

## 6.5 Rethinking the Consumer Journey

### Rethinking the Consumer Journey

A **consumer journey** is the trajectory of experiences through which a consumer goes from not knowing they want something to buying this something, to performing post-purchase activities (the most obvious being consuming the product) (Wikipedia, 2024b). More theoretically put, it is “an iterative process through which the consumer begins to consider alternatives to satisfy a want or a need, evaluates and chooses among them, and then engages in consumption” (Hamilton et al., 2019). The journey is composed of pre-purchase activities, i.e., activities consumers take prior to buying a product; purchase activities, or what people do to acquire a product; and post-purchase activities, what happens once consumers have bought a product (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

As a side note, we make a distinction in this course between **customer journey**, which would focus on the journey of a customer with a specific firm and would include, for example, a touchpoint solely associated with that firm, and **consumer journey**, which is a broader perspective on consumers who “undertake [a journey] in pursuit of large and small life goals and in response to various opportunities, obstacles, and challenges” (Hamilton & Price, 2019). By **touchpoint**, I refer to “any way a consumer can interact with a business, whether it be person-to-person, through a website, an app, or any form of communication” (Wikipedia, 2024c).

Understanding the consumer journey is important because it strongly contributes to firm performance. For example, a survey by the Association of National Advertisers in 2015 found that top performers in a market understood the journey better than their peers and had better processes to capture journey-related insights and use them in their marketing efforts (Edelman & Singer, 2015).

The journey varies greatly depending on which market a firm evolves in. It also varies depending on personas and their specific goals. For example, [a survey by Google](#) found that some markets, such as banking, voting, and finding a credit card, will have a typically longer journey than others, such as groceries or personal care products (Think with Google, 2011). And variation exists within markets. Google found, for example, three types of journeys for restaurants: one where consumers pick a restaurant within the hour; one where consumers pick a restaurant a day before; and a last one where consumers pick restaurants 2 to 3 months before.

Can you think of what these relate to?

We can hypothesize: If you’re at work and looking for a place to have lunch, chances are, you won’t dedicate much time to it and will pick a restaurant within the hour before going. If you are going out with friends or on a Tinder date, you might be a bit more involved in the process and will pick the restaurant one or two days before. Lastly, if you are going to travel (and are a foodie!) or you want to make a marriage proposal, this will require more planning, and you might start your journey much, much before. This also has implications for restaurants! Some restaurants that cater to downtown lunchers might be better off pushing Instagram ads with the menu of the day, or some daily sale, around 11 AM before lunch. Restaurants catering to groups or dates might want to start campaigns on Wednesdays to capture Friday and Saturday restaurant-goers. And restaurants that target the marriage proposal or foodie crowds might need longer, “**always-on**,” continuous marketing activities to bring in patrons (Chaffey, 2019).

### Understanding Consumer Journeys

Our understanding of consumer journeys has greatly evolved over the last two decades. It is important to understand that these are not perfect representations of reality. Rather, they are thinking tools that help us create marketing campaigns. In real life, people tend not to be so linear in their decisions.

A common conceptualization found in marketing textbooks is one where consumers move between different stages, initially being aware of a large number of brands, and slowly refining their understanding of the options in the market to make their purchase. McKinsey.com (1999) represents such a typical [model here](#). In this model, the consumer goes [through 5 stages](#) (Antoine, n. d.):

1. Awareness: the consumer is aware of a large number of products or brands in the market that might help address their need
2. Familiarity: From this large number of brands or products they are aware of, the consumer will make some initial research and become familiar with a subset of brands.
3. Consideration: From this smaller number of familiar brands, the consumer will continue their research efforts, eliminate some brands that do not fit their criteria, and narrow to a smaller number of considered brands (i.e., a ‘**consideration-set**’) (Mahar, 2023).
4. Purchase: Once ready to buy, the consumer might try out, or seek in-depth information on an even smaller subset, based on their consideration-set, from which they will purchase a product or a brand.

5. Loyalty: Assuming their consumption experience goes well, the consumer can become loyal to the product or the brand.

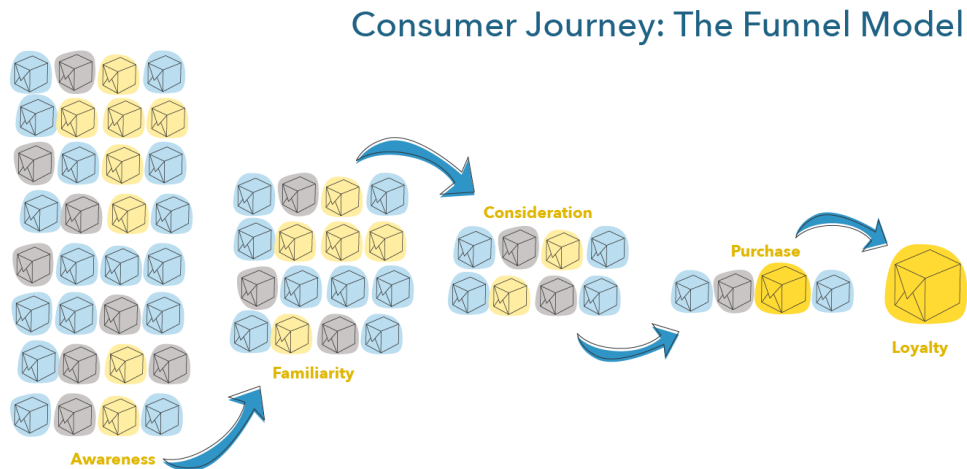


Figure 6.5 Consumer Journey: The Funnel Model

This understanding of the journey is based on a **funnel model**, where consumers start with being aware of a large number of brands, and over time, reduce their options as they go through each of the stages. This has a number of implications for marketers.

A first, central assumption is that, to be ultimately chosen by consumers, companies need to make sure that consumers are aware of them. This partly helps explain the prevalence of mass marketing: it serves to create awareness.

A second, central assumption is that consumers start with a large set of brands that are aware of, and over time, reduces this set to a smaller and smaller set of brands as they search and evaluate options.

McKinsey introduced in 2009 a competing model for the consumer journey, based on the purchase decisions of close to 20 000 consumers across five industries. They found that these two assumptions did not hold:

First, consumers do not start with a large set of brands they are aware of. Second, consumers do not reduce their options as they go through the stages of the funnel. Rather, the number of options they consider increase throughout their journey.

If you think of some recent purchases you made, this makes sense. Let's say I want a pair of running shoes. I might be aware of some brands and model, probably the ones that do the most mass advertising: Nike, Adidas, Reebok. Then, I turn to the Internet to perform some searches. I'll use general key terms like "What running shoes should a beginner get" or "Reviews for running shoes 2020." Throughout my search efforts, I will encounter new brands I had not considered originally, for example, Asics, Brooks, and Saucony.

In this example, rather than following the funnel metaphor, where the set of brands I was aware of reduced to a smaller set of familiar brands and an even smaller set of considered brands, I *added* brands to my consideration-set.

This has important implications for digital marketers: First, traditional, [push, mass marketing media](#) activities are not necessary (Saravia, 2020). Second, consumers broaden the set of products or brands they consider when they do research. We will see how this has led to the rapid growth of inbound marketing activities that help consumers with their problems and help consumers evaluate their options. This is because brands now understand that by supporting consumers throughout their journey, they can enter consumers' consideration-set and ultimately make a sale.

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