The Web Experience – Trends in e-Service

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1. Introduction

With the ever increasing proliferation of the internet and the tremendous growth of e-commerce, organisations, both in the business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) sectors, have moved to differentiate themselves through the electronic provision of service and the enhancement of the e-service or web experience. More and more organisations are using technology as a means of interacting and co-creating value with customers, developing and improving customer relationships with the objective of increasing profits.1

From the customer’s perspective, the quality of the web experience has a significant influence on the customer’s image of the organisation and the quality of the customer service delivered.2 From the organisation’s perspective, the more customers fulfil their service requirements online, the more scalable and profitable the organisation’s e-service model becomes.3 Indeed, superior e-service provision has led to enhanced customer communications, delivered the holy grail of “real-time marketing”,4 lowered organisational and customer costs, improved customer satisfaction and helped in attracting new customers.5

Governments and the public sector have also embraced e-service, not only to provide services electronically, but to demonstrate value to the public in terms of effectiveness, cost and efficiency as well as promote transparency.6,7,8 Even the health sector is looking at the internet to enhance the service that it provides to patients,9,10 while the third sector is also using the web in innovative ways to engage with supporters.11,12

Despite the huge potential of e-service, to date, relatively little is known about how organisations might best develop their e-service capability, improve customers’ web-experience and co-create value with customers online.5 This briefing note addresses this deficit, by first outlining what is meant by the terms e-service and the ‘web experience’ and explaining how and when it can occur. The review then suggests how organisations might develop and implement an e-service strategy and optimise the web experience of its customers. It concludes with highlighting recent trends as well as providing an overview of the emerging areas for future research.

2. What are e-services?

E-service can be broadly viewed as an interactive information service,3,4,13 where services are provided or consumed using internet-based or electronic systems7 and where the service organisation and customer(s) use the information gathered about each other to co-create a better service experience.

E-services can be more specifically defined as “deeds, efforts or performances whose delivery is mediated by information technology (including the web, information kiosks and mobile devices)”.3,14 While the majority of the available research, including this note, regards self-service technologies as being predominantly e-service, the important distinction is that for self-service, customers need to access a particular technology (e.g. an information kiosk or ATM), whereas for e-service, the customer can avail of the service by accessing the internet at home or elsewhere.3,14 Crucially, e-service delivery has enabled customers and individuals to interact with organisation(s), public
bodies, third sector organisations and other customers and citizens 24/7 at times and places that are convenient to the individual as opposed to being dictated by the organisation.

From the organisation’s perspective, e-service can be viewed as “the integration of business processes, policies, procedures, tools, technologies and human effort to facilitate both assisted and unassisted customer services using the Internet and other networks.”

Some researchers group e-services into categories including foundations of e-service (e.g. site responsiveness and effectiveness, order fulfilment etc.), customer-centred e-services (e.g. customisation, order tracking etc.) and value added e-services (e.g. where organisations proactively try and optimise customer value through its e-service delivery). Regardless of how e-services are defined and categorised, the key characteristics of e-services for customers and organisations are that they are accessible and consumed by a person or customer via the Internet or other electronic network and there may or may not be a payment involved.

3. Developing your e-service strategy

E-services provide organisations with unique opportunities for developing and deploying new services and positively enhancing customer interaction during the e-service encounter. However, it is imperative that organisations consider the development and implementation of their e-service delivery strategy as part of, as opposed to incremental to, their overall service delivery strategy. The integration of the organisation’s e-service strategy with the organisation’s other customer service strategies is critical to success.

While e-services provide an organisation with tremendous opportunities to interact with customers and to solicit customer relevant information to improve the service encounter, the organisation requires appropriate processes to manage and coordinate such customer information across all channels in a timely manner. Specifically, organisations must clearly define what processes (online and offline) or process improvements are involved and how these process improvements can facilitate superior e-service provision. They also should consider what role the customer can or will play in the e-service encounter. Organisations should incorporate processes into their online channels which collect customer feedback and enable the organisation or designated customer service agents to respond to customer needs in real-time.

Due to the inevitable costs of implementing an e-service strategy, organisations must thoroughly research and understand what combination of technological capabilities and procedural and process redesign that are required in order to deliver those e-services that are the most valued by customers. It is also critical that organisations avoid investing in technology capabilities that will not improve its overall customer service performance.

A number of frameworks, such as the service strategy design matrix and the P³ service design matrix (product-process-proximity of the customer), successfully implemented by sothebys.com, are available to organisations who are deciding how best to integrate their e-service strategy with the organisation’s other multi-channel service operations and to determine the various tradeoffs involved.

Indeed, according to a recent Forrester research report on e-service trends, the distinction between traditional customer service (e.g. personal service, call centre etc.) and e-services is disappearing due to increased competitive pressures. Channel integration, with underlying common business processes and seamless transitioning between customer contact media, is fast becoming the industry norm.

Until then, however, the web or e-service experience will be strongly influenced by how each of an organisation’s customer service and contact channels work together. To fully evaluate the
customer web experience, organisations must assess the web or e-service experience at three levels: the web site experience, the online service experience and the total multi-channel experience.  

4. Delivering your e-service strategy

E-service delivery enables organisations to personalise and customise the service offering in 'real-time' depending on the unique context and requirements of customers. While personalisation can be defined as the process of using a customers’ information to deliver a targeted solution to that customer, typically based on information solicited in advance or past customer behaviour, situation specific personalisation necessitates an awareness of the current customer context and requirements.

When designing e-service delivery systems, organisations should consider the three core areas of web-design (usability, ease of navigation etc.): information creation, search and quality and how the dialogue between the customer and the organisations can be optimised in order to facilitate value co-creation between the customer and the organisation. Organisations should continuously plan, monitor and integrate their customer contact programmes, including the full range of online and offline, outbound and inbound contact opportunities with different customer groups.

While customers tend to evaluate the e-service encounter by assessing how responsive the company is to their online query or request, together with the degree of personalisation experienced, recent research has shown that, while many organisations are good at responding to simple questions from customers online, the more complex the requests or complaints received, the poorer organisations are at responding satisfactorily. Therefore, e-service providers must enhance the ease-of-use of e-services, as well as be more responsive to customer requests and feedback received on-line. Organisations need to facilitate more personalisation of e-services for more complex customer requests, complaints or less typical situations.

Some ways to achieve this include improving usability in terms of website design, including easy to find contact information, internal search engines, and chatrooms. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is another interesting form of moderated group chat which allows customers and companies to interact in real-time with each other. For example, customers of the catalogue retailer Lands’ End (www.landsend.com) can chat with service representatives online regarding the products and services on offer, delivery terms and conditions or any other customer queries or requests.

Mercedes-Benz’s “teleweb” technology allows customers to submit questions online, which are then immediately responded to by a customer service agent. During the ensuing conversation, both the customer and agent are able to simultaneously view the same web pages as the agent seeks to respond to the specific customer request, or if required, the agent is able to temporarily remotely control the customer’s browser.

Some other practical ways that organisations can better manage e-service delivery include providing more customer channels of communication on the website or more ways of capturing and soliciting customer information (e.g. customer fora, suggestion boxes, etc.). While implementation of an e-service strategy will enable the organisation to instantly respond to customer requests, the organisation needs to ensure effective processes are in place to respond to such requests and continuously measure and monitor the effectiveness of such processes.

Finally, it is important for an organisation to continuously keep abreast of evolving technology developments, which in turn impact on the e-service systems and processes experienced by customers in the marketplace or cyberspace. As customers become more and more familiar
with e-service, the distinctions between e-services and p-services will begin to disappear. In addition, with increased web experience, coupled with relatively low switching costs, comes increased expectations, necessitating that organisations strive to continuously improve their e-service delivery and ensure positive web experiences for customers.

5. Benefits and applications of e-service delivery

The key benefit of developing and implementing an e-service strategy is that it enables the organisation to interact with customers according to their preferences and context requirements. “Real-time marketing” refers to the situation when the organisation can respond in real-time to customer requirements by integrating customer information to co-create the product or service. One example of real-time marketing is the availability of location based or location aware mobile services on a customer’s mobile phone. Another example is the online website www.threadless.com where customers can design their own t-shirts online, which are then manufactured to order by the company and delivered to the customer.

Many organisations in both the public sector and “third sector”, which includes the voluntary and community sector, plus other values-driven, not-for-profit organisations such as social enterprises and co-operatives, have actively and effectively embraced e-services. Strategically and operationally important applications include e-service development in the area of ePhilanthropy i.e. the use of the internet for philanthropic purposes, which will be discussed later.

In the arena of public sector e-services, e-government has been the subject of increasing research interest with significant projects underway to augment the efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency of governments’ worldwide. Electronic delivery of national and local government services, such as filing tax returns and vehicle registration, has led to higher levels of efficiency in terms of delivering services to citizens. Electronic service delivery has enabled government to reduce costs, while simultaneously increase productivity and deliver better quality services for stakeholders in public management. Other interesting examples of e-service delivery in the public sector include the area of e-health or the delivery of health care with support from various information and communication technologies, such as the electronic health record (EHR), telemedicine, clinical decision support, and computerised provider order entry systems.

6. Delivering the web experience

While technology enables the provision of increased levels of e-service by organisations, it is customers' experiences of e-service and the ensuing customer perceived value that will determine the effectiveness of such technologies and their application. Although it is critical that organisations continue to excel in the traditional aspects of customer service in order to achieve high levels of customer retention and satisfaction in relation to its online activities, the true and added potential of e-service is it’s ability to provide the organisation’s customers with a superior web or e-service experience in relation to the two-way flow of customer relevant information.

Many initial negative customer experiences of e-services in the early 90s led organisations to focus on better integrating the social and experiential aspects of the traditional service encounter, facilitated by technology, into the e-service encounter. Researchers subsequently sought to redefine e-service from the customers perspective, namely as “content-centred and internet-based customer service, driven by the customer…with the goal of strengthening customer-service provider relationships”. In the past, personalised service (p-service) and the development of one-to-one relationships with customers relied on the employment of costly skilled and well trained personnel. However, the internet and the increased use of technology greatly facilitates organisations in delivering
products and services to customers in a more automated and less expensive way, which in turn complements and sometimes replaces more expensive alternatives. Consider FedEx and its online service that enabled customers to track the delivery status of packages (see www.fedex.com) replacing expensive call centre staff.

The web experience is very different to customer experience of traditional customer service or personal service (p-service) which is typically delivered face to face or over the phone. The web experience can be defined as “the customer’s experience that results from the purchase through or engagement with information technology mediated service delivery.” The nature of the web experience will vary greatly depending on the respective tasks performed by the customer and the organisation (technology) during the e-service encounter.

The increased availability of e-services has empowered customers and offered them greater choices in relation to when and how they interact with the service provider, as well as greater control of the service outcomes. This, in turn, has led to increased customer service expectations before, during and after interacting electronically with the service organisation, which in turn continuously raises the bar for organisations wishing to provide customers with the ultimate web experience.

7. What is e-service quality and how might it be measured?

Much of the research on web experience focuses on e-service quality. E-service quality is the term often used to describe the positive and negative nature of the e-service or web experience from the customer’s perspective. E-service quality can be viewed as the consumer's overall “evaluation and judgment of the excellence and quality of e-service offerings.”

Much of the e-service quality research focuses on online customers behavioural intentions e.g. to purchase, repurchase or recommend the organisation’s product or service offerings as a result of the web experience. Many dimensions of e-service quality have been identified in the literature. These dimensions include process quality, web site usability, user interface, design, reliability, fulfilment, security and privacy levels, availability of information, perceived trust, responsiveness and empathy of the service provider, service recovery, options to contact the service provider and overall customer service levels.

Research has shown a wide degree of variation in terms of levels of e-service quality within and between industry sectors depending on the levels of customer orientation of the organisations concerned.

A number of models have been developed to measure e-service quality including:

- E-SERVQUAL, which focuses on how reliability, responsiveness, access, flexibility, ease of navigation, efficiency, assurance/trust, security, price knowledge, site aesthetics and the levels of customisation or personalisation impact on e-service quality.
- E-S-QUAL/E-RecS-QUAL, which focuses on the four core e-service quality (E-S-QUAL) dimensions: efficiency, system availability, fulfilment and privacy and the three service recovery e-service quality (E-Res-QUAL) dimensions: responsiveness, compensation and contact impact on e-service quality.
- Perceived e-service quality (PeSQ) scale, which measures the effect of e-service quality on online consumer satisfaction and web site loyalty.
- Customer value-in-use e-service model, customised for but not limited to e-services, examining how the technical (e.g. content, price) and functional characteristics (e.g. process easiness) of e-services as well as the temporal (e.g. temporal efficiency/speediness) and
spatial (e.g. visual layout, channel functionality, navigation) characteristics of e-services affect e-service quality.  

8. Trends in e-services and the web experience

Web 2.0 and other technological developments have facilitated improvements in e-service provision by enabling a more seamless connection between customers and indeed the organisation. As a result, customer engagement on-line can increasingly be seen as the equivalent to off-line experience marketing.

However, it is worth noting the findings of a recent McKinsey survey of 1,988 executives globally which indicates that, while many companies have embraced Web 2.0 technologies, barriers to increased adoption still remain. The barriers identified in the survey included management’s inability to grasp the potential financial returns from Web 2.0 (28 percent), unresponsive corporate cultures (22 percent), lack of incentives to experiment with such tools (20 percent) and less-than-enthusiastic leadership (15 percent).

It is therefore worthwhile to examine how organisations have successfully used or might consider using web 2.0 to better interact with customers and improve their e-service delivery. One notable success is Dell, who, in response to customer backlash revealed in blogs and other web chatter against Dell’s outsourcing of customer service to India, decided to create it’s own blog and social network IdeaStorm.com and Direct2Dell to facilitate customers in posting and voting on ideas. Dell responds to each of the customer ideas and, if required, makes changes to the company’s processes, offerings and how it delivers service and responds back to customers.

Other companies use the internet to enhance or replace personal selling e.g. by including a live chat feature (e.g. Lands’ End) on their site where customers can have real-time chats with sales representatives and where the sales agent can push relevant customised web pages to customers in real-time.

Other examples of e-service in our web 2.0 world include:

- **User-generated content** incorporates consumer-generated products and services (e.g. iPhone applications, where users develop applications for the iPhone which are then sold back to Apple and available for iPhone customers to buy via its Apps Store).

- Organisations are increasingly facilitating customers in uploading and distributing content online. For example, sites such as Tripadvisor.com, where hotel customers share their experiences with other potential hotel guests, have become indispensible customer reference sites.

- **Consumer opinion platforms** (e.g. www.epinions.com) enable consumers to share opinions with other consumers. Organisations need to monitor such fora as they are important sources of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) which may positively or negatively influence current and prospective customers.

- **Online communities** facilitate eWOM between current and potential users of a service. This includes communities formed around:
  - **Videos** (e.g. YouTube). For example, in 2006, IBM effectively initiated a viral marketing campaign featuring a thirty minute video which generated a 20 percent increase in opt-in rate emails for its newly launched service oriented architecture solutions. In order to generate consumer interest, the company posted a two minute trailer on YouTube which
included a website where people could watch the full film. Customers continued the
dialogue with the company through a dedicated blog.

- Photos (e.g. Flickr). For example, the software company TechSmith used Flickr to post
photos of its company's employees online.\(^{48}\)

- Wikis, which allows users to freely create and edit web page content using any web
browser.

Politocopia provides a useful example how web 2.0 and the use of wikis enable more
participatory and transparent policymaking in the US state of Utah. Politocopia hosts virtual
town hall meetings and runs on a wiki that lets users provide input into the various bills
that are under discussion in the state legislature.\(^{49}\)

- Individual and company profiles (e.g. Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn). Such social
networking sites offer organisations huge networking opportunities as well as an
interesting potential online marketplace.

Companies dialoguing with customers in social networks include Starbucks have a
MySpace profile,\(^{48}\) while Virgin Atlantic's Facebook site enables fans and customers to
interact with the company, post suggestions, share videos and experiences (both positive
and negative), etc. Organisations can run effective and targeted advertising campaigns on
such sites and avail of real-time statistics on how well the advertising campaign is doing.

Organisations can also create a business profile page on sites such as Facebook for free,
similar to a directory listing, monitor traffic to the page, enable discussions with customers
and incorporate other online tools such as blogs in the site. Companies can also send
messages to ‘fans’ or customers using the built-in messaging system. Other sites, such as
LinkedIn, are primarily focussed on building relationships between business contacts.
Organisations, for example, can profile their CEO or Chairman and create a ‘face’ for
customers of the organisation, which can be approached and contacted by customers.

One interesting area where social networking sites such as Facebook are of relevance to
third sector organisations is in the area of ePhilanthropy. Some of the available ePhilanthropy
applications on social networking site Facebook include Causes, which allows individuals to
donate to a third sector organisations and recruit others to support various social cause.
Other applications, such as Justgiving, ChipIn, and SponsorMe, allow individuals to make
donations to nonprofit organisations on Facebook and give organisations the opportunity
to send informational messages to their supporters.\(^{50}\)

Some successful applications in the third sector include the Australians for Native Title and
Reconciliation (ANaTR) organisation who have used Facebook to effectively and actively engage
supporters that are sympathetic to Indigenous issues and introduce the organisation to new
people.\(^{51}\) In addition, AnTAR uses a Group page with an invaluable ‘Message All Members’
function on Facebook that has a direct link to its website.

Another third sector organisation who has used Facebook innovatively is Karma Currency, one of
the largest charitable gift registry in the southern hemisphere. The organisation initiated its ‘Karma
Calculator’ application on Facebook, which directs users to donate in a unique way. The calculator
asks questions in relation to the user’s social and civic behaviour and then calculates the user’s
score. “If the score is low it might suggest that you start a Charitable Gift Registry. If your score is
high it might suggest spreading some further good karma by sending someone a charitable gift
voucher,” says Ashley Rosshandler, Founder and Director.\(^{51}\)
Overall, however, a recent study which examined the content of 175 non-profit organisations’ Facebook profiles and the results revealed that not-for-profit organisations have not incorporated the vast majority of the Facebook applications available and associated interactivity to them into their social networking presence.\(^{50}\)

- **Geographic location and shared subject interest** (e.g. Twitter). Organisations can facilitate dialogue (in the form of ‘tweets’) between customers or with the organisation using Twitter. For example, Twitter’s interest in the Finnish telecommunications company Nokia make effective use of this interactive customer channel. For example, @forumnokia allows twitterers (Nokia users or prospective users) to contact or follow Nokia and fellow users in relation to current issues or suggestions relating to Nokia products and applications, topic focussed or individual focussed on-line diaries or blogs.

- **Personalisation** through web-site recommendation systems, which present customer relevant information items e.g. web pages, images, news, music etc. that are likely to be of interest to the user may also be an effective way to enhance the e-service encounter.

Examples include personalised shopping sites such as www.stylefeeder.com or www.ilike.com where users can shop for fashion apparel or collect and share music with other users.

- **Digital virtual worlds**, such as Second Life (http://secondlife.com/), are increasingly being used by organisations to communicating with current and potential customers in virtual worlds.\(^{52}\) For example, Toyota have a virtual dealership in Second Life, while Starwood hotels have launched a hotel chain there.\(^{48}\)

- **Use of avatars** as part of the organisation’s website or in virtual communities can also improve the web experience. An avatar is a graphical personal representation that can be animated by means of computer technology which can be used by the organisation or customers to represent themselves on the company’s website or in virtual environments, thus mitigating against the sometimes impersonal nature of the web experience.\(^{53}\) For example, on the home page of Alaska Airlines (www.alaskaair.com), the friendly avatar Jenn is available to assist customers with all their request and queries.

- **Internet Communications** e.g. the free internet telephony service Skype offers customers who are Skype users the ability to video call an organisation for free.

- **Virtual Customer Communities.** Organisations are increasingly developing company managed virtual communities (eg, Bang & Olufsen, Compaq, Fiat, Microsoft, 3Com)\(^ {54}\) in order to create and maintain a dialogue with customers, co-develop products and service etc. online.

- **Improved service delivery** e.g. on-demand software delivery (also known as Software as a Service) offered by companies such as the leading CRM providers salesforce.com, SugarCRM and Oracle which results in lower customer and company costs as well as providing increased frequency of software updates for customers.\(^ {55}\)

- **Blogs** – while early blogging was the province of techies and journalists, corporate blogging has begun to take off. Sun Microsystems CEO Jonathan Schwartz communicates directly with investors, analysts and customers in his blog. Microsoft blogger Robert Scoble is often seen as doing more to improve the company’s image than the many millions the company spends on PR. Many companies already consider blogs as a business intelligence tool and regularly browse the blogosphere and bulletin boards to find out how the company or its
products are viewed in the marketplace. Others proactively work with bloggers as a marketing channel.

- **Improved contact details** – e.g. inclusion of google or interactive maps on the organisations website where customers can determine their current and desired location. For example, the NHS website enables citizens to search GPs in their local area using interactive maps.

In addition to understanding how customers interact with the organisation electronically and through the use of web 2.0 technologies, service organisations also need to be cognisant of the various online intermediaries that also influence customer’s perceived value in relation to e-service. Two common internet intermediary models are brokerage and agent models. Brokerages bring buyers and sellers together, without representing them directly, with fees payable by one or both parties (e.g. the online brokerage www.etrade.com, the B2C online auction www.priceline.com). The organisation obtains access to a pool of interested buyers whose customers benefit from increased convenience and transaction efficiencies. Agents on the other hand represent either buyers (e.g. the commercial rating site www.bizrate.com) or sellers (e.g. Amazon’s associates programme).

Another promising development for organisations who wish to increase value in the e-service context by embedding intelligent agent technologies in their services. These software agents offer customers’ assistance in relation to difficult or time consuming tasks, e.g. information search, analysing data in order to ensure just-in-time response, etc.

9. Opportunities for further research

Opportunities for further research include:

- An investigation of the role and weight of web experience elements as influencers of online buying behaviour of new and returning customers.
- What degree of control do customers prefer in relation to interacting with public, private and third sector organisations electronically?
- How do customers expectations in relation to personalisation develop over time as they experience the electronic services of different service organisations and what are the costs and benefits of different levels of customer personalisation for the service organisation?
- How best might public, private and third sector organisations maintain ‘real-time’ and meaningful dialogues with online customers over time?
- The development of a taxonomy of e-service tasks and an investigation of their relationship to the web or e-service experience.
- An investigation of how customers shape and influence their own web experience, as well as that of other customers, in different e-service contexts.
- How might public, private and third sector organisations best use web 2.0 social networking technologies to improve it’s relationships with customers?
- How does the web experience impact customer satisfaction and loyalty and how does the level of customer adoption and experience of e-services affect customer perceived value?
- In what situations should e-services seek to solely delivery products and services electronically versus simply providing information on the product and services available offline?

10. Conclusion

With the proliferation of broadband and wireless networks, more and more organisations are looking to provide new services electronically, enhance existing services, or offer additional services to complement those already provided. As technology advances, new opportunities
emerge. Yet, while electronic delivery of services offers tremendous advantages to both provider and customer, they must be evaluated in both an operational and strategic context.
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