Brand touchpoints’ orchestration: understanding the impact of digital, traditional and mobile touchpoints on customer journey

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Brands interact with their customers through multiple channels and a myriad of touchpoints. Identifying the right combination of touchpoints to better guide customers’ path to purchase is critical for many brands and retailers. This paper reports two field experiments in which a French click-and-mortar retailer’s email-only advertising strategy was substituted by i) a print-and-email strategy and ii) an SMS-and-email strategy. On large sample sizes of 128,000 and 37,000 individuals, both experiments improved conversion but impacted channel-specific distribution of customers. Print mainly drove offline incremental sales, while SMS equally drove offline and online incremental sales. The nature of firm-initiated touchpoints (email, SMS and print) has a significant influence on the customer purchase channel.
Brands aim at interacting with their customers through many touchpoints to engage them in profitable paths to purchase. Understanding customers’ paths to purchase thanks to the activation of specific “touchpoints” (Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman, 2015) has become a critical issue in omni-channel research (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). As a matter of fact, firms need to be able to evaluate and to understand how the activation of different touchpoints’ may impact customers’ journey.

Touchpoints which customers may be exposed to whilst shopping can be of great heterogeneity (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) namely brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned and social touchpoints. Furthermore, many newly established touchpoints are not under firm control. Therefore, one of the main challenges regarding brand-controlled touchpoints is to be able to measure the impact of communication investments on customer purchasing behavior.

Thus, the Marketing Science Institute identified the following key research priorities:

i) a better understanding of omni-channel drivers for customer decision making

ii) identification of causality for multi-touch attribution across all media, digital and non-digital.

The multiple distribution channels a customer may use combined with the different media a brand may activate lead to increasingly complex customer journeys. Such a complexity may be explained by the large number of available channels, the decreased control over these channels by brands¹ and the hybridization of channels’ nature (e.g. distribution channels become communication channels and inversely) (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman, 2015).

Beyond multi-channel, omni-channel management is becoming the norm for firms dealing with a greater fragmentation of their audiences (Brynjolfsson, Hu, and Rahman, 2013; ¹ one channel may impact the efficiency of another one
Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman, 2015). As there is increasing competition between touchpoints for marketing investments, analyzing the efficiency of each touchpoint to achieve the communication campaign objective becomes crucial.

**Customer purchasing behavior in a context of touchpoints’ multiplication**

*Understanding the customer journey in a multi-channel environment*

The advent of Internet has greatly modified the way customers search for information and purchase products and services. Some research helps the understanding of how customers choose their channels, including online channel (Ansari, Mela, and Neslin, 2008) and mobile channels (Wang, Malthouse, and Krishnamurthis, 2015).

In each stage of the buying process, customers’ channel choice depends on their shopping goals as well as the usefulness of each channel they perceived (Balasubramanian, Raghunathan and Mahajan, 2005). Furthermore, the Internet has given rise to what is called “the research shopping phenomenon” (Verhoef, Neslin, and Vroomen, 2007). Such a phenomenon describes a customer who searches information in one channel and purchases in another one. Verhoef et al. (2007) provide evidence for three mechanisms for research shopping: (1) channels’ search and purchase attribute based decision-making, (2) lack of lock-in in the channel during the purchase funnel, and (3) the cross-channel synergies.

Revealing similar mechanisms, Gensler, Verhoef, and Böhm (2012) found that channel inertia over time can also be an explanation for customer loyalty to channels.

In the existing research, the channel choice has been studied mainly from a customer viewpoint. The objective was then to understand why and how customers activate some specific channels or touchpoints during their journey. However an important issue that has not been treated so far is: *How may the activation of touchpoints by a brand impact customer*
journeys?

The aim of the paper is to analyze the efficiency of different touchpoints from the company viewpoint as a way to engage customers, to drive them to a specific channel and trigger a conversion on that channel. This paper aims at understanding how a specific brand-controlled touchpoint may impact the customer journey.

Customers may unexpectedly be exposed to touchpoints. In contrast with previous research, our samples are composed of many customers that are not engaged yet in a decision process. This is in line with recent work from Edelman & Singer (2015), arguing for the benefits of designing new and shorter customer journeys that compress the consideration and evaluation steps to engage and lock-in customers in a “loyalty loop”.

Understanding how touchpoints’ proliferation impacts the customer journey

Today, customers may use several channels, devices and touchpoints to search information or to purchase (Grewal, Roggeveen, and Runyan, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2015). Furthermore, the « different channels become blurred as the natural borders between channels begin to disappear » (Verhoef et al. 2015). The introduction of mobile touchpoints may induce even more switching across channels and adds complexity to the customer journey (Brinker, Lobaugh, and Paul, 2012). De Haan, Kannan, Verhoef and Wiesel (2015) indicated that mobile would be more suitable for search than for purchase stages and that mobile can directly interfere with other channels, during pre-purchase phases of customers’ decision making process. Mobile touchpoints could in fact drive a customer to a channel that would be more suitable for shopping (i.e. conversion). However, little research has been conducted to evaluate the capacity of mobile to drive customers to specific channels particularly in multi-channel retailing contexts.

Within omni-channel paths to purchase, Badot and Lemoine (2013) highlighted the new
role of mobile as a facilitator of “on-the-go” or situational shopping rather than destination-based shopping. Therefore, if mobile can trigger conversions across channels, more research is needed to measure its impact across online and offline channels.

**Brand contact strategy in a context of touchpoints’ multiplication**

*Designing contact strategies to generate more profitable customer journeys*

While multi-channel literature has focused mainly on customer behavior, how a brand may activate touchpoints to engage customers in a more profitable path to purchase, has received less attention from researchers. However, designing an omni-channel communication strategy is becoming critical for companies as touchpoints compete for marketing resources allocation in the company.

As it has been shown that multi-channel shopping adoption increases the intrinsic customer value (Rangaswamy and Van Bruggen, 2005), it could be expected that designing an omni-channel strategy may increase customer probability to buy. But, with regard to the proliferation of touchpoints (traditional, digital and mobile touchpoints), a crucial issue is the i) selection and ii) orchestration of touchpoints the brand may activate to drive conversions.

Among these touchpoints, mobile is becoming an important one as consumers rarely separate from their mobile devices, as evidenced by the nomophobia highlighted by Clayton & al. (2015). However, mobile has been mainly treated as customer-initiated touchpoints (through concepts such as showrooming or webrooming) and not as firm-initiated strategic touchpoints. A fruitful research direction consists in understanding how brands’ digital, traditional or mobile touchpoints may impact the customer journey and how they may differently influence the path to purchase.

*Brand control over the customer journey*
Nowadays firms do not manage or own every touchpoint and they have much less control over the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The explosion in customer-initiated touchpoints as well as the reduced control of the journey challenge the ability of the brand to impact the journey customers (Edelman and Singer, 2015).

In a context where firms have much less control over customers’ journey, the question of firm-controlled touchpoints’ causal impact on behaviors is even more central. Any insight regarding this question would result in actionable tools for a brand. *Firm-owned touchpoints* are customer interactions during the journey that are designed and managed by the firm and under the firm’s control. These touchpoints typically include direct touchpoints to opt-in individuals, websites and loyalty programs. While research showed that both advertising and promotion influences customer attitudes and preferences (Venkatesan and Kumar 2004), a gap remains in the understanding of how each touchpoint affects purchasing behavior across purchase channels.

*Understanding own-channel and cross-channel effects*

Dinner, Van Heerde and Neslin (2014) pointed out that offline communication drive offline sales which has been called “own-channel effects” and highlighted “cross-channel effects” as digital communication drives offline sales and reciprocally. They argued that measuring the impact of a touchpoint on a single channel does not fully reflect its total impact. They demonstrated that cross-channel effects are particularly important for online communication, namely Search and Display. They did not focus on how mobile touchpoints may drive sales across the different purchase channels. Moreover, this research on cross-channel effects was based on descriptive data. It thus highlighted correlation rather than strict causality.
How to combine different firm-initiated touchpoints to engage customers in profitable paths to purchase?

End-to-end customer journey analyses focuses mainly on customers’ proactive interactions rather than on brand’s option to activate specific touchpoints to engage its customers in their journeys. One key element of complexity addressed in this paper is the combined effect of multiple touchpoints (traditional, digital or mobile) on the customer journey. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) posit that “firms should attempt to identify specific trigger points that lead customers to continue or discontinue in their purchase journey”.

Measuring how multiple touchpoints, with different characteristics, may engage a customer to move forward from pre-purchase to a specific conversion channel is fundamental. Finally, from a customer journey perspective, understanding whether the value created by an additional customer touchpoint is driven by online versus offline incremental sales is key to many brands.

Methodology

Pursuing this objective implies a measurement that accounts for customer activity bias, which is made possible by experimental design combined with full randomization manipulations and an access to individual-level data to exploit variations in ad exposures and conversions across touchpoints and channels.

This study has two key features: the first being the reconciliation of individual-level ad’s targeting data across three brand-owned touchpoints (email, print and SMS) with the purchase behavior of the same customers and the second one is the randomized field experiment that enables a causality measurement.

We collected individual-level data (i.e. individual data matching between communication touchpoints exposure and purchase behavior at the same period of time) to measure and
understand the causal impact of different touchpoints’ types on customers’ path to purchase. The experimental methodology on large-size samples enables to analyze individual-level data. Any variations of the dependent variables are exogenous thanks to a full randomization distribution between control and test populations. To properly measure the impact of an additional touchpoint on customer channel choice, we first analyze the incremental volume of conversions observed during the period (i.e. overall impact), then analyze the ratio of online versus offline conversions for every population (i.e. baseline measurement) and finally split the overall incremental impact between online and offline conversions in order to assess how each new touchpoint drives conversions across channels. For this research we focus on the incremental value of a touchpoint based on previous research on multi-channel communication measurement (Kannan, Reinartz & Verhoef, 2016; Bothorel, Vanheems & Guérin, 2015).

Procedure

Two field experiments have been carried out from a French click & mortar retailer’s customer database. Control and test groups were split using full randomization and a pre-test populations’ description confirmed the inter-group comparability. A post-test populations’ description confirmed a behavioral convergence of control and test groups (i.e. there has not been post treatments’ loss in control groups). The first experiment aimed at measuring the impact, of replacing an email by a print communication, across both online and offline purchase channels. It was built using a sample of 128,000 individuals, options on both email and print touchpoints (70% in a control group, 30% in a test group).

The second experiment, strictly carried out over the same period, followed the same objectives but by replacing an email by a fully mobile communication (SMS). It was built using a sample of 37,000 individuals, options on both email and mobile touchpoints (50% control and 50% test groups).
The experimental design is presented in table 1. The sample was made up of 58% female and 42% male. 3% of individuals were under 20 years old, 8% between 20 and 34, 33% between 35 and 49, 35% between 50 and 64 and 21% above 65 years old.

The message content was strictly the same for every touchpoint and the objectives of the campaign were to communicate a nine-day-promotional operation with price discounts on a large array of products, both in-store and online.

Insert table 1 here.

Insert table 2 here.

Importantly, one control group was created for each experiment instead of one joint control group for both experiments. Indeed, each experiment addressed a specific type of opt-in customers (print-and-email opt-ins for the first one and mobile-and-email opt-ins for the second one) reflecting different levels of engagement with the brand. Our figures revealed that a customer who gave a free consent to be contacted through mobile was naturally more engaged and valuable to the brand than print-opt-in customers. As shown in table 3, the conversion and revenue baselines, therefore, were significantly different in the two experiments. Building two control groups was, then, essential to i) measure each group’s natural purchasing behavior and ii) assess how each additional touchpoint impacts this natural behavior across channels. Finally, because every touchpoint came with a different cost for firms, we addressed one essential question: at which incremental cost may a firm generate incremental conversions. To do so, we also compared the additional cost per individual generated by each touchpoint (print and mobile) to assess the return on investment –ROI- of those touchpoints’ combination.

Insert table 3 here.

Measures
We provide an original methodology: a bottom line and incremental measurement (conversions’ uplifts) to isolate the impact of every alternative touchpoint the firm activates. Beyond conversion uplifts, we measured the uplift of revenue per individual, first without taking touchpoints’ cost into account and second by deducting the incremental cost per contact of each additional touchpoint.

The incremental contribution of every touchpoint to sales is then split to understand whether it drives customers to physical stores (offline sales) or the brand e-shop (online sales). This enables us to assess how much of the overall value generated by a new touchpoint benefits to online versus offline sales, and therefore how the firm’s contact strategy may impact their customers’ paths to purchase. Doing so, we are able to understand in which channel every touchpoint drives its value.

Research design justification

Digital advertising has become the norm and, in particular, email may be considered, in practice, as a new mass media. In Europe, 95.3% of marketing professionals use this channel\(^2\). Its cost, ease of personalization and brands’ option collection capability explain the massive use of the channel. We thus considered a full email contact strategy as a baseline for the control groups. We address the research objective by assessing whether combining email with print or mobile communication channels for a same journey is more efficient than using an email-only strategy, and how the alternative touchpoint’s value is created across channels. While few studies have been conducted on the impact of adding a new communication channel during the same buying journey; the more recent issue is to understand the efficiency of every additional touchpoint within a contact strategy in terms of customer journey. Partly due to its lower cost per contact, email communication has become a norm; though mobile and print communication may generate incremental conversions and revenue that cover the

\(^2\) Experian, Survey on cross-channel marketing, France, 2014.
activation cost. This justifies, from a managerial perspective, the research design and the focus touchpoints.

**Results**

*Measuring touchpoints’ incremental impact*

Overall, both alternative touchpoints (traditional in study n°1 and mobile in study n°2) generate significant conversion and revenue uplifts (customer count and total revenue). Insert table 4 over here.

Indeed, replacing an email by a traditional (print) touchpoint results in an 82% uplift in overall customer count (p<0.5%): reasoning incremental means that almost one in two customers during the period would not have purchased without the activation of the print touchpoint. This customer count uplift was a key driver of revenue growth as an uplift of 92% of the revenue per individual was observed. Taking into account the incremental cost per contact of the print activation resulted in a net incremental revenue of +0.51€ per individual.

Replacing an email by a mobile (SMS) touchpoint results in a 29% uplift in overall customer count (p<0.5%). Just as in the first experiment, this customer count uplift was a key driver of revenue growth as an uplift of 53% of the revenue per individual was observed. Taking into account the combined effect of a lower incremental cost per contact of mobile activation and a higher conversion baseline among print-and-mobile option customers (table 3), this resulted in a net incremental revenue of +1.14€ per individual.

*Understanding how touchpoints drive sales across purchase channels*

A preliminary analysis of web-versus-retail customers’ ratio enables to notice a clear impact of the activation of traditional versus mobile touchpoints within the customer journey.
In experiment n°1, 87.4% of conversions occurred offline in the control group and 91.3% in the test targeted via print. The activation of traditional channels seems to reinforce the weight of the offline world in the channel mix. Alternatively, in experiment n°2, 78.8% of conversions took place offline in the control group and 72.7% in the test targeted via SMS. The activation of mobile channels, therefore, seems to balance the online/offline weights in the channel mix. Consistent with our focus on customer journey, an analysis of the offline versus online customer count uplift has been carried out for both experiments. This enables one to understand in which channel the different touchpoints drive their most important impacts.

It demonstrates that 96% of the print communication overall incremental value is driven by offline channel and 4% by online channel: a strong own-channel effect is visible. More importantly, 54% of the mobile communication overall incremental value is driven by offline channel and 46% by online channel: mobile seems to be a channel agnostic touchpoint.

**Discussion**

**Touchpoints’ specificity: encouraging destination-based versus leveraging situational shopping**

Existing studies mainly focus on customer *proactive* behaviors across channels. They also focus mainly on “destination-based shopping”, when customers are already engaged in a decision process. As a matter of fact, the journey is often planned and customers steer to a channel to enjoy a corresponding experience.

On the contrary, a brand-initiated touchpoint could be a means to guide customers to a specific conversion channel. As a matter of fact, our results demonstrate that, while
traditional channels such as print mailings encourage destination-based shopping, mobile channels such as SMS trigger a newer form of shopping that is more “situational”. The journey is more likely to be unplanned, not necessarily focused on experience but on ease of purchase and with a much different spatiotemporal dimension. For brands and retailers, a new issue becomes the capacity to attract, thanks to mobile touchpoints, flows of shoppers to one of its channels. Yet, print ads may still drive planned and destination-based shopping for customers who seek retail experience rather than seeking convenience. Although brand control over the customer journey is more limited, brand-owned touchpoints appear to have a significant influence on key customer outcomes. For promotional operations with strong business importance, such touchpoints may enable a brand to get back a greater control over customer journey.

Finally, the notion of control over the journey may be challenged. For many brands, the question is no longer: how to control end-to-end journeys, but more importantly, how to trigger firm-initiated touchpoints at key moments?

When a specific touchpoint impacts customers’ path to purchase and profitability

Our experimental approach combined with individual-level data collection and a bottom line measurement such as incrementality, enables firms to understand whether their owned-touchpoints make an impact on i) customer profitability and on ii) customer path to purchase. The results reveal key insights related to touchpoint’s orchestration. The first one is the importance of baselines’ measurement (made possible by randomization in the experimental design) which is strongly correlated to the incremental impact to expect from an additional touchpoint. Indeed, this research endorses the design of a “touchpoints’ combination” that focuses on impacting a baseline behavior instead of reducing costs. The second key insight invites marketing professionals to consider both the incremental cost and the incremental revenue that an additional touchpoint generates. Though it may be more costly, an additional
touchpoint could eventually be profitable when it generates uplift (tables 3 and 4). The third one is the importance of measuring the impact of each touchpoint across all channels. Our results confirm that the exposure to one alternative touchpoint may direct a customer to a specific channel. A specific touchpoint actually has an ability to influence the usage and effectiveness of other channels. While enriching a digital contact strategy with an offline print touchpoint, the overall uplift in customer count (82%) almost only benefits to the offline purchase channel. In contrast, the incremental value of the mobile touchpoint is an uplift of customer count of 29% that benefits almost equally to online and offline purchase channels.

*Measuring how touchpoints’ types affect own-channel and cross-channel effects*

The study confirms that offline channels are more likely to generate own-channel effects. Indeed, the audience exposed is not in mobility and had got more ad exposure occasions during the period (i.e. possibly had a look several times to the print mailing).

This research also provides an extension to Dinner, Van Heerde and Neslin (2014), by measuring how a mobile touchpoint may drive online and offline sales compared to a traditional touchpoint such as print. In our study, mobile touchpoints appear to foster cross-channel effects as the value provided by mobile favors equally online and offline conversion channels. In that sense, mobile seems to play a previously unseen role within the journey. Beyond enhancing the brand presence it maximizes the probability that the brand finally gets the conversion as a customer moves forwards in its journey.

*Limitations and need for future research*

Some research limitations must be mentioned, creating new research avenues. First, our study focuses on the impact of touchpoints on a short-term basis. More research is needed to confirm on the long term the observed effects. In particular: does channel usage significantly change over time? If so, what are the consequences in terms of repurchase and
customer value? Taking into account customers’ habits regarding historical channel use (i.e. web only, store-focused and multi-channel customers) could enrich the learning of the research.

The study was carried out in one country during a promotional operation that may have a trigger effect on purchase. It would be useful to validate the effects of mobile, digital and traditional touchpoints with different communication objectives (relational or service-oriented) and to take carry-over effects into account to serve the need for a long-term measurement.

Furthermore, as the historical steps of the journey may be mixed up in the loyalty loop designed by many brands, an interesting avenue for future research could be to analyze customers’ level of engagement within the conversion funnel. In particular, the increasing collection of browsing data could help firms identify visitors, clickers or users who abandoned a basket online over a period a time to design a touchpoints’ combination that depends on the level of engagement of each customer.

As a further extension of research on cross-channel effects, mobile could be isolated, not only as a communication but also as a conversion channel, to measure whether online sales are desktop or mobile driven. Moreover, considering the moderating effect of the retailer’s geographical coverage (network size and store location) to measure cross-channel effects would be useful.

Finally, research exploring advertising expenditures optimization in cross-channel effect settings would be useful. In particular, any contribution regarding purchase channels profit margins could lead to new insights on customers’ strategic guidance on their paths to purchase. Optimizing the combination of touchpoints that directs the most strategic customers to the highest-margin channel appears to be fruitful.

Table 1: Experiments’ methodology
Focus brand
A French click & mortar specialized retailer that markets its products both through a physical store network and an e-commerce website.

Data collection
The experiments have been carried out respectively on 128,437 individuals and 37,782 individuals.

Data analysis
A chi-square test of homogeneity has been done for every comparative analysis between control and test groups. The significance thresholds (p-value) are mentioned for every test.

Table 2: Experimental design and experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Touchpoint 1</th>
<th>Touchpoint 2</th>
<th>Touchpoint 3</th>
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<td>control 1</td>
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Table 3: Overall increments of conversion rates for experiments 1 and 2

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<th>Experiment</th>
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<th>Additional touchpoint activated</th>
<th>CVR baseline (100 index)</th>
<th>Revenue per individual baseline (100 index)</th>
<th>Cost impact (100 index)</th>
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<td>print</td>
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Table 4: Overall increments of conversion rates for experiments 1 and 2

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
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<th>uplift of CVR</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>Absolute</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(100 index)</td>
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<td>test 1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>test 2</td>
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Table 5: Purchase channel distributions for experiments 1 and 2

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<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Touchpoint 1</th>
<th>Touchpoint 2</th>
<th>Touchpoint 3</th>
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<th>significance</th>
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<td>27.3% p&lt;5%</td>
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<td>email</td>
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<td>27.3%</td>
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Table 6: Share of lift distribution by purchase channel for experiments 1 and 2
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<th>Touchpoint 2</th>
<th>Touchpoint 3</th>
<th>Relative uplift of CVR (100 index)</th>
<th>Share of lift driven by offline conversions</th>
<th>Share of lift driven by online conversions</th>
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