Designing the Interface System
when handling multiple communication channels

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With the technological development during recent years, it has become possible for companies to communicate with their customers through many different channels. This includes customer service communication that just a few years ago only were offered through phone, regular mail or at the company´s physical service center. Today, it is possible to communicate with the customers and to offer customer service through other types of service channels such as e-mail, chat, website, and social media. The technological development has made it possible for the customer to get help almost instantly and to have several channels to choose from. Consequently, this has resulted in greater demands on customer service; customers expect service outside regular working hours, and to wait for an e-mail answer more than one day is no longer acceptable.

In order to meet these expectations, companies that offer customer service have started to add new communication channels to their portfolios. What is important for companies to consider when these changes are made is that even though they should try to satisfy their customers by adding different types of service channels, the mix of channels has to be carefully selected. It is important that every single channel contributes to the overall customer experience. Choosing the right channel types, even called *interface* types, involves critical trade-offs between a company's capabilities and resources on one hand, and segment-specific customer needs and expectations on the other.

Together the mix of service channels forms the *interface system*. When designing the interface system, it is important to consider the effects of the system and the fact that an interface rarely operates in isolation from the other interfaces. The interface system has to optimize the trade-offs between effectiveness and efficiency, and the selection and deployment of each interface must trade performance for cost. The interfaces need to be selectively and thoughtfully deployed and managed strategically as systems in order to reduce costs and improve the customer satisfaction.
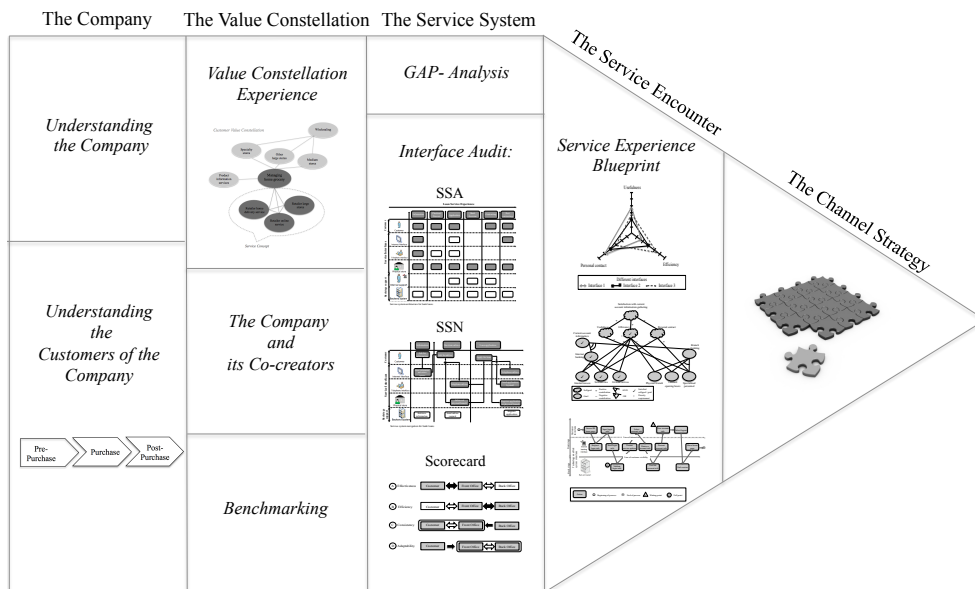
Channel Strategy Design

So how should a company be able to know which design of interface system that is the most effective and efficient for their specific organization?

The authors of the Master Thesis *Designing the Interface System when handling multiple communication channels,* have developed a model called Channel Strategy Design, see figure 1. The model is based on existing theories and methods from areas that the authors have found necessary in order to get a better picture of how to design a company's interface system.

The Channel Strategy Design model is composed of five major sections; the Company, the Value Constellation, the Service System, the Service Encounter, and the Channel Strategy. By following the model from left to right, top to bottom the company will get a thorough understanding of all the different aspects that needs to be considered when choosing which communication channels to offer. Moreover, the model helps to understand and find ways of how to steer customers into the most appropriate communication channel in order to be as cost efficient and customer oriented as possible.

Channel Strategy Design

Figure 1: The Channel Strategy Design

The Company

When developing a communication channel strategy, the first step is to thoroughly understand both the company as well as its customers.

The first part of this section is called *Understanding the Company* and is performed in order to get an overall picture of the company; which services the company offers, which markets the company is operating in, and which channels the company is using when communicating with its customers. The second part of the section, *Understanding the Customers of the Company*, should describe the company from the customer's perspective. This part explains the customer journey when using one of the company's services, as well as provide an understanding of in which situations the customers contact the customer service. By mapping the customer journey from the pre-purchase phase to the post-purchase phase, it is easier to understand the customers' experiences.

The Value Constellation

The second section in the model, the Value Constellation, consists of three steps: *the Value Constellation Experience*, *the Company and its Co-Creators,* and *Benchmarking*. By *co-creators* means other companies that together with the company in question create the customer journey. The relationships with the co-creators affect how customers perceive the overall service, and this section of the model helps to review these relationships. In addition, a benchmarking study should be conducted. This type of study helps the company to find inspiration and new ideas of how to provide customer service. The value constellation part of the model is carried out in order to get a broader view of what is going on outside the company and to get inspiration and ideas for future changes and developments.

The Service System

The third section consists of *the Gap Analysis* and *the Interface Audit* including Service System Architecture (SSA), Service System Navigation (SSN), and the Interface System Scorecard. Together these methods provide a deep understanding of the structure of the service system.

Although it is possible to steer customers to different channels when they are in need of help, the greatest attention should be paid to prevent miscommunication, both externally and internally. This section goes through many different aspects, and covers various dimensions in order to find underlying factors that may be the reason why customers need to contact the support.

When conducting the SSA, the customer experience is mapped in a comprehensive way. In the SSA it is possible to see which interfaces that are used during a specific service activity. After completing the SSA, a SSN is used in order to get an overview of how customers migrate between different interfaces.

The Service Encounter

In the fourth section it is time to design the service encounter. A method called *the Service Experience Blueprint* helps the company to understand which types of errands that should be handled in which channels, in order to be as efficient as possible.

The Channel Strategy

With the information and knowledge gained from previous sections it is in the fifth and last section possible to develop a customized communication channel strategy to handle all end customer contact.

A more detailed explanation of the model can be found in the thesis, *Designing the Interface System when handling multiple communication channels.*

Conclusion

When applying the Channel Strategy Design model, all of the different parts in the model have to be examined, section-by-section. However, some parts of the model may be less or more important to a certain company. Therefore, the model must be adapted to every specific case and company.

Generally, the model is easy to apply if;

- The company has access to the right information from the beginning
- The right persons are involved in the process
- The employees agree to participate in interviews

If these requirements are not fulfilled, the application of the model is difficult and time consuming. Depending on which company that applies the model; the different stages will require different amounts of time. If the company already has gathered a lot of the information necessary to the analysis, it will obviously require less time than if the company has to start with conducting customer surveys etc. For some companies some stages are more important than others, which means that the time needed for different stages will vary for different types of companies. Preferable someone outside the company should perform the analysis since it probably will result in a more objective assessment, and therefore a more accurate recommendation of channel strategy.

In order to obtain the best possible result when applying the model, a strong commitment from the company is required. Employees from different departments, with diverse knowledge and expertise, must be involved in the project and contribute with different perspectives and viewpoints. If not, the recommended channel strategy will not be as strong as it has potential to be. The more the employees are involved in the development of the new strategy; the better anchoring it may get in the organization.

The model can be very helpful in order to find opportunities for a redesign of a company's service system, since it structures existing information and opens the eyes to what the company should focus on. Thoughts and ideas about possible design options of the interface system may probably already have emerged before the model is applied. However, it provides important support to the chosen design of the interfaces.

Applying the model will help a company to better understand how to meet their customers' increasing demand of service availability in an efficient and effective way.