USER JOURNEY PLANNING FOR SALES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION BY LOCAL COMPANIES

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Abstract

The user journey is a pivotal concept in marketing that evolves and adapts amidst technological, economic, and behavioral shifts. This paper aims to present practical models for user journey planning, exploring their influence and subsequent utilization by companies exporting their products. Specifically, it delves into Bulgarian companies and their strategies to plan and implement exports to EU member states. Interviews have been conducted with marketing managers exporting from Bulgaria to the EU. The framework identified in the analysis is employed, detailing the various approaches companies opt for. The paper concludes by outlining areas for further analysis regarding companies' decisions related to elements of the user journey in international sales..

Key words: User Journey, Planning International Sales

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Introduction

The digital era has catalyzed monumental transformations in consumer behavior through new technologies that enable greater control, interaction, and access to information. Consumers now expect to derive value quickly, leveraging digital tools to independently shape their journey and forge "licensed" relationships with companies on their own terms. User-generated content is proliferating across digital platforms, feeding consumers personalized recommendations. Meanwhile, algorithms grow ever more sophisticated at predicting consumer needs, while big data analytics reveal nuanced correlations between demographics, psychology, and buying patterns. This complex digital landscape requires nimble navigation by companies seeking to align strategies with emerging consumer behavioral models.

This paper aims to elucidate such corporate strategies through comparative analysis of consumer interactions across diverse markets and industries. It seeks to model the user journey planning adopted by Bulgarian companies exporting goods and services to the European Union, assessing the efficacy, business influence, and integration of these models amidst accelerating globalization. After reviewing the

evolving conceptualization of the user journey in marketing theory and practice, interviews with marketing managers of Bulgarian exporters will garner qualitative insights on the decisions, challenges, and influential factors affecting user journey design. Quantitative data on sales performance may also inform statistical analysis of correlations. Findings will summarize the nuanced market dynamics and touchpoints affecting user journey optimization for export success, while also weighing limitations like small sample sizes. Further research can build on these findings by expanding samples, incorporating additional variables, and testing hypotheses on user journey design principles.

By modeling user journey planning for EU exports, this study can help Bulgarian companies compete in the global digital economy while adding to academic understanding of digital consumer behavior. But it has boundaries in scope and methodology that future work can address.

Review of Models for User Journey Planning

Marketing and the User Journey

What exactly marketing is, is a question that is hard to answer unequivocally and there are numerous definitions - succinct or more detailed. One of the most established authors in the field of management, Peter Drucker, defines marketing as follows: 'The entire business from the point of view of its end result - the customer.'

Consumer behavior in the era of digital technologies leads to changes in advertising campaign concepts, including television, as well as in the mechanisms of planned communication and advertising impact. The main reason is the significant change in the consumer behavior model. Through their behavior, consumers clearly demonstrate that the use of digital communication tools is an essential part of their perception and interaction with the outside world, including the advertising messages from advertisers. The internet and mobile communications are so deeply embedded in consumers' daily lives that an advertising campaign, which doesn't integrate digital technology and communications, would lose its marketing effectiveness. Consumers are now significantly changing their behavior patterns and are greatly influenced in shaping their perceptions and decisions based on the information and impact they have actively or passively received through digital communication means.

The concept of the "user journey" encompasses the management of user behavior when interacting with one or multiple channels throughout the process of extracting value from users and converting them into customers and/or partners of the company or organization. Every step that users might undertake throughout their "journey" across the company's marketing and advertising toolbox is planned. The concept takes into account who the typical users are, what motivates them,

where they go, what they do, and what the company can and will do to engage them in the most optimal way.

The "user journey" is popular as an approach for managing user behavior on websites, but in reality, it can be applied to the entire user journey, regardless of whether there's digital interaction or not. Using this concept allows for the most effective modeling of every interaction. In a digital environment, adjusting and changing the interaction is much easier than in any other setting.

A significant advantage of this model is that it emphasizes the users, specifically the target users, and creates behavior scenarios for these users. This allows for the "alignment" of expected and most realistic user behavior with the behavior desired by the company. This effect is especially important given the frequent inclination of companies to create tools solely aimed at the behavior they desire from users, without accounting for the real motivators and probable behavior of the users.

Key Elements of the User Journey

Users have a behavior model that they themselves have decided on and wish to follow. In this context, every marketing tool should consider:
- **The state of the users** - At any given moment, users are in a particular state, and this state determines the interaction that should be offered to them with the aim of maximizing their participation. A good example of this is users' morning commute to work - it's challenging to "hold" users' attention for a product presentation, regardless of how potentially useful and interesting the product might be for them.
- **The interests of the users** - Each user has specific interests. Often, users with a similar profile - demographically and socially - have similar interests. As an example, consider parents of young children; they seek the best for their kids. In this context, they are inclined to seek out online platforms that provide them with the necessary information and a place to share. These users are interested in certain products and services, and are willing to seek information and share both positive and negative experiences of using them..
- **The environment in which the users are located** - The environment in which users find themselves largely determines the behavior we can expect from them.

Touchpoints in the User Journey

A key element of the user journey concept is the touchpoints – broadly defined places where the user and the organization can interact. These can be television advertisements, metro stops, an information portal, brochures in the apartment's mailbox, emails, etc. For the organization, these potential touchpoints in the metro, for example, are realized through advertising spaces around and on the metro stop, the stop itself (for holding a flash mob or handing out flyers), the board at the

stop (for sticking on, for example, wish notes), on the escalators, on the backs of tickets, and so on.

Most of the key models for the marketing funnel include the notion of touchpoints as the user journey is the practical implementation in a specific channel of a specific message in a specific format, and includes the next expected step by the user.

This is valid for models as:
- Awareness, Consideration, Decision (ACD)
- Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action (AIDA)
- See, Think, Do, Care (STDC)
- Awareness, Trial, Adoption, Loyalty (ATAL)
- Moments model (ZMOT, FMOT, SMOT, TMOT)

Touchpoints in the User Journey as Nudges and Nods

The touchpoints are of key importance as serving as both a nudge to the consumer's journey and a nod that gives a new direction to the user journey. A nudge because the goal of applying the user journey concept is to move the consumer in the desired direction, and a nod as any new interactions, touchpoints and flow will depend on how this specific nod affected the user's user journey in the future.

The model presented in Branding in the Digital Age: You're Spending Your Money in All the Wrong Places (Edelman, 2010, Harvard Business Review, 88) clearly presents the decision journey a having triggers for specific behavior (initial evaluation, new loyalty loop) that can be viewed as both a nudge and a nod.


Source: Edelman, D. C. (2010). Branding in the Digital Age: You're Spending Your Money in All the Wrong Places. Harvard Business Review, 88(12)

Figure 1: Consumer Decision Journey

Customer experiences and perceptions are significantly shaped by interactions with various touchpoints, which can elicit either positive or negative responses based entirely on the individual (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, p. 116-126). Touchpoints can impact consumer purchase intent and behavior across all five stages of the buyer

decision journey: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase actions. (Kotler, 2013).

Touchpoints as nudges and nods are omnipresent in the micro-moments concept by Google. The concept of micro-moments was developed by Google based on billions of user interactions and states that micro-moments are needs that consumers instinctively satisfy on a digital device, which devices have become part of the life of consumers. These interactions are context-specific, and as Google points out, they are intent-rich, meaning actions that are rich in specific user intent.
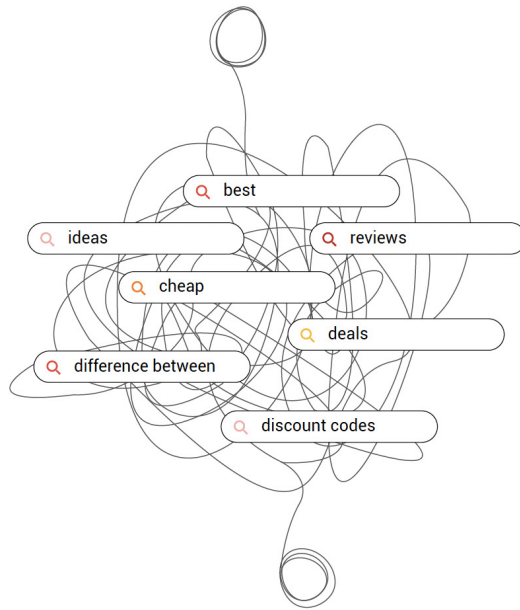
Source: Decoding Decisions: Making sense of the messy middle. Think with Google.

Figure 2: Representation of the micro-moments in the user journey as nudges and nods in the Messy Middle paper by Google

The significance of micro-moments, in the context of the above, is fundamental to marketing insofar as:
- Micro-moments represent specific needs that consumers wish to fulfill.
- They are tied to real actions by users for which they have left a digital footprint in context.
- They allow for the planning, implementation, analysis, and enhancement of both strategic and tactical marketing for companies and organizations.

The concept covers three key aspects:
- Micro-moments can be articulated as questions that the user wants an answer to with the next click or swipe of finger

- Micro-moments can be grouped in clusters, i.e. a cluster of questions that fall into a braided category of consumer needs in the user journey (i.e. which is the best shampoo; which is the best shampoo for me; what customers are delighted and frustrated from; can i trust the producer; where and how can i buy it; how do i use it)
- Micro-moments can be either won or lost at a specific touchpoint by a specific company, so that user want and then move to the next step (i.e. there is a clear nudge and nod aspect in the micro-moments concept - a nudge to the next step and a nod that will affect the next steps on the user journey)

Category heuristics   Power of now   Social proof

Scarcity bias   Authority bias   Power of free

Source: Decoding Decisions: Making sense of the messy middle. Think with Google.

Figure 3: The six cognitive biases that most affect consumer's behavior in the Messy Middle

Exports by Local Companies

The Importance of Exports

There are numerous benefits of the internationalization of a company and of exports in particular. Some of the key benefits are increased sales and profits, diversification of risks, enhanced competitiveness, expansion of product life cycle, access to market insights, economies of scale, spread of overhead costs over larger sales volumes, utilization of excess resources or capacity, reduction of local market dependency etc.

The exports of local companies from EU member states to other EU countries is one of the most accessible internationalization opportunities. Yet there are specific to be accounted for namely:
- Expertise of the team of the company for marketing and sales
- Quality of digital assets, including website
- Financial resources available
- Type of products and specifics of the sector
- Country specifics at all stages of the user journey

What Could Affect the Planned User Journey for Local Companies

These specifics affect, and sometimes imply the options and the choice of approach to exports, the planned user journey, the types of nudges and nods that can be planned and managed in different ways when local EU companies export to other European countries.

The hypothesis is that consumers would have their specific heuristic for these specific areas:
- Place and model for order and purchase - dependent on country (cluster of countries in the region) in terms of predominant models on the respective market
- Payment and delivery method - dependent on country (cluster of countries in the region) in terms of predominant models on the respective market
- Specifics for the type of goods - dependent both on the specific country (cluster of countries in the region) and on the specific type of goods

The reasons for these hypotheses are that these nudges and nods in the consumer journey are highly dependent on the heuristics for these users. The effect on the heuristics of the category is well developed in the Messy Middle paper by Google. The paper elaborates on the specifics of user behavior and the evolution of the behavior of part of a user journey. The concept is that users in the digital age are constantly moving in a cycle Trigger / Exploration / Evaluation / Purchase but even with immense datasets as with Google there is a need for a model to be implemented to move the users across the different stages.

Selection of Companies to Be Interviewed

A diverse set of companies was chosen for interviews to offer a comprehensive understanding of various aspects of the selection of exports approach and the specifics of the user journey:
- The interview with the Reverse Model for eCommerce Company offers a unique perspective on customers' understanding of a market category. The fact that the company has two major markets - Bulgaria and Romania allows it to identify specifics that could otherwise be missed as key aspects in the user journey.

- The interview with the Perfumes and Cosmetics eCommerce Company brings to the fore the challenges and nuances of selling beauty products online - it outlines both the heuristics for the category and by country. And combines it with the type of users - heavy users, occasional users etc.
- The interview with the Handmade Bio Shampoos and Cosmetics Company presents a view of a specific niche and the challenges for a company with limited eCommerce experience and with focus on product development and product production.

Questionnaire to Companies

The questionnaire for the interview - to be conducted in person or online - covers 4 key areas and the respective sub areas to be covered

- Sales Model to Consumers in Bulgaria and Other Countries - What is your current sales model? Do you employ different sales models for different countries/regions? If so, what remains consistent across these models? Why was this particular approach selected?
- Specifics in Consumer Behavior for the Company - What variations in consumer behavior have you noticed across different regions/countries? Are there any discernible differences in behavior for various types of products or purchases?
- Trends in the Consumer Journey - What touchpoints (physical, online, specific channels/platforms, influencers, review sites, etc.) have you observed to be gaining or decreasing in importance? Which touchpoints and types of content significantly influence a successful movement of consumers towards sales or loyalty development? Do these patterns change depending on the type of product or purchase?
- How the Company Plans the Consumer Journey - How does your company account for the above-mentioned specifics and trends in the consumer journey? What approaches or changes in the consumer journey has your company made/tested/rejected/added recently?

Findings on the User Journey Planning

Company with Reverse Model for eCommerce

Company Overview - Pavlina Marinova, the CEO and founder of Pick N Dazzle, offers consumers a unique beauty box experience. Unlike traditional mystery boxes, this service allows users to personalize or receive recommended product choices via AI. It predominantly operates in the Bulgarian and Romanian markets.

Business Model- the company utilizes a reverse shopping model. After creating a beauty profile, customers select a subscription package, creating a

unique shopping experience. Digital platforms, especially Facebook and TikTok, significantly influence user engagement and transactions.

User Experience - cultural differences exist between the Bulgarian and Romanian markets. While Romania values energetic content and price-focused marketing, Bulgaria leans towards a more trust-driven approach. Social media content differs, with Romania favoring concise posts and Bulgaria reading longer content.

Touchpoints - Pick N Dazzle actively uses social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. The company experienced a surge in business after integrating TikTok, and they've recently expanded their affiliate marketing efforts in Romania.

Perfumes and Cosmetics eCommerce Company

Company Overview - Bilyan Atmadzhov is the Project Manager of Parfium. bg, a top online perfumery and cosmetics retailer in Bulgaria, boasting a range of 4,000 to 5,000 products.

Business Model - besides an online presence, they operate a physical store in Sofia. The firm employs a country-specific approach for its eCommerce strategy and plans to diversify delivery options with new collaborations.

Marketing and Advertising -their main traffic sources include search engines, Facebook, Instagram, and affiliate marketing. They also utilize Viber campaigns and collaborate with YouTubers. Unique marketing initiatives include encouraging customers to tag them in return for mystery boxes.

User Experience - consumer behavior ranges from price-sensitive shoppers to brand loyalists. External review platforms like Pazaruvaj.com in Bulgaria and TrustedShop in Western Europe influence buying decisions. Delivery time and payment methods differ per region, affecting consumer satisfaction.

Market Penetration - they use dynamic pricing software, influencer collaborations, and diverse campaigns tailored to specific markets. Their content strategy, especially on TikTok, focuses on education and trust-building.

Handmade Bio Shampoos and Cosmetics Company

Company Overview - Soap Factory, managed by Boris Borissov, offers natural products for body, face, and hair care. Their products are sold internationally via various business models.

Business Model - they sell in Bulgaria, Romania, Germany, and the US, emphasizing the right product mix. In Bulgaria, they're exploring online sales with a platform called "Sapunta Mara." In Romania, they collaborated with bio retail shops, while in Germany, they successfully sell online through Amazon.

User Experience - customer feedback and reviews play a pivotal role in shaping the brand's offerings. Their strategy shifts from merely following market trends to

genuinely understanding consumer needs. Amazon sales highlight the importance of margins and algorithms in determining product visibility and sales.

Touchpoints - packaging changes boosted sales on Amazon. The company recognizes the significance of the in-store experience and anticipates a continued shift towards online shopping. The next step is to create touchpoints for loyal customers.

Conclusion

Online Sales - all three companies, Parfium.bg, Soap Factory, Pick N Dazzle have an online presence or are exploring online sales, but their strategies vary. Parfium.bg has a well-established online platform while Soap Factory is in the exploratory phase in Bulgaria and has selected an approach for Germany via a partner for sales in Amazon. Pick N Dazzle has its own website with AI for recommendations, focuses primarily on Bulgaria and Romania, creates highly localized offers and content and actively utilizes social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram extensively for online sales.

Offline Sales - both Parfium.bg and Soap Factory have offline sales channels, with Parfium.bg having a physical store in Sofia and Soap Factory primarily operating offline in Bulgaria. The physical touchpoints are a key part of the business model.

Market Entry - the companies use different strategies to enter new markets. Soap Factory partnered with local entities in Romania and Germany. Parfium bg manages its own platforms and uses some marketplaces and review websites. Pick N Dazzle uses its own website, and places a huge emphasis on leveraging social media.

Market Similarities and Difference for consumer behavior - consumer behavior towards online and offline shopping, and the importance of reviews and customer experience are common themes across the markets discussed. There is a notable mention of different consumer preferences in Romania, Germany, and Bulgaria regarding shopping online or offline, and how reviews and customer experience impact purchase decisions. Whether a market is cash on delivery or online card payment highly affects the entire use journey and can make the difference for a successful or failed market entry. Some markets have predominant review platforms and courier service companies that are a key part of the user journey.

Customer Engagement - engaging customers during their journey and understanding their needs is a common theme. All companies look to understand and meet customer needs, and build loyalty. The topic is present for the fulfilment company as well.

Further Research Recommendations

- Conduct surveys or interviews to gather qualitative data on customer touchpoint preferences and experiences.
- Perform statistical analysis on quantitative data like sales numbers to identify correlations between specific touchpoints and purchase behavior.
- Review case studies of companies succeeding with omni-channel touchpoint strategies to identify best practices.
- Research emerging touchpoint technologies and evaluate their potential impact on consumer engagement.
- Study cognitive psychology and behavior science literature to better understand emotional, social, and psychological drivers behind touchpoint effectiveness.

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