



DESIGN MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

ARTICLE REPRINT

**Design
Management
Review**

The Customer Continuum: Turning Casual Web Users into Brand Advocates

Gwyneth Dwyer, *Director, Writing Services, Larsen*

Reprint #07181DWY53

This article was first published in *Design Management Review* Vol. 18 No. 1

Design Creativity and Market Leadership

Copyright © Winter 2007 by the Design Management Institute, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission. To place an order or receive photocopy permission, contact DMI via phone at (617) 338-6380, Fax (617) 338-6570, or E-mail: dmistaff@dmigroup.com. The Design Management Institute, DMI, and the design mark are service marks of the Design Management Institute.

www.dmi.org

The Customer Continuum: Turning Casual Web Users into Brand Advocates

by Gwyneth Dwyer

It is clear that a business's real-world presence is amplified by a successful presence in the digital world—a presence that delivers memorable customer experiences that can be leveraged to create value and nurture loyalty. With an analysis of the stages in relationships with consumers and a breadth of interesting examples, Gwyneth Dwyer outlines how organizations can build sites that deliver this extra traction.



Gwyneth Dwyer, Director, Writing Services, Larsen

Yes, of course you have a website, but is it doing enough to grow your business? Is it working hard enough to turn casual web users into brand advocates?

Understanding the customer continuum can help. Whether your website is e-commerce, informational, or purely promotional, it should move customers quickly and efficiently along this continuum:

- **Awareness**—Reach out to make people aware of your company and its offerings. Capture attention and hold interest.
- **Transformation**—Turn casual browsers into first-time buyers. Answer questions, overcome objections, and get the order.
- **Engagement**—Inspire one-time customers to become repeat customers. Build brand loyalty.

- **Allegiance**—Create customers who are true advocates for your brand. Encourage and support word-of-mouth marketing. Create community and deepen emotional connections.

Where do the majority of your customers lie on this continuum? Are they just learning about your products and services? Or are they knowledgeable repeat buyers? Figuring this out can provide valuable focus for a web redesign effort, and it can help you wisely allocate marketing dollars.

The rub, of course, is that most organizations have customers in *every phase* of the continuum. So in a perfect world, your website would be designed for each of these phases. The reality is that most organizations cannot overhaul an entire site, so the continuum

provides much-needed strategic clarity, especially when there's a tight budget or a looming deadline or an army of stakeholders.

Let's take a closer look at each of the four phases, examining a relevant website project for each. (Please note that the examples here focus on informational and promotional websites rather than e-commerce sites.)

Phase 1: Awareness

"I'm looking for..."

The first step is to get noticed. In the virtual world, you have numerous options: banner ads, keyword or sponsored-text ads, online coupons, good search engine rankings (both paid and organic), links from companion sites, peer marketing, blog posts, e-mail marketing, and viral marketing.

You can also rely on offline marketing to drive online traffic: print advertising, broadcast advertising, direct marketing, and media coverage. With print, the links are not direct, and your potential customer has to remember your URL or sort through a pile of papers to find it, but with enough exposure, an integrated campaign, and a compelling message, you can drive traffic.

Of course, for optimum results all these look-at-me strategies must drive potential customers to a superbly designed website—one that delivers on user expectations. If your primary goal is awareness, it's critical to focus the team on creating an absolutely top-notch site, one that compels users to forward your URL to friends and business associates. You must create a buzz. The CultureRx website, shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3, does just that.

Putting theory into practice: Culture Rx

Suppose for a moment you're a start-up consulting firm trying to get grassroots support for a radically new way to define work—in which schedules are entirely self-regulated, meetings are optional, and results count more than face time. How do you capture attention?

Culture Rx met this challenge by creating a real Wow of a website. No straightforward design grid here. Instead, the site features all the wonderful chaos of everyday business life: crumpled paper with coffee stains, Post-it® Notes, car keys, and a PDA. So visually arresting is the site



Figure 1. CultureRx homepage. Collage-style graphics and animated effects capture attention. The grass background loads randomly; sometimes users see brick or asphalt instead.



Figure 2. CultureRx Testimonials page. How CultureRx changes lives.



Figure 3. CultureRx Contact Us page. Crumpled napkin communicates authenticity.

that visitors tend to explore, read, and forward the URL to colleagues and friends. Several “Easter eggs” (hidden surprises that users can find by mousing over and clicking) delight users and encourage word-of-mouth endorsements.

Also key to the site’s success is the careful layering of content. On the homepage, several “think-about-it” headlines pulse by in Flash:

- If Einstein developed his theory of relativity in one hour, would you have made him sit at his desk for seven more?
- Imagine firing Michelangelo for taking four years to paint the Sistine Chapel.
- Imagine calling Benjamin Franklin a slacker for discovering electricity while flying a kite.
- Imagine Sir Isaac Newton discovering the law of gravity while sitting under an apple tree. How would he indicate that *on his timesheet?*

This site works because the innovative design is directly relevant to the business problem. And despite its gritty, work-in-progress appearance, the site has a very serious side, advocating a people-centered approach that engenders respect and does away with what is called sludge—the backbiting and monitoring habits of people for whom face time counts more than actual job performance.

This site received a Standard of Excellence Web Award from the Web Marketing Association, and one judge’s comment underscored the site’s ability to build awareness: “Love the design.... A CEO may tell another exec about ROWE (Results Only Word Environment) and say, ‘You’ve got to check these guys out.... These types of services are sold based on word of mouth and ROI.’”

Phase 2: Transformation

“Hmmm, interesting.... I think I’m ready to buy.”

Transformation is phase 2 of the continuum. Here, you’ve captured attention; now you need to hold interest, answer questions, overcome objections, and take the order.

Start with a well-constructed, thoughtfully organized, content-rich site. Make sure the navi-

gation is intuitive. “Develop for users, not the company,” says William Rice, president of the Web Marketing Association. “The best sites do not allow a corporate silo mentality to drive the information architecture.”

Be sure to stress your competitive strengths up front. If you’re differentiating based upon quality, expertise, innovation, speed, price, or any combination therein, make that abundantly clear—through both headlines and visuals. Yes, it’s obvious, but far too many sites bury their essential content, or never provide it.

Remember, on the web, your competitors are only a click away.

Also, web users are task-oriented and goal-driven. Follow the paths they might follow through your site. How many pages does it take before they can make the decision to buy? Is each page a well-thought-out next step, or is there redundancy? Realize that every page is a potential homepage. Users can easily land on an interior page of your site based on a search. Are your essential messages still clear?

Finally, be sure to ask for the sale with a clear call to action: Join now. Donate today. Request a sample. Speak with a representative. Add to cart. Check out.

Putting theory into practice: LithoInc.com

Is it possible to communicate exquisite print quality in an electronic medium? This was the challenge facing Litho, a high-end printer with a need to redesign a dated, ineffective site. (See figure 4.)

When Michele Nanney, Litho director of



Figure 4. Litho homepage before redesign. Irrelevant circle graphic, confusing navigation, lack of imagery.

marketing, describes Litho's business, she speaks about attention to detail. "In 9 out of 10 print jobs, there is compromise. Most printers say, 'That's about as far as we can go. We really can't push it any farther.' Not Litho. We minimize the compromise. And we needed our website to reflect that sensibility."

After examining competitors' websites, Litho and the design team determined what they would not include:

- No pictures of Fred the pressman posed in front of the Heidelberg press
- No pictures of the building
- No long history of the company
- No collage of client logos

Still, they were stumped. Paper is tactile; printing excellence is not something you can typically discern on a screen. How would a website convey that—especially when claims of superior print quality were commonplace among competitors?

Design creativity was the answer. The redesigned Litho site is itself a *virtual press sheet*, immediately recognizable to the audience of art directors and print buyers. (See Figures 5 and 6.) The website begins as a small image far away on the screen and zooms in at the user, just as the designer would zoom in on a press sheet to check detailing and quality. By capturing this essential press check experience online, Litho distinguished itself from the more mundane sites of competitors, and took the lead in coolness, a trait highly valued by the target audience. "We love what the site communicates," says Nanney. "We think it's a fabulous digital expression of our value."

As users explore the site, prominent images drawn from Litho's portfolio move by in the top quadrant, highlighting Litho's superior quality and prestigious client base. The clean, contemporary navigation is purposely rendered in a small point size to appeal to the audience of designers. And the supplemental navigation, visible in the lower left corner of the site, is the original press sheet itself.

"Visitors to LithoInc.com are genuinely impressed and frequently take the next step by calling Litho or using the online sample request form," says Nanney.

In 2006, the Web Marketing Association named the Litho site an Outstanding Website. "The site has the perfect design for the intended audience," said one Web Awards judge. The site was also featured on moluv.com, a site whose intent is "showin' luv to the world's best web designers."

"Quick, snappy Flash interface, the way it should be," said a reviewer on moluv.com.

"After we appeared on moluv.com, our Google ranking soared to number one," said Nanney. "Best of all, we saw a 30 percent increase in requests for information."



Figure 5. Litho homepage after redesign (www.LithoInc.com). Bold imagery and carefully distilled, easily scannable copy.



Figure 6. Litho About Us page. Random-load imagery showcases the Litho portfolio.

Phase 3: Engagement

“I always visit...”

Engagement is step 3 of the customer continuum. How do you inspire return visits and additional buying? For informational and promotional sites, provide content tailored to specific audiences. Write relevant articles, link to news-worthy information, provide useful product information, and become a trusted source of information.

“The best sites push content to users to maintain share of mind,” says William Rice. Email newsletters have long capitalized on this wisdom, and the most successful among them link users directly from the email to the site, where even more useful or entertaining content exists. *MarketingProfsToday*, a weekly e-newsletter, is an excellent example. It’s full of enticing, quick-read content that links readers to the MarketingProfs site, where they can read hundreds of informative (and free) articles, or sign up (for a fee) to access premium content.

Many successful sites also pull content from users to deepen engagement. Giving consumers a voice is an increasingly successful digital strategy. Amazon.com *Customer Reviews* and *Customer Discussions* are two examples. In *Customer Reviews*, Amazon encourages users to write online reviews and share thoughts with other customers. In *Customer Discussions*, Amazon provides a place for customers to ask questions, get advice when shopping, contribute product comparisons, debate plots, and connect with other aficionados.

Putting theory into practice: Larsen.com and Larsen inSights e-newsletter

How do you maintain mindshare without being overly promotional? How do you make clients aware that you offer a broad range of services?

This was the challenge facing my own company, Larsen, a large branding, design, and interactive agency. Larsen already had an extensive portfolio of work on the Larsen.com website, where clients could see examples of advertising, annual reports, environmental graphics, identity design, marketing literature, product launches, and websites. But despite wide-ranging capabilities, some clients still viewed Larsen as a provider of only single services—product packaging, for instance, or web design.

To encourage these one-channel clients to become repeat customers, Larsen created a content-rich monthly e-newsletter: in short, a digital publication (Figure 7). This e-newsletter provides two examples from the Larsen portfolio (with direct links to the Larsen website), plus a lead story with helpful information about design and marketing. Story topics vary widely to showcase a wide range of expertise:

- Product launches: Six marketing musts
- Humor in communications
- Visual systems: Controlling what was once left to chance
- Promotions with pizzazz: Five starting points



Figure 7. Larsen inSights e-newsletter. Relevant content and quick-read case studies encourage click-through to the Larsen.com website.

The goal in each story is to be helpful, rather than promotional. It's paying off. Open rates on the e-newsletter have been as high as 68 percent for some audiences. And high click-through rates to both the lead story and the various case studies have put clients and prospects right where Larsen wants them—in the portfolio section of Larsen.com (Figure 8). Brand awareness has grown, and clients are increasingly aware that Larsen's capabilities are truly multidisciplinary.

Phase 4: Allegiance

“Everything you need is at www...”

The fourth phase of the continuum is *allegiance*. How do you create and sustain loyalty? How do you turn customers into advocates?

Start by moving away from sameness. If your website is the same as everyone else's, your customers may not understand just what it is that makes you unique. Use creativity to create a site that clearly distinguishes you from the commonplace.

Another way to build loyalty is to exhibit empathy. The more you focus your site on the needs of a particular audience at a particular time, the greater the emotional connection. When customers connect with your brand emotionally, they are more likely to become advocates. These emotions don't have to be profound to be effective. They can be as simple as a quick smile or a moment of pride or an acknowledgment of thanks.

You can also use rewards to build allegiance. We're all familiar with member-only benefits

and frequent-shopper rewards. Is there some way rewards can be used to deepen loyalty in your business?

Finally, make customers part of a community. We all define ourselves by the company we keep. Perhaps your website could build community by encouraging customers to leave comments, exchange ideas, or share information. Strive to make customers proud of their association with your brand. And give them opportunities to connect with others based on the shared, positive experience of your brand.

Putting theory into practice: Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Brand Center website

As a brand, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota already had awareness, engagement, and customer trust. The challenge for this 70-year-old organization was staying relevant to a broad demographic that included younger healthcare consumers, boomers becoming seniors, and seniors eligible for Medicare. To keep the appeal fresh, Blue Cross began revitalizing its brand—with a new focus on healthy living, wellness, and peace of mind.

As part of this brand revitalization, Anne Knauff, creative services manager at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota, began reinvigorating the visual system.

“We decided to create a digital brand center,” said Knauff “an informative, engaging, resource for all employees.”

Knauff and the Larsen team established new standards for the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota logo, typography, color, imagery, and brand voice. They then applied these standards to a wide array of representative applications, including advertising, marketing literature, direct mail, newsletters, and PowerPoint presentations.

“We wanted *all* Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota employees living the brand and acting as true brand advocates,” said Knauff, “not just marketing professionals or designers.”

Particularly difficult, said Knauff, was reaching those employees who might feel that any sort of brand website was irrelevant to their day-to-day jobs.

The Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Brand Center website, shown in Figures 9 and



Figure 8. Larsen.com featured case study (www.larsen.com). Carefully designed pages balance visuals and content. A monthly e-newsletter, shown in Figure 7, keeps site traffic high.

10, is clearly focused on the allegiance phase of the customer continuum. By creating a site specifically for Blue Cross employees, stakeholders, partners, and vendors, Knauff not only codified critical aspects of the brand, she also created an emotional connection with first-line ambassadors of the brand.

This excerpt shows how an upbeat, conversational style informs nonmarketing employees



Figure 9. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Brand Center. Clear logo guidelines ensure consistent expression of the brand.



Figure 10. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Cover Examples page. Numerous examples help designers create brand-right materials.

about the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota brand voice:

Voice. It's what you say. It's how you talk. The words you choose and the way you put them together. It's personality, style, and meaning. Individuals have a voice, and so do organizations. Blue Cross wants that voice to be consistent and sincere—from every corner of our company.

Brands succeed when they have a clear, consistent voice, as well as a consistent visual look. This section will help you understand and apply the Blue Cross brand voice—the unique tone of our communications. Because, ultimately, you and what you say are part of the Blue Cross brand.

The Brand Center website is, not surprisingly, an incredible resource. Marketing and design employees can access templates, download resources, and see an impressive gallery of brand-right samples in the Fresh Forward section of the site. Best of all, the site provides immediate answers and a clear visual context for the work employees do every day. And as deadlines invariably loom, the site helps alleviate a culture of reaction.

Closing thought

The best sites move customers seamlessly through the customer continuum. These sites start by building *awareness*, then move customers through *transformation to engagement*, and finally gain their *allegiance*. As you begin your next website redesign, take the time to evaluate which phase of the continuum is most important. It's an incredibly clarifying exercise—for marketing strategists and designers alike—and it can ensure that the site you create will be effective and profitable.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Dave Molanphy and David Garcia, the talented Larsen designers responsible for the work shown here. Thanks are also due to John Andreini, senior writer, and Jennifer Parks, senior interactive producer, for their valuable contributions to this article. ■

Reprint #07181DWY53