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3 Steps to Drive Loyalty With a Customer-First, Channel-Second Strategy

Strategies that prioritize channels over customers fail to foster long-term loyalty. By focusing first on customer expectations and goals, CMOs can build stronger relationships that drive growth and enhance engagement.



Market-shaper CMOs — those CMOs with strong positioning, innovation capabilities and deep customer understanding — are eight times more likely than non-market-shapers to exceed CEO and CFO expectations. Yet only 14% of CMOs are seen as market shapers by executive leaders.¹

Achieving this leadership stance will require adjustments to most marketers' current approach, as customer understanding and customer experience management is a critical capability gap for most marketing teams. It has ranked in the top 10 CMO-reported capability gaps since 2022.²

This continued gap means that digital investments are often driven first by channel selection, rather than starting with customer needs, expectations and goals. This results in poor channel and investment decisions that limit sustainable growth through customer loyalty, advocacy and retention. For example, 87% of CMOs reported performance issues with their marketing campaigns throughout the last 12 months.³

One reason: Many consumers don't feel understood by brands. Fifty-eight percent of U.S. consumers say the companies trying to sell them something don't have

a good understanding of their needs and preferences, according to the 2024 Gartner Consumer Values and Lifestyle Survey.⁴ This isn't just a problem for B2C brands; B2B buyers also penalize brands that demonstrate a lack of customer understanding. Seventy-three percent of B2B buyers agree they avoid doing business with suppliers that send them irrelevant messages.⁵

To reverse lagging performance through better customer experience, follow these three steps.

Step 1: Develop a Customer-Centric Experience Thesis Statement

A customer-centric experience thesis statement defines what your target customers expect your brand to deliver and how meeting those expectations drives positive outcomes for your business. Many brands jump directly into channel execution and skip creating a clear, customer-centric value statement that will serve as their marketing strategy's compass. Creating an experience thesis statement helps CMOs better evaluate how each decision ties back to their central tenet of customer centricity, so as not to succumb to distraction by novelty or common biases.

The thesis statement ensures you focus your efforts on the customers your company has the greatest upside with. The goal of developing the thesis statement (see Table 1) is twofold:

- It ensures that the experience helps customers accomplish something they'll derive value from.
- It secures agreement from all stakeholders on the specific business target that this experience will help the company achieve.

» Table 1: The Experience Thesis Statement Framework

The Who	The target persona(s)
The Why	The persona's goal or objective
The What for the Customer Persona	What defines success from our persona's point of view?
The What for the Business	The target outcome for our business

Source: Gartner

Start with finding “the who.” Effective experience thesis statements are based on customer insights and data — not assumptions. To ensure you target efforts toward the most relevant customer group, you should:

- Strengthen your customer personas with insights to inform the thesis statement.
- Gather key customer insights, if you do not have customer personas in place, to inform your thesis statement.

After you have defined the right customer persona, identify the relevant internal audience to co-author the remainder of the experience thesis statement. Use your existing customer experience governance or collaboration team, or recruit a team of cross-functional representatives with a direct or indirect influence on the delivery of experiences throughout the persona-driven customer journey.

This cross-functional team should create the experience thesis statement when setting goals and objectives for customer experience and marketing communications initiatives. This ensures all decisions are anchored from the outside-in. See Table 2 for a hypothetical example for a wearable device company.

» **Table 2: Theoretical Experience Thesis Statement**

The Who	Fitness enthusiasts who pride themselves on being well-researched and value guidance on how to maximize and learn from their own data to make healthy decisions.
The Why	The consumers have recently transitioned back to a more vigorous fitness regime after a long period away from training. They want to regain their endurance and activity levels, but they want to take a smart approach by using their own data to learn how their body responds to ease back in safely and without injury.
The What for the Customer Persona	They want to feel confident they will receive personalized guidance and recommendations informed by their fitness data and in a way that they couldn't glean on their own.
The What for the Business	Increase daily utilization of the health insights dashboard by 15%. Reduce annual customer churn by 10%.

Source: Gartner

Cross-functional leaders should emphasize the experience thesis statement as a starting point for all decisions. To do this, consider using a “Does it relate to the thesis?” (DIRTT) approach to project kickoffs, channel performance reviews and strategic planning meetings. To ensure this exercise is continuous, encourage posting the acronym somewhere visible. The more frequently this process occurs upfront, the more likely these practices will become ingrained in your culture. One way for marketing to solidify this practice is to make a customer-focused thesis statement a requirement for new project intake forms.

Step 2: Align the Thesis Statement to Critical Moments in the Customer Journey

The next step is to examine the customer journey for opportunities to boost decision confidence.

Customers want to feel like they are in control throughout their end-to-end journey and do not want to be restricted to a channel (online or offline). They are turning toward hybrid experiences that enable them to engage with the channels that best support confidence in their purchase decisions. For example, 82% of smartphone users leverage their smartphones when shopping in stores.⁴

Hybrid experiences offer flexibility and allow customers to choose the most convenient or effective way to interact based on their immediate needs and location. This could mean providing a mobile app for wayfinding in a large store, blending the physical location with digital guidance or offering a virtual try-on tool online that lets customers easily order physical samples.

Formulate your approach to designing customer experience enhancements by answering the following questions in sequence:

- How do customers' needs present themselves at different stages in the journey?
- When would customers benefit from signals that clarify how to reach their goal? Alternatively, when would they benefit from signals that provide confidence in their decisions?
- What are the potential ways in which we could support the answer agreed upon in the second question?

Identifying the journey stage gives you a reference point for when this need shows up in your customer relationship. The delineation between clarity and confidence will help you

focus ideation efforts on designing a customer experience approach that supports that specific need. The inputs from the experience thesis statement, provided in Table 1, serve as a guiding reference to ensure the answers align with your target persona's needs and success criteria.

Treat this as an evergreen process and update the answers as you learn from your target customers. This exercise's value comes from planning for how your team can be better informed and equipped to engage your customers over the long term, as it does not restrict your strategy to a channel that could become irrelevant in the near future.

Step 3: Prioritize Channel Selection Based on Customer Impact and Capability

Consider the channels for delivery only after your team has identified the stage and approach for supporting the customer.

Brands should think of channels as vehicles for customer experience delivery: a means, not an end.

Use the following factors, in concert with existing criteria at your organization, to identify which channels are the most viable for your company's experience delivery:

- **Feasible:** Are we currently equipped to deliver on the experience as promised?
- **Repurpose:** Is this an opportunity to leverage an existing capability or channel in a new way?
- **Measurable:** Can we assign metrics that track value for the customer and the company to our efforts?
- **Employee effort:** Will this require a completely new workflow or skill?
- **Time:** Can we deliver when our customers expect the experience to occur?
- **Customer experience ROI:** What are the potential gains and costs of execution, and/or what is the cost of not executing?

Some of the factors represent more advanced considerations that organizations often overlook, such as time and employee effort. Others are ways to reframe traditional criteria in a slightly different way, such as feasibility and whether there is an opportunity to repurpose an existing channel in a new way. Maintaining a balance between customer-focused and company-focused criteria is the most important.

¹ **2024 Gartner Senior Executive Views of CMO Leadership Survey.** This survey was conducted to explore how chief marketing officers are perceived by key C-suite leaders (i.e., CEOs and CFOs), and what distinguishes effective CMOs under different behavioral and company circumstances. The survey was administered online from August through September 2024 and includes data from 125 senior executives in North America (n = 84) and Europe (n = 41). Respondents were CEOs and CFOs at organizations with at least \$50 million in annual revenue, with 36% coming from organizations with at least \$1 billion in annual revenue. Respondents came from a wide variety of industries, including manufacturing and natural resources (n = 21); banking and financial services (n = 6); retail (n = 8); healthcare (n = 23); consumer products (n = 17); pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and life sciences (n = 6); insurance (n = 2); technology products (n = 14); travel and hospitality (n = 8); IT and business services (n = 16); and media (n = 4). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

² **2025 Gartner CMO Spend Survey.** This survey explored top-line marketing budgets with the goal of understanding how changing customer journeys, pressures from the C-suite and cost challenges affect marketing's spending priorities and channel effectiveness. Conducted online from January through March 2025, the research included 402 respondents from North America (n = 202), the United Kingdom (n = 97) and Europe (n = 103; including France,

Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden). Participants were required to be involved in decisions related to setting or influencing marketing strategies/planning, aligning marketing budgets/resources, or leading cross-functional programs and strategies with marketing. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents represented organizations with annual revenue of \$1 billion or more. The respondents came from a diverse range of industries: manufacturing (n = 52), financial services (n = 50), insurance (n = 43), consumer products (n = 43), healthcare (n = 42), travel and hospitality (n = 37), IT and business services (n = 36), retail (n = 36), pharma (n = 32), and media (n = 31). Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

³ **2024 Gartner Channel and Campaign Management Survey.** This survey aimed to understand how marketing organizations should organize internal resources to manage effective campaigns, efficient channels and impactful content. It was conducted online from the end of July through mid-September 2024. In total, 418 respondents were surveyed in their native languages across North America (n = 194) and Europe (n = 224). Qualifying organizations reported enterprisewide annual revenue for fiscal 2023 of at least \$100 million, with 80% of the respondents coming from organizations with \$1 billion or more in annual revenue. The respondents came from a variety of industries: financial services (n = 67), insurance (n = 32), manufacturing (n = 43), consumer products (n = 38), retail (n = 40), travel and hospitality (n = 37), healthcare (n = 33), pharmaceuticals (n = 21), media (n = 29), tech products (n = 40), and IT and business services (n = 38). All the respondents were required to be senior decision makers in the marketing function, where they held significant responsibilities in setting or influencing overall marketing strategy and planning. They were also required to be involved in decisions pertaining to managing multiple marketing campaigns and/or advertising channels, as well as creating, managing and executing digital marketing strategy. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

⁴ **2024 Gartner Consumer Values and Lifestyle Survey.** The purpose of this survey was to understand consumer lifestyles and motivations. The research was conducted online in two parts, from 30 July to 28 August 2024 among 6,174 respondents in the U.S. (n = 4,146), Canada (n = 1,012) and the U.K. (n = 1,016). The first part of the survey included screening, demographic, sentiment,

values and lifestyle questions. The second part included category-specific (for example, money and spending, retail, shopping, sustainability, health, and beauty) questions. Respondents were required to be at least 15 years old. Quotas in the U.S. were set for geographic areas, age, gender, ethnicity and employment status to approximate the U.S. population as a whole. Quotas in the U.K. and Canada were set for geographic areas, age, gender and employment status to approximate the U.K. and Canadian population as a whole.

⁵ **2024 Gartner B2B Buyer Survey.** This survey was conducted to explore how B2B buyers learned about potential suppliers, what factors influenced their decision to purchase from a specific supplier and their perceptions of personalization. The survey was administered online from August through September 2024 and includes data from 632 B2B buyers from North America (n = 502) and Europe (n = 130). Respondents who qualified for this survey were required to be employed full time at an organization with a total revenue of at least \$250 million (or equivalent) and have participated in a significant B2B purchase decision. A "significant B2B purchase decision" was defined as a decision that required deliberation with at least one other person and the evaluation of more than one potential supplier or vendor. Purchases included in this survey were made in a variety of categories, including manufacturing (n = 144), IT and high tech (n = 140), healthcare (n = 138), financial services (n = 115), non-IT business services (n = 57), and other (n = 35). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

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