

Engaging the Online Customer

by Bruce Grey Tedesco

In the internet atmosphere there is a vastness which can appear unmanageable. A business that offers any online endeavor must be aware of a need for reliability, speed, content, and uniqueness. There is not yet a consensus on how to define, measure, or monitor this atmosphere and its components. In what follows we present a beginning for methodically understanding and managing a critical constitute of the online experience. First investigated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1977, *Flow* has become an accepted theory of personal engagement with situations.

Engagement is common to all aspects of an individual's experience with the internet and e-commerce. The engagement of a customer with an e-tailer and the engagement of a Web surfer with a game typify the interaction of someone who seeks online activity. Using the elements of flow theory, we can quantify and track the effectiveness of a Web destination.

Opportunity for market research

What now follows is a well defined area of contribution for market research. Tracking flow and directing website content improvement are ideal functions for market research.

The framework for flow is well documented as an experience in a number of activities: e.g., sports, art, science, community involvement, etc. Recently the eLab at Vanderbilt University has made available a conceptualization of the flow model applicable to internet encounters. Their excellent work with structural equation models confirms a connection between a positive experience on the web with specific and measurable attributes collected in a survey.

This same data models well with neural networks. It is now possible to identify the relative importance of flow drivers. Simulations using survey data and a neural network flow model depict the elasticity (thus the opportunity) between aspects of a web session and flow.

Once this model information is obtained, content on the site can be adjusted. These adjustments will increase a site visitor's experience of flow. The increased flow experience would then directly translate into increased site activity and increased revenue.

Flow defined

Csikszentmihalyi uses the following list to define what he means by flow experiences:

There are clear goals every step of the way.
There is immediate feedback to one's actions.
There is a balance between challenges and skills.
Action and awareness are merged.
Distractions are excluded from consciousness.
There is no worry of failure.
Self-consciousness disappears.
The sense of time becomes distorted.
The activity becomes autotelic (an end in itself).

This list serves as a fine introduction to the conceptual flow model confirmed by the eLab. Included and measured in that version are (among others): involvement, skill, focused attention, control, and exploratory behavior. These groups of measurements which are monitored by three dozen or more survey variables, provide direct information for web content design.

Action steps

Content is king. Design is critical. These universally accepted tenets of internet activity and e-commerce are often claimed to be purely qualitative facets. Within the structure of a flow model, they become active. Surveying and modeling flow on the internet now shapes a Website to be most fulfilling for the customer.

The application of this method is direct. For example, factors of skill often appear in the eLab survey data. It is a constant driver of flow. At first it may seem as though there is not much that can be done with skill. Perhaps it seems much like the weather is for a marketer ---- an influence outside of our control. But, there is a great deal to be done about the user's skill. This is due to the fact that skill is about *perception*. Each time a user is on the web, his or her skill at that moment is perceived within the context of what they can accomplish.

We can use this knowledge to create a high ease of use on sites, empower the user in every way with clear direction and guidance. Through empowerment, online users will perceive their own skill level as higher and stronger.

In popular culture the terms such as "buzz" and "in the zone" both refer to experiences that are understood to be positive, intense, and satisfying. Understanding how to boost customer flow is the relevant parallel in Website design and content development.

Fulfillment of the online experience will lead directly to customer loyalty and satisfaction. Just as traditional brand equity has been the foundation for relating to customers, flow stands to provide an equally powerful bond between the internet and individuals.

Customers that are absorbed in the activity of a site will return again and again. They will know where to find *flow*.