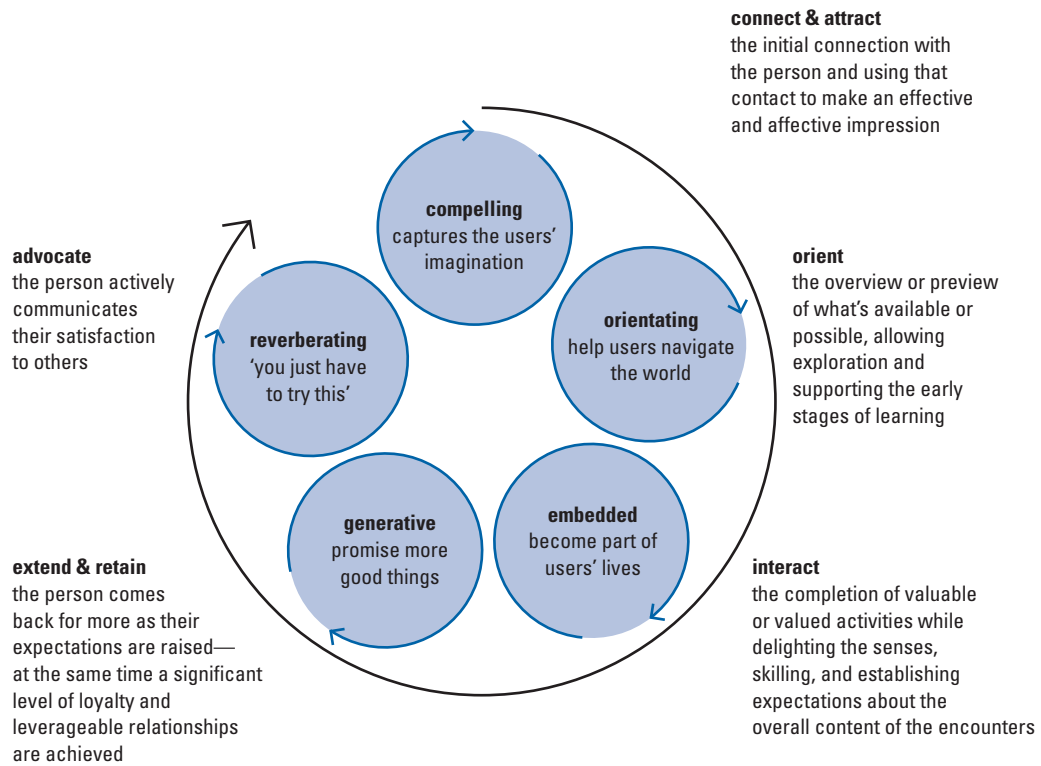 customer is a "rational actor." The danger is that people often act more on emotion than by rationally calculating self-interest. And their definitions of problems depend on their point of view and are often formed in conversations with others—including producers. Indeed part of the innovation process is reframing an existing situation to create consensus around a new definition of a problem.

Models of decision-making as problem-solving echo models of the design process as problem-solving which were common in discussions of first-generation design methods. In proposing a second generation of design methods, Horst Rittel[5] articulated the limitations of design as problem-solving and offered as an alternative a view of design as conversation.

Bitner[1] articulates a six-step self-service technology adoption process:

– Awareness
– Investigation
– Evaluation
– Trial
– Repeated use
– Commitment

Bitner suggests "trial" is the most important stage because it is influenced by customer readiness or the expectations that they bring to the interaction—can they do "it" (ability), do they know what to do (clarity), and do they see benefit in doing it (motivation). These ideas are consistent with the concept of transparency in interaction design. Of course, producers (and designers) have goals for their customers' experience. But all they can do is provide artifacts and services that create opportunities for experience. We should be cautious about proposing to "design experience." Ultimately, construction of experience remains with the customer. You own your experience. No one else can construct your experience for you. In John Dewey's words, "a beholder must create his own experience."[3]

connect & attract
the initial connection with the person and using that contact to make an effective and affective impression

compelling
captures the users' imagination

orientating
help users navigate the world

advocate
the person actively communicates their satisfaction to others

reverberating
'you just have to try this'

orient
the overview or preview of what's available or possible, allowing exploration and supporting the early stages of learning

generative
promise more good things

embedded
become part of users' lives

extend & retain
the person comes back for more as their expectations are raised—at the same time a significant level of loyalty and leverageable relationships are achieved

interact
the completion of valuable or valued activities while delighting the senses, skilling, and establishing expectations about the overall content of the encounters

So: What is the customers' view of their experience?

Customers interact with producers through "touch-points," clusters of elements combined into artifacts that foster product or service experiences. These touch-point experiences form a larger arc or path: the customer journey. The series of customer experiences aggregate to form an impression of the product or service in its context—developing an idea of what it does, what it means, and what its worth—what the customer thinks of the brand. Indeed, the impression (the sum of the experiences) is the brand.[7]

Ideally, the experiences build a strong relationship between customer and producer. John Rheinfrank, Shelley Evenson, and others developed a model of the ideal "experience cycle" as they worked on a usability design strategy for Xerox in the 1980s. They were searching for a way to describe a copier in its broader context—in its ecology—so that they could design the product to fit its context. The initial model had seven steps, but over the years the team refined it to five.

The experience cycle model describes the steps people go through in building a relationship with a product or service:

– connecting (first impression)
– becoming oriented (understanding what's possible)
– interacting with the product (direct experience)
– extending perception or skill and use (mastery)
– telling others (teaching or spreading activation)

Explicit in the experience cycle is the process by which customers become advocates and introduce others to the product, beginning the cycle anew. This frame suggests a shift in focus from "the sale" as a point event or "trial" as a single interaction to nurturing a series of relationships in a continuous cycle that yields increasing returns.

The experience cycle model suggests attributes for an ideal experience—criteria for evaluating experience or even key performance indicators (KPI)—which designers can address. A good product or service experience is:

– compelling (it captures the user's imagination)
– orienting (it helps users navigate the product and the world)
– embedded (it becomes a part of users' lives)
– generative (it unfolds, growing as users' skills increase)
– reverberating (it delights so much that users tell other people about it)

In Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," people are completely involved in an activity for its own sake. In peak flow experiences, people are engaged in discovery, transported to a new reality.[2] Though in most experiences we cannot expect people to "become so involved that nothing else matters," addressing the facets of experience can make flow easier to achieve.

The experience cycle also helps designers reflect upon another important design consideration—what

expectations people bring to the experience. At each stage, resources for experience must account for or consciously disregard a customer's expectations for the stage and design accordingly. The experience cycle plays out at multiple scales. It plays out "in-the-large," across the life of the relationship between a customer and a product. It also plays out "in-the-small," across the experience a customer has with each touch point. For example, a good magazine ad connects immediately with readers, presents a clear structure, draws readers in, extends their knowledge, and delights them so much that they show it to other people. A good product package, a good interface, a good support service, and other well-executed touch points enable a similar cycle of experience. These interactions build on one another and further cement the producer-customer relationship.

The experience cycle model suggests experience has a fractal quality—that experience has a self- similar structure at different scales. The model suggests recursion—each stage stands for itself but can also "call" the whole model. The recursion process can continue down to a fi ne scale as designers work out the ways an experience ramifies. (Design also has a self-similar structure at different scales; employs recursion; and ramifies.) Thus the experience cycle model is useful to designers both in early stages of a project when working out the broad outlines of a product or service and also throughout the process as successive iterations add increasingly finer levels of detail.
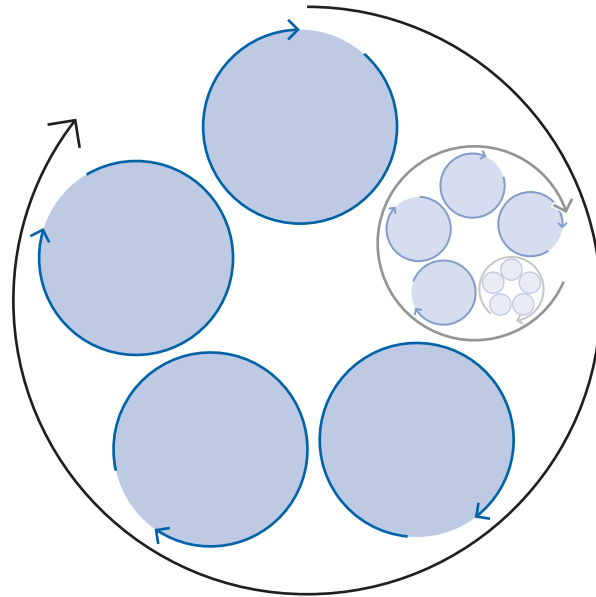
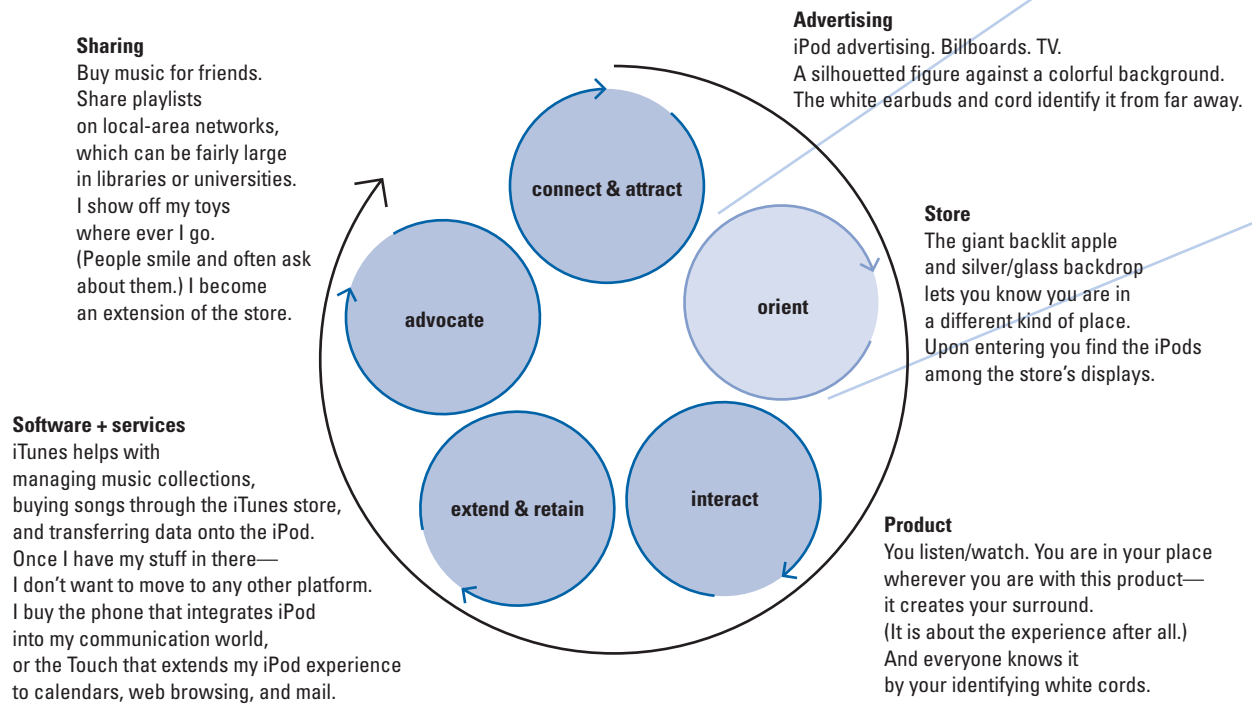The experience cycle model moves beyond the push model of the sales cycle, framing interaction between producer and customer in terms of an on-going relationship. It describes steps that build the relationship, and it offers criteria for evaluating the experiences customers have with products and services. It is a useful tool for anyone involved in planning/designing or managing/operating products or services.

Experience cycle "in the large" and "in the small"
Integrated experience across multiple scales: Apple as a case study
The fractal nature of the experience cycle

In the large
Multiple touch-points across the life of a product

Sharing
Buy music for friends.
Share playlists
on local-area networks,
which can be fairly large
in libraries or universities.
I show off my toys
where ever I go.
(People smile and often ask
about them.) I become
an extension of the store.

Advertising
iPod advertising. Billboards. TV.
A silhouetted figure against a colorful background.
The white earbuds and cord identify it from far away.

Store
The giant backlit apple
and silver/glass backdrop
lets you know you are in
a different kind of place.
Upon entering you find the iPods
among the store's displays.

Software + services
iTunes helps with
managing music collections,
buying songs through the iTunes store,
and transferring data onto the iPod.
Once I have my stuff in there—
I don't want to move to any other platform.
I buy the phone that integrates iPod
into my communication world,
or the Touch that extends my iPod experience
to calendars, web browsing, and mail.

Product
You listen/watch. You are in your place
wherever you are with this product—
it creates your surround.
(It is about the experience after all.)
And everyone knows it
by your identifying white cords.

connect & attract

advocate

orient

extend & retain

interact

In the middle
Multiple touch-points in the store experience

Busy locations
Apple locates flag-ship stores
in high-traffic areas like Market Street
in SF, Michigan Avenue in Chicago,
and 5th Avenue in NY. It also locates mini stores
(as narrow as 15 feet) in malls.
Both strategies expose Apple products
directly to people who wouldn't otherwise see them.

Repeat visitors
Apple stores are almost always busy,
often late into the evening.
(The 5th Avenue store is open 24x7.)
Many of those visitors
are repeat customers.

Simple layout
The stores display relatively few products
in an open even sparse layout, so that visitors
can easily find what they're looking for.
A greeter stands at the door,
and plenty of trained staff are available
throughout the store to answer questions.

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Genius bar + classes
The genius bar offers on-site service;
walk-in or reserve a time online.
The theater offers a range of classes,
events, and free workshops.
$99 a year gets you all the classes you want,
even one-on-one training;
one-on-one shopping appointments are available, too.

Test drive
Visitors can test most of Apple's products
in the stores. There's even a special area
for kids and internet access. Recently, Apple
has begun to replace cash registers
with mobile check-out devices,
an effort to eliminate check-out lines.
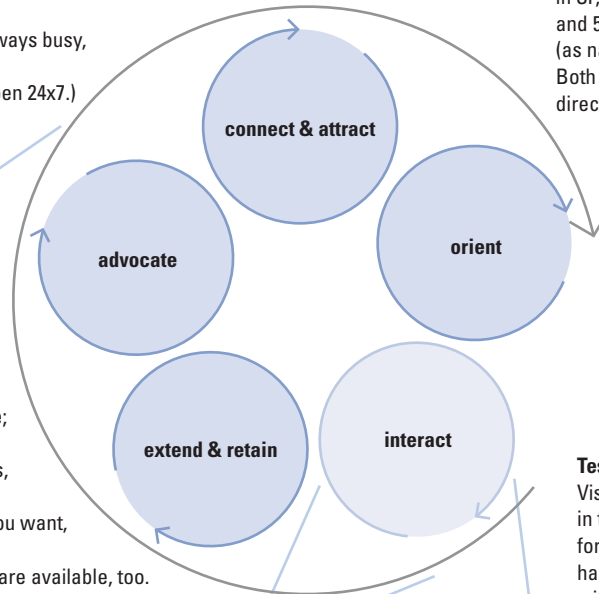
In the small
Multiple touch-points within the in-store purchase process

Museum-style staging
Because of the sparse layout, it is easy
for people to find the product category
that they are looking for—
differentiation between products is clear—
iPods vs. laptops vs. desktops.

Connect by mail
Staff offers opportunity to receive
the receipt by e-mail—
so there is another chance
for Apple to touch you
via a different channel.

Informative signs
Once at a station the information
about the product is displayed on
small cards, so you know
what you're looking at.

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Choose accessories
The staff member gathers
the item from stock (located
near the rear of the store)—
and directs you to accessories,
cables, cases, etc., and checks you out
right there with a hand-held device.

Listen to music
People can try on the products
by playing with them (headsets supplied.)
In the ipod section all the colors are displayed—
so you can even try them on with your outfit.
A staff member sees you playing,
asks if you'd like one.
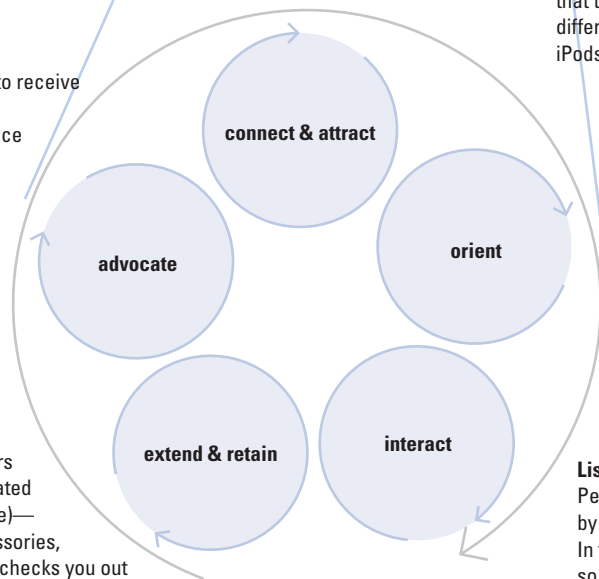
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