

Page not found: how to avoid a customer experience roadblock

by Alastair Cole, Chief Innovation Officer, Partners Andrews Aldridge

For automotive brands, customer experience is easy. It's all about the swish showroom, smooth test drive, and slick salesman spiel – right?

Wrong. The automotive industry is changing, and with it, the expectation for brands to deliver an end-to-end customer journey. A journey that takes the consumer from browsing on mobile, through the showroom, into a test drive and ending with purchase.

Take Tesla, who are redefining how we think about the buying process, with their streamlined straight-to-buy site and customised design studio. Or Honda, whose VR driving experience unveiled at this year's CES uses geotagging and interactive content to immerse the user in a virtual test drive.

But as more and more people expect to browse, explore, and purchase all via digital, there are even more points at which brands can lose their customers. And it's becoming a huge issue – exactly as we found at our Excellence in Customer Experience event held in February in conjunction with the Global Sourcing Association.

The event covered everything from how to measure and improve CX, to a panel discussion on the new technologies driving customer experience. But how did we get our audience really getting to grips with how customer experience affects purchase?

We set up a workshop to assess the mobile web CX of ten major automotive brands. Users had to complete three tasks on their mobile devices which were scored using a featherweight model of our CX Score. Each group had to find the garage fit, NCAP safety rating, and the dealership's contact details of a specific model available nearby. And the results were startling.

Own your space

Let's start with the positives. Out of 10 major British and International automotive brands, Seat came in at top place. Why's that? We noticed that the brands who ended up with the best scores were those who had the best integrated digital experience. That means that our group used external sites to help them find the information they needed – and it worked.

This seemed to be a trend. Groups who used aggregators which directed them back to the brand's site ranked their overall customer experience higher. Users researching the Toyota Yaris successfully completed the tasks, but poor search optimisation in aggregators meant they were rarely directed to the most helpful site, straight away affecting their overall score.

If users can quickly find out what they need to know, that's one half of your customer experience sorted. But if you're losing customers to aggregators because your site doesn't meet requirements, that's poor CX. Brands need to own the spaces where customers are interacting with their brands at every level. You'd think in this day and age that would be second nature, but our findings showing it to be far from the case.

Think best practice

Moving back to the brands' sites themselves, and testers were regularly reporting poor customer experience. BMW's navigation was deemed 'laughable' and landed it in the bottom three, while Audi's site looked good but wasn't comprehensive and failed in two out three of the tasks.

And yes, it may sound obvious, but sites need to be easy to navigate with a helpful (and working...) search function, an intuitive layout and a clear, fair value exchange. Ford and Peugeot were ranked low because their poor CX meant lots of scrolling, a clunky search function, and users ending up on different tabs and PDFs which interrupted their journey.

Once brands have this best practice in hand, they can focus on making their customer experience memorable. While users found Fiat's site ok to navigate, as one user put it 'if you didn't want a Fiat 500 before you went to the website, you wouldn't want one after'. Inspiring content is an essential element in delivering excellent customer experience.

Join the dots

While the main site may be the main event, auto-manufacturers need to bear in mind their entire brand ecosystem. We found users had to navigate a number of individual branded microsites – and that's where they found inconsistencies.

Honda's dealer websites may have all the necessary information, but they weren't similar enough to make them easy to compare. Similarly for VW, the main site had positive feedback but the details on the dealership sites were poor.

This disconnect can be hugely detrimental, even if a company's main site is strong. Brands need standardised control over microsites to ensure excellent customer experience in all user interactions.

So where did that leave the overall standings?

1. Seat Leon

Came well ahead in first place for its performance on Google and other aggregators.

2. Kia Picanto

Site had good content but users found it difficult to find exactly what they were looking for, and wouldn't go back.

3. Honda Civic

Good main site but overall experience let down by poor dealership sites.

4. Fiat 500

Website was easy to use but it was nothing special and generally uninspiring.

5. VW Polo

Microsites weren't standardised enough, creating inconsistencies and made it difficult for the user to compare information.

6. Toyota Yaris

Dealership sites were ok but the overall experience wasn't exciting enough to get users wanting to buy.

7. Audi A1

The site looked good but wasn't comprehensive: users couldn't find the information they were looking for.

8. BMW Mini

Poor overall CX, with searching throwing up 404s and a poor value exchange when users were asked to input information too early on in the journey.

9. Peugeot 208

Lots of disconnect between pages, with lots of scrolling needed to find information and major loss when the website didn't mention the 5 star NCAP rating.

10. Ford Fiesta

Poor search tool, with users ending up on different tabs and PDFs making the journey difficult and too complicated to find necessary information.

Snapshot: what we learned from automotive CX testing

1. It's the simple things that make the biggest difference

When users are unable to complete simple tasks, it's the basic functions of customer experience which need to improve first. Brands need to minimise the number of steps in the journey to purchase by simplifying layout and keeping users on the site. Once customers are able to easily find what they're looking for, they'll have time for the more emotive content. And that's what will get them coming back – and even better, buying.

2. External aggregating sites are owning the customer experience

While overall digital experience is key in delivering best practice CX, brands are losing out to aggregators who are owning good navigation. Whilst search optimisation is one half of the battle, the other is improving your site's search functions and internal navigation so users will trust your brand to find them what they want, before they look elsewhere.

3. There's a disconnect in quality across the digital experience

You can't expect customers to stay on one site throughout their journey to purchase. Which is why brands need to ensure the quality of their main site extends to microsites and beyond. Wherever there's branded content, it needs to meet the same standards. That will help create a seamless and coherent experience which will guide your customer to purchase.

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