

8 – USER EXPERIENCES

Experiences are real and occur, and there is a process for an experience to unfold. That process is based on forming preconceptions, which are critical for judging an experience. Our preconceptions become the criteria and standards we use to determine satisfaction.

Experience

noun

Practical contact with and observation of facts or events.

verb

3rd person present: **experiences**

Encounter or undergo (an event or occurrence). "The company is experiencing difficulties"

Few businesses match the advantages of cruise lines to influence behavior through memorable, satisfying experiences... so passengers, hold on to your wallets. The cruise lines are dedicated to entertaining vacationers with activities that satisfy passenger needs. That requires creating preconceptions, and monitoring and evaluating experience outcomes for possibilities to improve before the voyage ends.

Passengers, meanwhile, are wholly receptive, even eager, for memorable experiences to occur, and remain open to

messages doled out along the way. For instance, entertainment directors will use popularly attended gatherings to ask passengers to count aloud the number of cruises they have taken. In the background, staff cheer on those who have cruised the most.

What better opportunity to influence an ideal target audience than holding them captive in an artificial environment and bombarding them with incentives to keep on spending over the length of a voyage.

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Sitting in a Starbucks recently, I was explaining to a colleague the meaning of a service experience, and thought of the coffee company's business model. Customers come in with a preconceived idea of what to expect. And that expectation is either satisfied, or not. In other words, it's either a positive or a negative experience.

We all take some comfort when our expectations are met. Conversely, if you have ever walked out of your favorite restaurant dissatisfied, the experience didn't live up to your expectation. However, anyone who has visited a Starbucks, even once, will find the experience similar to any one of the other twenty-eight thousand stores worldwide. The coffee retailer relies on décor, flow, and arrangement to create a comfort level. Subconsciously, we all crave familiarity, which leads us to establish routines. As we grow older, we tend to gravitate toward even more familiarity in our lives, steering away from situations that we might find awkward or confusing.

With Starbucks, our expectations are met the moment we walk through the door. From any vantage, the retail shop is familiar with recognizable patterns that lead us through a predictable experience. We know where the line forms, have an idea what's in the glass case, can quickly scan the menu, and can manage the Italian-English jargon to order. And when we screw up, there's always a forgiving barista.

I've noticed that, often, some of the very same people who disparage Starbucks coffee are also regulars. They are not likely to bolt—neither due to costs or convenience—unless there's an alternative that meets their need for a familiar, comfortable, reliable, friendly, positive experience.

Satisfying expectations keep customers coming back. A service that continues to underwhelm, on the other hand, will not survive.

Back to the Starbucks demonstration. My colleague, whose timing was superb, responded: "Ah, then if what you say is valid, Starbucks is missing an opportunity if they fail to ask its customers whether their expectations were met."

Well, it just so happens, when I got home—no fooling—I had an email from Starbucks asking about my experience.

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"That was so unsatisfying, I'll never come back." Jack Johnson said after spending thousands of dollars on a company dinner. Johnson, a senior executive was so dissatisfied with what he was served that the next morning he instructed his administrative assistant to make sure he never again had a meeting there. "It just did not match my expectations," he told me.

How is it that a McDonald's burger, fries, and shake are satisfying, yet a meal prepared by a master chef using the finest ingredients fails to impress? Even more, our experience at a McDonald's doesn't seem to be marred by rude order takers, unsanitary bathrooms, or rowdy Cub Scouts. The distractions and inconveniences—which one can anticipate—has little impact on what is otherwise a consistent, reliable experience.

How can there be any commonality for comparing these two services? The answer—because, it reflects our preconceptions for what to expect with a service. In the above scenario with Jack Johnson, the outcome was contrary to what should have been a hands-down win for fine dining. But it turns out each of us sets expectations that we rely upon to measure experiences. McDonald's is consistent and our expectations are typically satisfied. Ultimately, we all take away impressions from experiences.

These accumulate in abstract references, residing somewhere between our conscious and subconscious, which we later use for decisions. We use our expectations to sort, rank, and prioritize abstract references, psychologists and researchers say. As a result, we can offer an opinion of an experience, yet barely describe or define it to others. Nafiz Imtiaz, a marketing executive at a California-based communications company, suggests our expectations are shaped by exposure and interpretation of our environment, price, points of comparison, and any combination of them all.

EXPECTATION INFLUENCERS	DESCRIPTION	SHAPING	FEEDBACK TYPE
EXPLICIT SERVICE PROMOTION:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications: environment, price, points of comparison, or a combination of all three. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect the actual service versus aspirational. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accuracy of service as expected?
IMPLICIT SERVICE PROMOTION:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cue, such as price, experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Price levels/premiums justified by increased levels of performance versus member needs, tastes and attitudes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check incentives against other services or competition.
WORD OF MOUTH:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rely on promoters and advocates, and respected opinion shapers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of prominent testimonials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine NPS “promoters.”
PAST EXPERIENCE: (PARTICULAR SERVICE) (WITHIN THE SAME INDUSTRY) (RELATED SERVICE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capture feelings and expectations of prior experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of input from feedback for improving or designing next program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did your service meet expectations? What were your expectations? What stood out as meeting your expectations? (Importance on a scale of 1–10).

Serving Up Satisfaction Deliciously

Le Relais de l'Entrecôte which translates to steak house in English, is known for its steak-frites throughout France, with locations in Paris and elsewhere. The restaurant attracts locals and tourists who wait no less than an hour for a coveted seat among the one hundred or so per sitting.

The business model is the epitome of predictable consistency, for which diners can be assured of having their expectations met. The restaurant's menu hasn't changed since 1959—steak frites, a house salad, and a few choices for drinks and dessert.

Even while writing this, I can summon the experience: spirited conversations in line; no-nonsense, efficient service; and above all, the Parisian-infused tastes of garlic butter.

By narrowing choices and defining the boundaries, l'Entrecôte is able to deliver dependability which is then replicable and thus scalable. With little room for error, I would only imagine dissatisfied diners are rare.

Unlike in the United States, Europeans don't mess around with success, thankfully. But if l'Entrecôte were to fuss with its menu, it would result in disaster of untold proportions. Its entire business model would need reconfiguring.

The restaurant would need new staff training, new equipment, and would need to stock greater varieties of ingredients. But perhaps most of all, the change would introduce degrees of unpredictability.



L'Entrecôte demonstrates that a service is sufficiently successful when users are merely satisfied. Once expectations are met, users interpret an experience as positive. So, it's somewhat ironic that some executives will strain resources to do even more. They act as if meeting expectations is barely a passing grade—nominally satisfactory, the minimum threshold.

How often do we come across an organization whose core value statement runs along these lines: "We strive to exceed expectations?" This thinking is a recipe for failure. Imagine for a moment the kind of organization that exceeds members' expectations. What kind of operations would that take? It might be possible to ask what each member's expectations are and deliver exceptionally. But exceeding expectations would require increasingly higher levels of satisfaction, which if not implausible, is incredibly resource-driven.

Services that accommodate a wide variety of preferences are difficult to scale. iTunes may offer movies, music, books, and such, but they are all forms of entertainment that can be streamed. Moreover, the expectations are clear. iTunes is just a conveyance for streaming on-demand. But as attitudes and behavior constantly shift, a personal service will require tighter constraints.

Executives, also, will find it easier to achieve success with an offering that is simple to process, easy to deliver— with limited choices—and achieves consistent outcomes as promised.