

Product Development

4 Strategies to Simplify the Customer Journey

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Summary. While it may be tempting to offer your customers a never-ending array of products, customizations, and information, research shows that simplicity is almost always the best option for boosting both company value and customer loyalty. But what does it take to build a... [more](#)

The modern consumer faces hundreds — if not thousands — of choices every day. What to read. Where to shop. What to buy. And each of those decisions takes a mental toll.

And yet, marketers continue to champion *more*. More choice. More products. More bang for your buck. More features, information and discounts.

Investing in new technologies, products, and services that add value to the consumer isn't a bad idea. But our research suggests that more often than not, simplification is the best strategy across the board. We conducted a comprehensive, systematic literature review that looked at hundreds of studies on customer preferences, and found that an overwhelming majority of studies reported simplicity as a top priority for consumers. For example, one survey, conducted by leading brand consultancy Siegel+Gale with over 15,000 consumers across nine countries, found that brands perceived as providing the simplest, most seamless experiences boasted both the strongest stock performance and the most loyal customers.

Of course, simplicity is easier said than done. But through our formal research, our extensive consulting work, and countless conversations with both customers and marketers, we've identified four interrelated steps that can help any organization deliver the smooth, simple experience today's customers demand:

1. Identify and communicate what simplicity means to you.

First, building a simplified customer experience starts with identifying what "simple" means for your organization. Our research suggests that simplicity has many facets. It entails rethinking both product development and sales and marketing efforts with a less is more mindset, reducing complexity in product portfolios, price discounts, ad campaigns and more. Each organization must determine which areas would benefit most from simplification, depending on its unique context and circumstances.

Next, once you've identified those top-priority areas, it's essential for leadership to clearly communicate them. This means adding language emphasizing the importance of simplicity to your organization's value proposition, list of corporate values, or guiding principles — and then making sure that people on the ground are actually connecting with and acting on those words. A

nice sounding value statement displayed in the lobby means absolutely nothing if people don't take it to heart. Netflix, for example, highlights the importance of taking time to simplify and fight complexity wherever possible in their staff culture memo — but the company's leaders also clearly live those values, with policies designed to reward employee behavior that aligns with Netflix's focus on simplification.

Similarly, Apple is also known for its simplification principles, which inform decisions such as their explicit policy of intentionally limiting the number of products and models the company offers. Identifying and communicating the areas in which simplicity is most important for your business is the critical first step to ensuring employees throughout the organization act on those priorities.

2. Don't just build a simple product. Build a simple customer journey.

Focusing on the product is important, but it's equally important not to lose sight of the entire customer experience. That means designing your sales and marketing efforts to make it as easy as possible to find, purchase, and start using your product. To make sure you're prioritizing simplicity throughout your customer journey, start by asking yourself the following questions:

- How can we make it easier for customers to understand and evaluate our offerings? Could we provide fewer products, features, or capabilities without compromising the effectiveness of our solution?
- How can we create targeted marketing campaigns that speak to customers in their language, at the time and place that is most useful to them?
- How can we make our pricing more transparent and consistent? Varying prices based on loyalty, season, purchase location, channel, or demographics can increase profits, but they also increase complexity for the customer.
- How can we optimize in-store layout and leverage point-of-sale technologies (tools such as automated recommendations for related products, mobile payments, etc.) to create a frictionless purchasing experience?

These are just a few examples, but there are countless opportunities to simplify the customer journey. Whether you're consolidating similar products into a single offering, investing in a convenient digital payment method, or even just instituting round-number prices, anything you can do to reduce your customers' mental load will improve their experience and their perception of your brand.

3. To achieve external simplicity, embrace internal complexity.

Prioritizing simplicity in the customer experience doesn't mean you can completely eliminate complexity internally. On the contrary, the process of winnowing down your product to its most simple form can often be incredibly complex. For instance, maintaining Google's simple, stripped down search engine has required an extremely rigorous and complex process of continuous design and simplification. Keeping their flagship product so simple has meant making tough choices like overruling well-meaning engineers and even going against customers' stated wishes.

After all, figuring out what customers *really* want (rather than what they say they want) is often extremely complicated. To build the most useful and targeted product, start by doing the hard work of determining the job your customer needs to get done. Don't assume that customers will use the product exactly how you want them to; instead, identify their pain points and design your products and features to meet those needs in as smooth and simple a manner as possible.

Building a simple customer experience is a bit like choreographing a dance performance. With enough preparation, the dancer will make the performance look easy — but that takes enormous effort behind the scenes.

4. Remember that simplicity isn't always the answer.

Most of the studies we reviewed suggest that keeping things simple for customers is the way to go. But in some cases, simplicity can backfire. For example, if you're talking to a new and inexperienced customer, taking a high-level, simplified

approach in your marketing communications can be effective. But if you're working with a more experienced customer, such an approach could come off as condescending or unhelpful. The same is true of products: In some situations, customers prefer a simple product that just does one thing well, but in others, they may want the ability to customize their personal settings and features.

Even some of Apple's strategic decisions have seemingly been in conflict with the company's deeply-held value of simplicity. Despite their focus on minimizing the number of products they offer, for example, they have demonstrated a willingness to allow new product categories to coexist with older ones in certain cases. Specifically, while Apple has discontinued most iPod models in order to focus on new and more powerful devices such as the iPhone and iPad, the company decided that it's worth continuing to sell the iPod Touch alongside their more popular product lines, because it meets customer needs that their newer products don't. Similarly, Netflix combines an extremely simple pricing structure and user interface with a decent amount of complexity in terms of variety in product offerings. While simplicity should be the default, it's important to consider the areas in which a bit of complexity can actually improve the customer journey.

Building a simple customer experience is an incredibly complex endeavor. It can be tempting to offer a never-ending array of options and features in an attempt to provide your customer with exactly what you think they want. But nine times out of ten, your customers will choose the easy option — not the “perfect” one. If you identify and communicate your simplification priorities throughout the organization, consider the entire customer journey, embrace internal complexity, and leave room for exceptions, you'll be on your way to creating the smooth, simple experience your customers truly want.

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