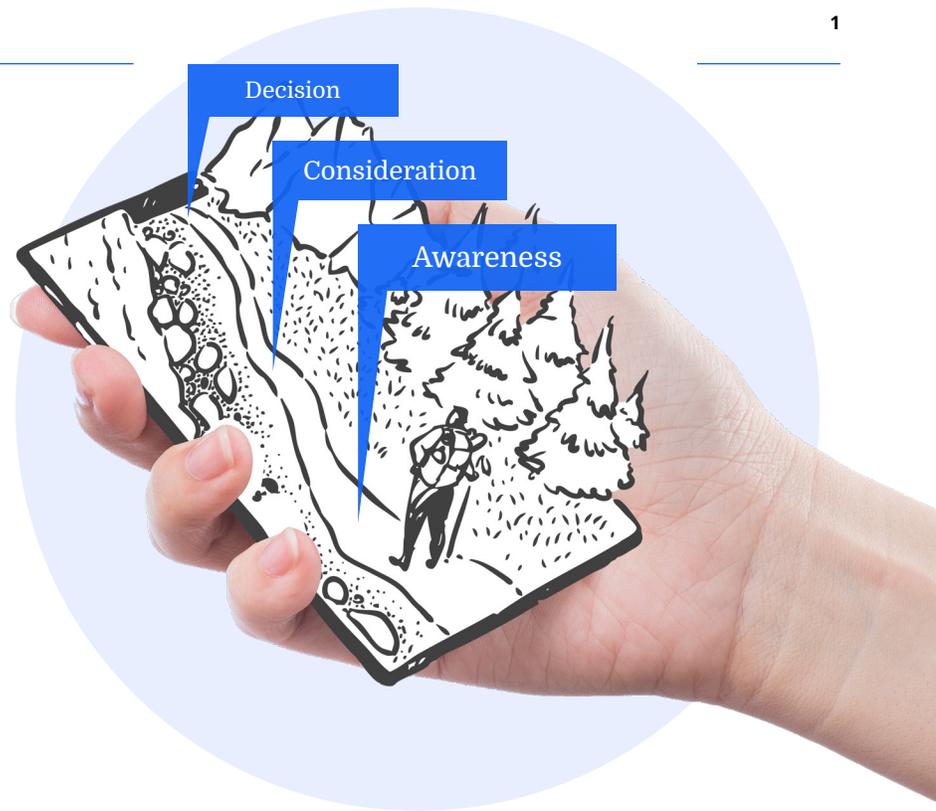


# Applying the Online Customer Journey for Small Business Success



Building strong relationships with customers has always been critical to success in business. Small businesses are often exceptional at providing quality service and valued products to ensure customers are satisfied.

We've included a helpful chart to show you specific examples of the customer journey and how you can apply them to your business



But have we ever stepped into the shoes of our customers to understand what they're doing beyond their relationship with us? Do we know what happened just prior to them choosing us, or directly afterwards, or even why they really needed us to begin with? Do we know what they liked and didn't about finding their way to us?

As a small business owner, understanding the answers to these questions is paramount to building and maintaining your customer base and the ongoing success of your company – and your customers expect you to know them well. Over 75 percent of small business customers say companies should understand their needs and emotions.<sup>1</sup> To create lasting relationships with your customers you have to build personal connections instead of simply offering transactional benefits. That's why many business futurists are predicting that providing

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/15396-how-small-businesses-grow-customer-loyalty.html>

a consistently excellent customer experience (CX) will overtake price and product quality as a key brand differentiator by the end of 2020 or shortly afterwards – and with good reason.<sup>2</sup> Companies that lead in CX outperform those that don't by nearly 80 percent and 84 percent of companies that work to improve their CX report an increase in revenue.<sup>3</sup> While a renewed focus on the customer experience will be

**“It's no longer about how you want to sell, it's about how your customers want to buy.”**

critical as businesses move forward, it has become clear that it's no longer about how you want to sell, it's about how your customers want to buy. Being mindful of how your customers think and feel before, during and after choosing your brand and making a purchase is a pathway to creating greater customer engagement and stronger brand loyalty. Becoming proficient in CX strategies begins with a deeper comprehension of a topic that only 25 percent of small businesses say

they understand – the customer journey.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Online Customer Journey and Why it is Critical For Small Business Success**

As the tactical focus of small businesses continues to shift from building a better brand to better understanding their customers, successfully arriving at this pivotal point

of clarity has been challenging for many. Gone are the days of generic marketing messages to mass audiences and a one-size-fits-all approach to service –

**“Identifying key areas of action before, during and after the purchase process can help you learn more about your customers' mindset, motivation and reasons for buying.”**

the desire to create personalized customer experiences is driving the way brands are promoting their products and services.

It all begins with understanding the customer journey, the sum total of all experiences an individual will have with your brand. Although every customer's encounter with your brand may be different, identifying key areas of action before, during and after the purchase process can help you learn more about your customers' mindset, motivation and reasons for buying.

It is worth noting that based on consistent consumer behavior trends, the majority of customer journey focus is now through the lens of the online buyer. Over 200 million Americans (or two-thirds of the U.S. population) consistently make online (eCommerce) purchases and this number

is projected to steadily increase.<sup>5</sup> In addition, due to more people staying home and spending more time online during the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis,

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.walkerinfo.com/Portals/0/Documents/Knowledge%20Center/Featured%20Reports/WALKER-Customers2020.pdf>, <sup>3</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/blakemorgan/2019/09/24/50-stats-that-prove-the-value-of-customer-experience/#490b659c4ef2>, <sup>4</sup> <https://www.adobe.com/uk/offer/digital-trends-2020.html>, <sup>5</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?q=how+many+people+in+america&oq=how+many+people+in+america&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l7.6328j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

eCommerce was up 30 percent from March through April of 2020 as compared to the same time frame the previous year.<sup>6</sup> Because of these growing numbers, many small businesses are more interested than ever before in developing an understanding of the thinking and patterns of these online shoppers that are critical to their ongoing success.

## Why the Traditional Sales Funnel May Be Obsolete

While many people equate the customer journey to the “sales funnel,” a century old step-by-step model designed to bring customers closer to a business’s offer and ultimately provoke a positive purchase decision<sup>6</sup>, the widespread adoption of customer internet usage is changing things. Nearly 90 percent of customers look for businesses online and conduct their own research before contacting a store or making a purchase decision.<sup>7</sup>

Many business analysts claim these empowered online customers are making the sales

**“Businesses must adapt their approaches to meet customers where they are instead of where businesses want them to be.”**

funnel – a business-focused approach to generating results – obsolete. In their book “Smash the Funnel: The Customer Journey Redefined for the Digital Age,” authors and business experts Eric Keoles and Mike Lieberman say the customer (not business) must be the center of any model.

With customers now having easy access to do their own online research where, when and how they want, successful businesses must adapt their approaches to meet customers where they are instead of where businesses want them to be. The customer journey, they argue, is an important method for accomplishing this goal.<sup>8</sup>

## Building a Customer Journey Map

Exploring the customer journey begins with a mapping process that helps you visualize the experience of interacting with your brand from the viewpoint of your customers and in the

way they actually see your brand as opposed to how you think they do. Nearly 70 percent of all businesses across the globe have applied customer journey mapping as part of their brand research and 90 percent of companies using this technique say the practice is yielding positive results. Of all the business tools available, the majority of small businesses agree that customer journey maps are one of the most valuable.<sup>9</sup>

Customer journey maps allow you to get a big picture overview of how your customers interact with your brand by defining and analyzing key touch points of your customers’ online experiences with your brand. Creating and understanding a customer journey map will help you to clearly define moments of truth and make or break scenarios from the customer perspective that can result in a potential buyer suddenly exiting your website or taking the next

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/19/coronavirus-what-americans-are-buying-online-while-in-quarantine.html>, <sup>7</sup> <https://www.salesforce.com/blog/2018/08/digital-shopper-first-retail-report-research.html>,

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.smashthefunnel.com/>, <sup>9</sup> <https://www.cxp.org/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=8bf803fc-7191-1412-ca79-d1bb5c26b7ef>, <sup>9</sup> <https://www.cxp.org/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=8bf803fc-7191-1412-ca79-d1bb5c26b7ef>

step and clicking through the steps of your eCommerce page to make a purchase.

Understanding the customer journey from the outside in means you need to talk to your customers. You can gather their input personally when speaking with them, via periodic email surveys or with a brief questionnaire after they make a purchase – offering a discount on a future purchase often encourages participation. Use this information and look for common answers you can use to create buyer personas – a summary profile of your buyer, what drives them, why they are interested in your brand and what provokes action. Your employees may also help you in defining these personas as they may deal with customers more than you.

**Most buyer journey maps spotlight three key areas of the customer journey: awareness, consideration and decision.**

### Awareness

Your customer is experiencing a problem or challenge. Whether they have clearly



What factors may encourage a purchase?



What is my target customer doing to seek resolution?



What is my target customer struggling with?



Are they searching online?



There are many variables to consider, but mapping out your customer journey allows you to see the big picture, giving you clarity when determining your strategy and tactics.

identified this challenge and are actively seeking a solution or have suddenly come across an issue they didn't know existed, this customer is led to your brand as a possible solution. They may find your company actively through an online search or a social media post or passively such as when your customer is reading a magazine and sees an ad you

have placed that describes a problem and positions your business as the answer.



**Key Questions to Ask During This Phase:**

What is my target customer struggling with? What causes them discomfort or displeasure? How and where will they look for help?

## “Creating a customer journey will help you identify areas of opportunity for improving the customer experience.”

### Consideration

Once a potential customer begins to take a closer look at the solutions you offer, they are in the consideration phase. While they have not yet committed to making a purchase, they are taking the next steps to determine if they wish to do so. Keep in mind that your customer’s journey will most likely extend beyond the parameters of your own brand – they will probably compare other solutions from other brands and read online reviews for example. However, they will also consider your brand and may visit your website to learn more. You can prompt a potential buyer to take action during this stage by providing value-based content on your website or offering a discount incentive to encourage a purchase.



#### *Key Questions to Ask During This Phase:*

What is my target customer doing to seek resolution?  
Are they searching online?  
Reading Google reviews?  
Asking friends or family for advice?

### Decision

Once a customer decides to make a purchase, it may be with your brand or one of your competitors. This is the moment of truth. If a customer puts items in their online shopping cart on your website, your mission is to make it easy for them to complete the transaction – over 75 percent of customers abandon shopping carts because of problems checking out on an eCommerce page.<sup>10</sup> Offering other information on your eCommerce page such as free delivery and restating the benefit of the product or service may help to prompt the transaction.

Keep in mind that there is no finite timeline on how long the phases that lead to a customer decision may take – every situation is different. However, these phases represent critical milestones in the customer journey and understanding how these phases can apply to your specific customers and business can help you generate more revenue, build brand loyalty and create long-term customer engagement.



#### *Key Questions to Ask During This Phase:*

What criteria does my target customer use when deciding to make a purchase? What factors may encourage a purchase – an easy checkout process, free shipping or a discount on the eCommerce page?

## Applying a Customer Journey Map to Your Business

Creating a customer journey that is specific to your business will help you to isolate key phases and identify areas of opportunity for improving the customer experience.

<sup>10</sup> <https://optinmonster.com/cart-abandonment-statistics/>

*To give you an idea of how this model may apply to your business, here is an example featuring three small business verticals, a customer point of view for each journey phase and touchpoint opportunities that may successfully lead your customers from awareness of a problem to a decision to buy.*

Customer Journey Phase	Roofing Customer	Plumbing Customer	Pool/Spa Customer	Touchpoints/ Opportunities
<b>Awareness</b>	My home's shingles are showing signs of distress. I will post on my local community connect page on Facebook to see who my neighbors might recommend.	There's a slow leak in the pipework of my kitchen sink. I will search online for a plumber who can help.	I will be opening my home pool in a month or so and will need some assistance balancing the water quality. I'll check Google Reviews to see what services are highly rated.	<b>Social Media</b> <b>SEO Content</b> <b>Online Reviews</b>
<b>Consideration</b>	I have received some good recommendations and am reviewing roofing websites now. Some are hard to navigate and I am having trouble finding the information I need. I am also having trouble reading the site details on my smartphone.	After finding a number of local plumbers online, I have been calling but few have responded. I need help now!	I followed up on the highest rated reviews and am looking at these pool service websites now. Some of the pricing seems really high.	<b>Website Building</b> <b>Website Enhancement</b> <b>Mobile Optimization</b> <b>Customer Service</b> <b>Value Proposition</b> <b>Service Descriptions</b>
<b>Decision</b>	I found a roofing company that made it easy for me to make an appointment on their website. They did great work and I even received a discount for paying online.	While searching further, I came across a banner ad for a plumber who had a 24-hour emergency hotline. They quickly repaired my sink and followed up with a call the next day to make sure I was satisfied.	I found a pool service that had a great blog which clearly explained the services I would receive for my investment. I chose an affordable monthly package that will allow our family to enjoy our pool without the maintenance hassles and worries.	<b>Incentives/Discounts</b> <b>eCommerce</b> <b>Web Banner Ads</b> <b>Service After the Sale</b> <b>Blog Posts</b> <b>Service Packages</b>

<sup>19</sup> <https://home.bluesnap.com/snap-center/blog/9-payment-trends-that-will-shape-2020/>, <sup>20</sup> Ibid., <sup>21</sup> <https://www.creditcards.com/credit-card-news/payment-method-statistics-1276.php>, <sup>22</sup> Ibid., <sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Small businesses use customer journey maps like these to better understand their target audience, and identify opportunities – like enhancing their websites, optimizing their sites for mobile screens, creating more impactful social media content and improving their eCommerce page – to build and grow the customer experience. In addition, you will need to identify things such as how your customers best consume content (videos, podcasts, blogs) and preferred payment methods (credit cards, PayPal, Apple Pay) to make sure you are keeping pace with their expectations.

Customers appear to be cheering small businesses on in their customer experience endeavors. Over 40 percent of all consumers say they are willing to pay more for a friendly, welcoming experience and over half would pay more for a fast and efficient purchase experience.<sup>11</sup> Plus, while price and quality are key considerations, nearly

75 percent say that a positive customer experience is the most important factor in creating brand loyalty.<sup>12</sup>

## Using the Customer Journey to Plan for the Future

Moving ahead in a challenging economy, small businesses will continue to look for every possible edge. Over 80 percent of all business owners believe they will compete on customer experience alone in the near future, although only 20 percent claim to have developed an experience that exceeds customer expectations.<sup>13</sup> The ability to understand and apply a customer journey map that is specific to your business will be a key factor in your success.

While understanding the customer journey is important, it is an ever-changing model. Your customers post COVID-19 may look very different compared to how you defined them before the crisis. That's why many companies

consistently send out customer satisfaction surveys semiannually or after a purchase to gather the thoughts and feelings of their brand followers. In addition, the digital environment continues to change – artificial intelligence is creating high service expectations from your customers and technologies like chatbots and evolving the mindset of how customers consider interacting with your brand. Staying up to speed with these tools and technologies will not only help you provide an outstanding customer experience but keep you ahead of your competition as well.

One important statistic seems to best underscore the importance of creating an excellent customer experience – a customer happy with their brand experience has a lifetime value to a company that is 600 to 1,400 percent greater than that of a detractor.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://cmo.adobe.com/articles/2018/4/new-study-finds-consumers-would-pay-more-for-better-cx-pwc.html#gs.7nyjpc>, <sup>12</sup> Ibid., <sup>13</sup> <https://www.superoffice.com/blog/customer-experience-statistics/>,  
<sup>14</sup> <https://www.customerthermometer.com/customer-service/customer-service-and-satisfaction-statistics-for-2020/>