

The Experience Cycle

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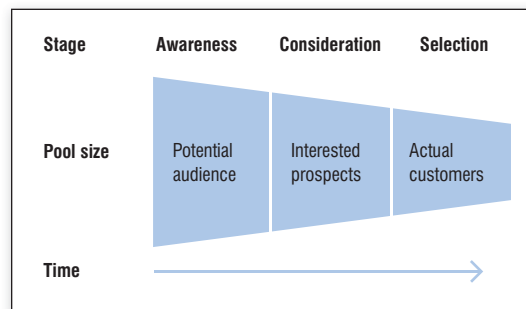
In this article, we contrast the “sales cycle” and related models with the “experience cycle” model. The sales cycle model is a traditional tool in business that frames the producer-customer relationship from the producer’s point of view and aims to funnel potential customers to a transaction. The experience 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 ongoing 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



► The funnel shaped sales-cycle model

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 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.

An update to the sales-cycle model frames stages in the process as goals the seller has for customer thinking, adds actions the seller may take to achieve those goals, and measures its effectiveness. This model also adds a stage for customer feedback, important for product improvement and innovation.

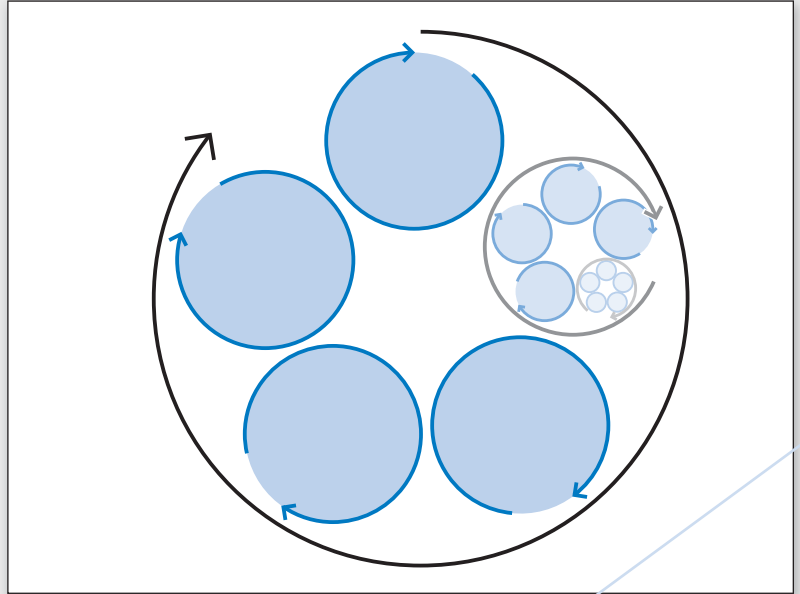
Related to the sales-cycle model are models of decision making and technology adoption. Rogers[1] articulates a five-step innovation decision process:

1. Knowledge
2. Persuasion
3. Decision
4. Implementation
5. Confirmation

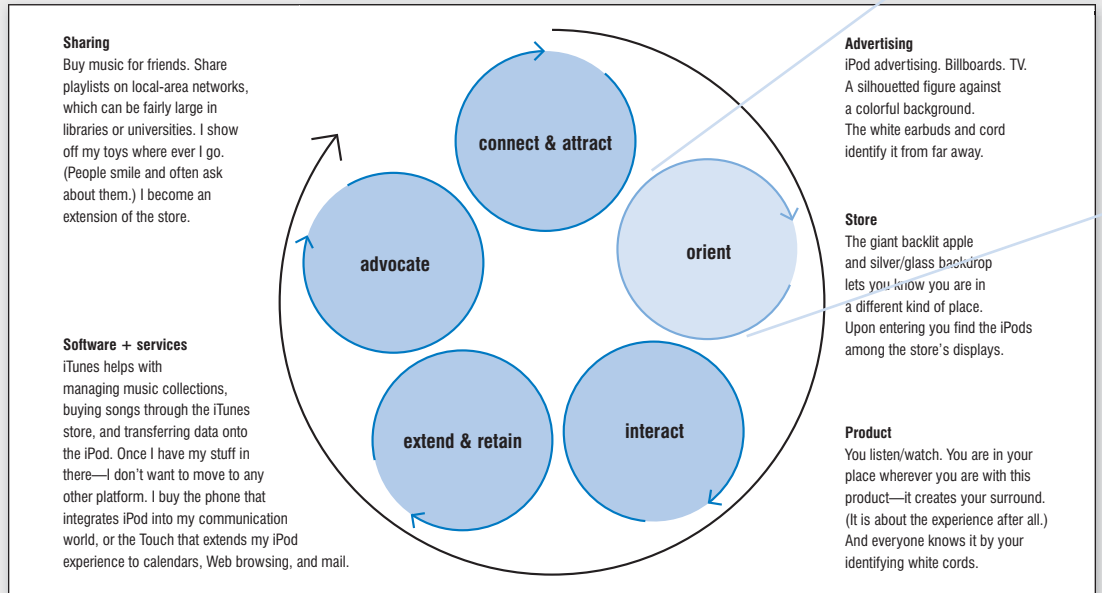
[1] Rogers, E. M. *Diffusion of Innovation*. New York: The Free Press, 1995.

Experience cycle “in the large” and “in the small”—an 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



Kotler and Armstrong [2] articulate another variation on the decision process:

1. Problem recognition—perceiving a need
2. Information search—seeking value
3. Alternative evaluation—assessing value
4. Purchase decision—buying value
5. Post-purchase behavior—value in consumption or use

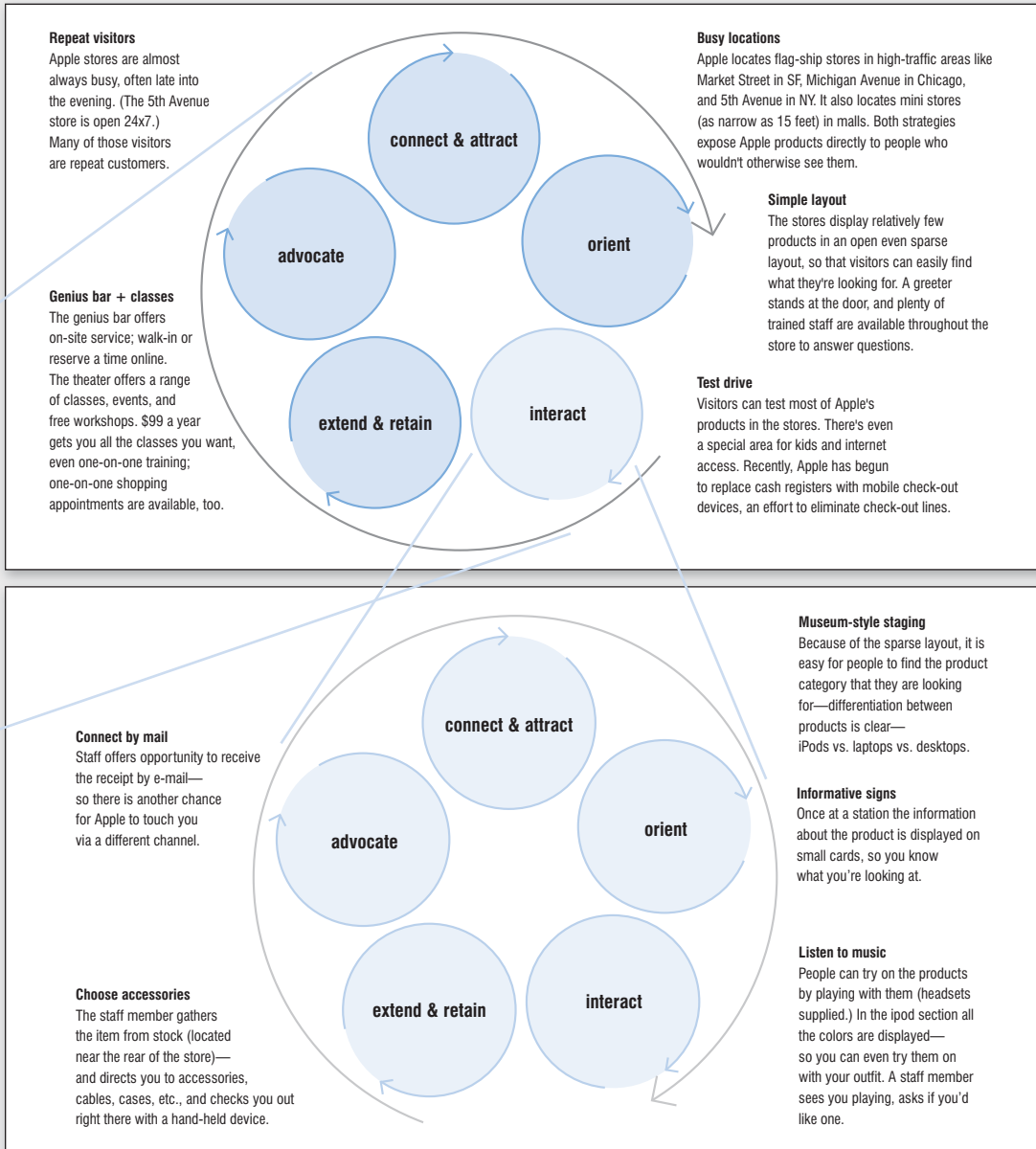
Defining the first step as problem recognition may imply the “problem” has an objective existence, independent of the customer—and the producer. Framing the decision process as problem solving suggests the customer is a “rational actor.” The danger is that people often act more on emo-

tion 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 [3] articulated the limitations of design as problem solving and offered as an alternative a view

[2] Kotler, P. and G. Armstrong. *Principles of Marketing*. New York: Prentice Hall, 2001.

[3] Rittel, H., “On the Planning Crisis: Systems Analysis of the “First and Second Generations.” *Bedrifts Ökonomen* 8 (1972): 390–396.



► In the middle—multiple touch points in the store experience

► In the small—multiple touch points within the in-store purchase process

of design as conversation.

Bitner [4] articulates a six-step, self-service technology adoption process:

- 1. Awareness
- 2. Investigation
- 3. Evaluation
- 4. Trial
- 5. Repeated use
- 6. 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 it for you. In John Dewey’s words, “a beholder must create his own experience [5].”

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

[4] Bitner, M., S. Brown, and M. Meuter. “Technology Infusion in Service Encounters.” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 28, no. 1 (2000).

[5] Dewey, J. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 1980.

► The updated sales-cycle model

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

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 it’s worth—what the customer thinks of the brand. Indeed, the impression (the sum of the experiences) is the brand [6].

[6] Schmidt, B. *Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to Sense, Feel, Think, Act, and Relate to Your Company and Brands*. New York: The Free Press, 1999.

Ideally, the experiences build a strong relationship between customer and producer. John Rheinfrank and others (including coauthor Shelley Evenson) 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:

1. Connecting (first impression)
2. Becoming oriented (understanding what’s possible)
3. Interacting with the product (direct experience)
4. Extending perception or skill and use (mastery)
5. Telling others (teaching or spreading activation)

[7] Csikszentmihályi, M. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

Explicit in the experience cycle is the process by which customers become advocates and introduce others to the product, beginning the cycle anew.

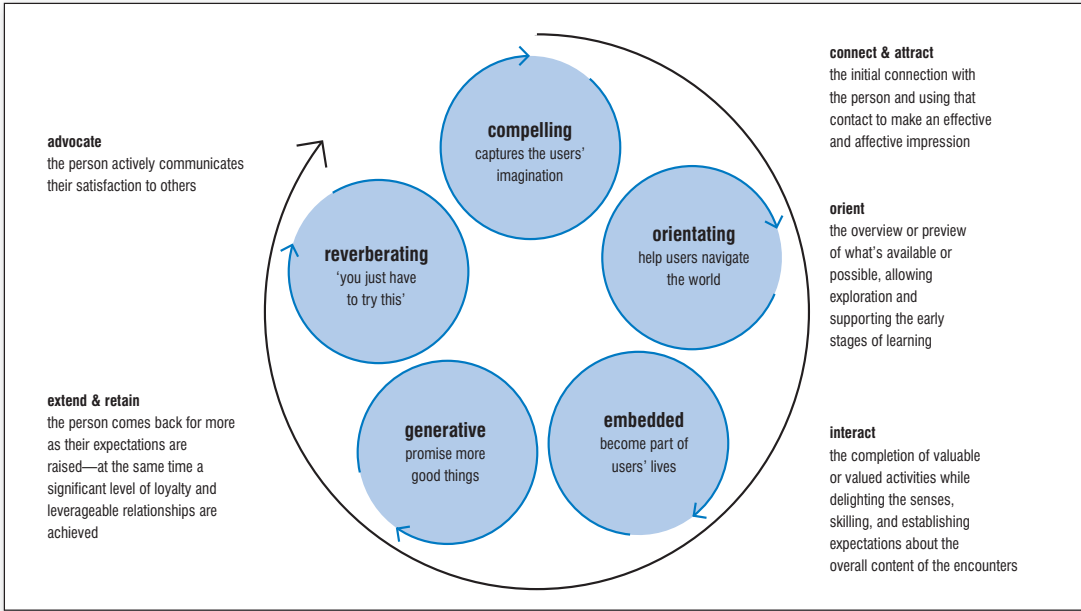
This frame suggests a shift in focus from “the sale” as a point event or “trial” as a single interaction to nurturing a series of relationships in a continuous cycle that yields increasing returns.

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:

1. Compelling (it captures the user’s imagination)
2. Orienting (it helps users navigate the product and the world)
3. Embedded (it becomes a part of users’ lives)
4. Generative (it unfolds, growing as users’ skills increase)
5. Reverberating (it delights so much that users tell other people about it)

In Csikszentmihályi’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 [7]. 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



► The experience-cycle model

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 fine scale as designers work out the ways in which 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 ongoing 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.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS Hugh Dubberly manages a consultancy focused on making services and software easier to use through interaction design and information design. As vice president he was responsible for design and production of Netscape's Web services. He was at Apple for 10 years, where he managed graphic design and corporate identity and co-created the *Knowledge Navigator* series of videos. Dubberly also founded an interactive media department at Art Center and has taught at San Jose State, IIT/ID, and Stanford.



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