Master Thesis – Business Administration

Optimizing the online consumer journey of a traditional digital marketing agency:
Making interactions with customers more effective and efficient
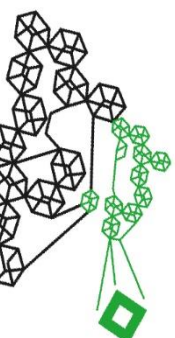
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Abstract, this thesis examines the design criteria for developing digital touchpoints in the customer journeys of traditional digital marketing agencies. Despite extensive research on digital touchpoints in broader contexts, there is limited insight into optimizing these for digital marketing agencies. Using the case study of 'Growing Lemon,' a digital marketing agency in the Netherlands, the study identifies key touchpoints and stages where they have the most impact on customer experience. The findings offer both theoretical and practical guidelines to help digital marketing agencies enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty by effectively managing and optimizing digital touchpoints throughout the customer journey. This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore digital touchpoints within the customer journey of digital marketing agencies. Semi-structured interviews with clients were conducted to identify key stages and touchpoints. The data collection involved purposive sampling to select participants with direct experience, and thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings. The study involved synthesizing interview data with existing literature. The combined insights were used to propose a redesigned customer journey framework for digital marketing agencies, aiming to enhance customer satisfaction and business performance. The study at Growing Lemon reveals that digital touchpoints are essential throughout the customer journey, particularly during the consideration stage. The current customer journey effectively meets service quality and communication objectives but lacks in creativity and proactive strategy suggestions. Enhancing the journey involves increasing proactivity, improving online visibility, and refining communication processes. Overall, Growing Lemon should focus on a client-centric approach, optimizing both digital and personal interactions to improve the customer journey.

Keywords – customer journey, customer experience, digital touchpoints, (marketing) agency

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1.0 Introduction

It is crucial for firms to understand the customer experience and customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The customer experience can be defined as "the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company" (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). The customer journey is the process the consumer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints with an organization, comprising the customer experience according to Lemon and Verhoef (2016). A company's customer experience surrounds many aspects, the quality of customer service, but also the reliability, product and service characteristics, advertising, accessibility, and packaging (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Within the customer journey there is a distinction between direct and indirect touchpoints, where direct points are the advertisements and website, and the indirect spots can be rating portals, user forums and blogs (Märtin et al., 2023). Business-to-business (B2B) customer interactions increasingly occur in digital areas, which forces firms to adopt innovative technology tools and solutions to oversee their customer's journey (Steward et al., 2019; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). B2B companies are usually less flexible in acceptance of new trends, which makes them often more dependent on customers than B2C firms (Järvinen et al., 2012; Karjaluoto et al., 2015). One of the main crucial points to the formulation of brand attitudes and purchase intentions are touchpoints (Siqueira et al., 2020). Digital touchpoints can be defined as the individual opportunities of interaction between the consumer and the firm with use of digital technology (Straker et al., 2015; Vannucci & Pantano, 2020), and can shape the consumer responses with having negative or positive influences (Kotler, 2017).

While the literature knowledge on digital touchpoints and customer journey mapping is growing in the context of digital marketing, there is a noticeable gap in research specifically addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by traditional digital marketing agencies. While digital touchpoints play a crucial role in enhancing customer experiences and driving engagement, it is unknown for digital marketing agencies, how to optimally design the digital touchpoints in the customer journey. The data generated from interactions with customers at different touchpoints could provide valuable insights into customers' preferences, behaviors and pain points. This allows digital marketing agencies to refine their service offerings, marketing strategies and customer management processes (Vannucci & Pantano, 2020). Using data analytics and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, digital marketing agencies can personalize their communications, tailor recommendations and anticipate customer needs, building deeper and more meaningful relationships with their customers (Siqueira et al., 2020). By prioritizing touchpoint optimization and leveraging data-driven insights, digital marketing agencies can orchestrate seamless client journeys that maximize satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability in today's hyper-connected marketplace.

In this research the emphasis will be on digital marketing agencies; a company specializing in providing a range of online marketing, advertising, and digital services to clients. These services often include website design, search engine optimization (SEO), social media management, digital advertising campaigns, content creation, and more. Digital marketing agencies serve a diverse clientele across various industries, helping businesses establish and strengthen their online presence, reach target audiences effectively, and achieve their marketing objectives. As digital marketing agencies navigate the dynamic landscape of digital marketing, they encounter challenges in managing the online consumer journey effectively. This journey encompasses all touchpoints and interactions a customer has with the agency, from the initial discovery phase through post-purchase support. Optimizing this journey is essential for digital marketing agencies to enhance customer satisfaction, foster brand loyalty, and drive business growth. However, the influence of touchpoints goes beyond just customer perception; it has a major impact on the agency's bottom line and competitive position. Effective management of touchpoints throughout the customer journey can lead to greater customer satisfaction, greater brand loyalty and higher profitability (Verhoef et al., 2007). By optimizing touchpoints, agencies can streamline the customer journey, reduce friction points and exploit opportunities to upsell or cross-sell additional services (Siqueira et al., 2020). By understanding the interplay between different contact moments, agencies can identify critical moments of truth - moments when customer perceptions are most strongly affected - and strategically allocate resources to maximize impact (Verhoef et al., 2007). Therefore, the research question:

What are design criteria for the development of digital touchpoints in the customer journey of traditional marketing agencies?

Sub questions:

1) What are customer journeys?
2) How can digital touchpoints in customer journeys be defined?
3) What are design criteria / steps for developing customer journeys?
4) How can design criteria be made specific for marketing agencies?

These sub questions will be answered with a literature study. To start the research, it is essential to know the literature field to identify the gaps, and build on existing knowledge. This literature research was mainly about the customer journey, mapping the customer journey, customer experience, and digital touchpoints. This literature knowledge was collected from different articles found on Google Scholar, CORE, and Scopus.

1.2 Case company

This paper is based on the information conducted together with a case company specialised in digital marketing, called 'Growing Lemon'. The company is based in Hengelo, the Netherlands, and exists

for 4,5 years now. Growing Lemon helps companies to grow with the help of digitalization, ICT and smart and measurable marketing solutions. The company consists of technical, ads, strategic, and content growth specialists. Nowadays, the team consists of twelve colleagues, both full time employees and stagiaires. The customers are recruited by responding to their vacancies, which are related to digital marketing. Growing Lemon is also working on their visibility online, helping customers find the company themselves. As Growing Lemon only exists for 4,5 years, the customers joined the company not that long ago. This means the time of the start of the partnership until now is not long, which makes most customers suitable for this research.

1.3 Empirical questions

Some empirical questions will be answered through this paper, performing literature research and a qualitative experiment.

1) "In which stage of the customer journey do digital touchpoints play the most pivotal role?"
2) "What are the primary digital touchpoints that hold strategic significance for the company, and what factors justify their importance?"
3) "How does the current (online) customer journey perform in terms of meeting established metrics and objectives?"
4) "What actionable measures should be enacted to implement solutions aimed at enhancing the online customer journey?"
5) "How can the design criteria for a customer journey effectively be integrated to redesign the customer journey for a digital agency?"

1.4 Expected research contributions

The research will contribute to the academic literature by developing a theoretical framework specific to traditional digital marketing agencies' digital touchpoint design. It will identify key design factors through empirical research and validate these principles, providing a synthesized understanding of digital touchpoint design. This synthesis will bridge gaps between marketing, design, and technology fields.

In practice, the study will offer practical guidelines and practices for traditional digital marketing agencies to implement digital touchpoints effectively. By considering client needs, it will enable digital marketing agencies to develop client-centric solutions. Additionally, the research will inform digital marketing agencies with improvements for an innovative digital touchpoint design. Optimizing the customer journey will not only advantage the agencies, but also the customers. Effective management of touchpoints throughout the customer journey can lead to greater customer satisfaction, greater brand loyalty and higher profitability (Verhoef et al., 2007). Overall, the study will drive

industry innovation, supporting the development how to optimally design the digital touchpoints in the customer journey.

1.5 Structure of research

This paper will consist of first a theoretical framework, which will be presented in chapter 2. The theoretical framework consists of literature research done on the subjects 'Digital touchpoints', 'Customer experience', 'Customer journey', and 'Mapping the customer journey'. Then, the conceptual model will be explained. After the literature research, the methodology will be explained, consisting of the research design, data collection, the interviews, how the data will be analysed, and the reliability of this research. In chapter 4 the results of the sub questions will be shown. Then the conclusion and answer to the research question will be formulated. In chapter 6 the discussion is represented to interpret the results.

2.0 Theoretical framework

2.1 Digital touchpoints

Most organizations think about touchpoints when focussing on customer experience. Touchpoints can be defined as "the individual transactions through which customers interact with parts of the business and its offerings" according to Maechler et al. (2016). Because it needs the customer's response, a touchpoint is more than only a contact point (Schüller, 2016). These touchpoints can be quick, the exchange can vary from more shallow or more intensive, and it can be one-way or two-way exchanges between customers and firms. There is also a possibility that touchpoints exist from customer-to-customer interactions, which can affect the brand consideration (Baxendale et al., 2015). According to Baxendale et al. (2015) six main touchpoints are in-store communications; traditional earned media; brand advertising; peer-to-peer interaction; peer observation; and retailer advertising. Touchpoints highlight the breadth in stakeholders that the consumer interacts with, including peers (WOM and peer observation), independent third parties like editorial and expert reviews, and brand owners (brand advertising), retailers (retailer advertising), and in-store communications (traditional earned media). The research of S. Baxendale et al. (2015) relied on self-reported customer touchpoint interactions by working with mobile devices. They indicate that certain touchpoints influence brand preferences more than others, and also discover that the impact of in-store communications on brand choice is very potent. Developing a digital strategy such that every point of contact between a customer and a business becomes a touchpoint is the difficulty of digital marketing (Bakhtieva, 2017). According to Straker et al. (2015) there are 34 different kinds of touchpoints. For B2B companies, website, mobile applications, email and social media networks and search engine are the most common (Leeflang et al., 2014). Straker et al. (2015) suggests a division of digital touchpoints, which consists of functional touchpoints, social touchpoints, community touchpoints and corporate

touchpoints. Digital touchpoints like email and webpages are considered functional touchpoints. The three main goals of functional touchpoints are interaction, functionality, and diversion. Social media platforms comprise social touchpoints, and they offer a greater degree of engagement due to the direct and instantaneous posting and response capabilities. Community touchpoints, which are predicated on user cohesion, comprise blogs and forums. Lastly, corporate touchpoints, which include customer feedback forms and FAQs, are aimed at getting input from customers (Straker et al., 2015).

Brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent are the four types of customer experience touch points which are identified. At every stage of the journey, the client may interact with each of these touch point categories (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Brand-owned touchpoints refer to the channels or platforms directly managed by the brand itself. These touchpoints typically include the brand's website, mobile app, social media profiles, physical stores (if applicable), email newsletters and customer service hotlines (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Partner-owned touchpoints refer to the channels or platforms that are managed by external partners or affiliates, but are still associated with the brand. These touchpoints often include distribution channels, reseller websites, affiliate marketing programs and co-branded promotions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer-owned touchpoints refer to the channels or platforms managed by individual customers themselves. These touchpoints include customer-generated content, reviews, ratings, posts on social media and word-of-mouth recommendations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Social/external/independent touchpoints refer to the channels or platforms that are external to both the brand and its partners, but still play a role in shaping the customer experience. These touchpoints include industry forums, review websites, social media discussions and news articles (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

2.2 Customer experience

Marketing academics refer to customer experience as the essential foundation for marketing management (Homburg et al., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), while business executives view it as crucial to their company's competitiveness (McCall, 2015). According to Meyer and Schwager (2007) the customer experience can be defined as 'Customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company.' Direct contact is typically started by the customer and takes place during the purchase, use, and servicing processes. The majority of the time, indirect contact entails chance meetings with representatives of a company's goods, services, or brands and can be expressed through advertising, news articles, reviews, word-of-mouth referrals or criticisms, and other mediums (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). A firm's "experience" can be defined as how it operates. In the same way that a successful business-to-consumer company meets the demands of its clientele on a personal level, a B2B company assists its business clients in serving their clients by resolving business-related issues. A positive encounter in a business-to-business setting is one that is trouble-free and hence comforting to those in control, rather than one

that is exhilarating (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Expectations are partly shaped by people's prior interactions with a company's products. Consumers automatically assess any new experience—positive or negative—by contrasting it with their past encounters. The state of the market, the level of competition, and the individual circumstances of the client can also influence expectations. Customers may be set up for disappointment even when the company's own brand sets expectations (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Organizations aiming to enhance customer satisfaction must have the ability to systematically track touchpoints and evaluate the customer experience across the whole process of consumption (Følstad & Kvale, 2018b; Ieva & Ziliani, 2018b). According to Edelman and Singer (2015), their role involves doing a critical analysis of the effects of various experience aspects and attentively observing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses of customers at every point of the consumption process. The research tradition that emphasizes experience as reactions to consumption processes may take up the managerial tradition's more in-depth examination of journey composition and "zoom in" on the journey, concentrating, for example, on the meanings that surface at particular touchpoints (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). The Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) quantifies the total value a customer brings to a business over the entire duration of their relationship, providing insights into the long-term profitability and sustainability of client engagements (Kumar et al., 2008). CLV serves as a predictive tool, aiding agencies in forecasting future revenue by analyzing past customer behavior (Fader & Hardie, 2007). CRM and customer value management are primarily concerned with optimizing customer profitability and CLV, whereas relationship marketing is primarily concerned with developing strong, long-term relationships with customers (Reinartz et al., 2004; e.g., Kumar & Reinartz, 2006).

2.3 Customer journey

According to Olson et al. (2019), the customer journey is the actual process that embodies the development of the customer experience and makes it easier to comprehend how the goals, expectations, and behaviors of the customer change over time. Businesses attempting to align their offerings with customer expectations may find the notion of customer journeys particularly helpful (Tueanrat et al., 2021). The customer experience is a crucial concept of the customer journey, consisting of three phases: prepurchase, purchase, and (Howard et al., 1969; Neslin et al., 2006; Pucinelli et al., 2009). According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016) given this perspective on the client purchasing journey, firms should first aim to understand both the corporate and customer views of the buying experience, identifying crucial features in every phase. Then companies ought to start pinpointing the particular components or points of contact that arise along the process. Lastly, businesses ought to make an effort to pinpoint particular turning moments that influence consumers to carry on or stop proceeding course with their purchases. Verhoef et al. (2007) specifically draw attention to the connections between channel attitudes during various stages of the purchase process. They demonstrate that opinions about a channel's capacity for searching are positively correlated with

opinions about its capacity for purchases. Moreover, a growing body of research on journeys indicates that they are not always linear processes, but rather *recurring cycles with loyalty loops* (De Keyser et al., 2015; Kranzbühler et al., 2018; Siebert et al., 2020), shifting the emphasis from short-term purchasing decision-making to long-term iterative processes. Also, various touchpoints—defined as instances of direct or indirect interaction with the brand or provider—are included in customer journeys, as stated by Baxendale et al. (2015), Becker and Jaakkola (2020), De Keyser et al. (2020), and Rawson et al. (2013). Furthermore, situational factors, particularly the specific objectives that buyers seek to fulfil during their journey, have an impact on consumers' reactions to numerous stimuli along the way as well as their evaluative outcomes (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). The customer's methods for achieving their higher-order goals are then made clear by the journey, which acknowledges that they require the assistance of several different resources to complete (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Epp & Price, 2011; Hamilton & Price, 2019). Setting more detailed lower-order goals that account for specific buying chores helps the client achieve their higher-order goals (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

Cialdini (2008) has developed a deep understanding of human behavior and how people make decisions with his 7 principles of persuasion. These principles can certainly influence the understanding of the customer journey, which describes the journey a customer takes from awareness of a product or service to purchase and possible repeat purchases. The 7 principles of persuasion are: reciprocity, commitment or consistency, consensus or social proof, authority, liking, scarcity, and unity (Cialdini, 2008). It can be crucial for organizations to consider these principles in order to understand the influences of the customer journey.

2.4 Mapping the customer journey

Mapping the customer journey and the different compartments it exists of can be insightful for organizations. To design a customer journey, several design principles have to be taken into account. According to Canfield and Basso (2017), service mapping acknowledges the customer journey as a tool for designing the customer experience as well as a way to understand it. Rusthollkarhu et al. (2022) thought of four different B2B customer journey management activities: analyse, design, engage, and guide. The step 'analyse' is mainly about examining the activity structure's comprehension of the ways in which a B2B provider's and a prospect's or customer's actions impact one another during the customer journey. The second step 'design' is about the activities intended to help the consumer plan their trip. In order to create a seamless experience for the prospect or customer, this involves designing journey elements as well as sales and marketing processes (such as content creation, lead generation, and sales negotiations). The third step is 'engage', where the goal of actions is to entice the potential client or consumer to participate in the journey by providing relevant,

correct material and channel selections. The last step 'guide' are the activities that direct the potential client or prospect to the following stage in the customer journey (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022).

According to Temkin (2010) the customer journey consists of five steps:

1) *Collect internal insights*: Businesses should begin the process by assessing the current level of consumer knowledge they possess (Temkin, 2010).

2) *Develop initial hypotheses*: Various groups frequently hold quite different beliefs about what matters to customers, who they are, and how they feel about dealing with the business. Although some discrepancies may be resolved through internal talks, journey mapping leaders must do more thorough analysis in order to combine the information and observations they gather (Temkin, 2010).

3) *Research customer processes, needs, and perceptions*: Even if businesses have extensive knowledge about their clientele, conventional customer insights are presented from the viewpoint of the business. Businesses must expand their research to incorporate techniques that gather consumer insights from customers' viewpoints if they are to truly understand customer processes, demands, and perceptions (Temkin, 2010).

4) *Analyse customer research:* Journey mapping leaders must summarize their findings about how customers interact with the business, what they want from each encounter, and how they feel about each interaction right now—the three essential components of a journey map— after obtaining both internal and external data (Temkin, 2010).

5) *Map the customer journey*: Businesses must create journey maps by translating their data into an easy-to-understand visual depiction of the needs, procedures, and perceptions of their customers. The main framework is provided visually by customer processes. Along with defining client needs and indicating how well the business currently satisfies them, the map should record each interaction (Temkin, 2010).

Kuehnl et al. (2019) emphasizes the important steps in designing the customer journey. It is important to identify key touchpoints, and understand customer emotions, in order to personalize the customer journey. However, it is also essential to ensure consistency across channels and to continuously monitor and optimize the customer journey (Kuehnl et al., 2019).

To develop the customer journey, the process begins with analyzing the current state of customer interactions. This includes collecting internal insights to assess the existing knowledge (Temkin, 2010), developing initial hypotheses to reconcile differing internal views (Temkin, 2010), and researching customer processes, needs, and perceptions from their perspective (Temkin, 2010). The next step is designing the journey by mapping customer interactions visually, identifying key touchpoints, and understanding customer emotions to personalize the journey (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Temkin, 2010). Engaging the customer involves providing relevant and accurate content through

appropriate channels (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022). Finally, guiding the customer through the journey requires directing them to the next stages with clear and consistent communication, ensuring a seamless and optimized experience across all channels (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022). Continuous monitoring and optimization are crucial for maintaining an effective customer journey (Kuehnl et al., 2019).

2.5 Conceptual model

The conceptual model for optimizing the customer journey in a digital agency revolves around comprehending and improving digital touchpoints throughout the customer experience. The customer journey includes all stages and interactions a customer has with a company, from initial awareness to post-purchase support (Maechler et al., 2016). This model involves understanding the customer journey, identifying digital touchpoints, and enhancing customer experiences at these touchpoints.

The research question, "What are design criteria for the development of digital touchpoints in the customer journey of traditional marketing agencies?" aims to pinpoint specific criteria for improving digital interactions. The sub questions help to break down this broad question into manageable parts.

It is essential to define what customer journeys are, which provides a foundation for understanding how these journeys can be mapped and analyzed in the context of a digital agency. Next, defining digital touchpoints is essential for identifying the exact moments of customer interaction that can be optimized. Then, exploring design criteria and steps for developing customer journeys involves methodologies and principles for mapping interactions. Understanding customer needs, and analyzing emotional responses should be included. Finally, making these design criteria specific for digital marketing agencies involves tailoring general principles to the unique challenges and environment of digital marketing agencies.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Digital marketing agency (DMA)

Marketing management can be described as the issue of controlling the level, timing, demand and character for one or multiple products or services. The main purpose is to make a plan to reach a desired level of demand, based on profit and sales maximization, and desired level of supply (Kotler, 2017). This is where digital agencies step in for other companies. In a client-advertising agency context the service quality contains the project outcome, management processes, agency's performance, and creative capability (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007). Digital agencies have a significant input in marketing strategy development with understanding how marketing happens, is processed and carried out, the agency-client relationship within this has been acknowledged for a long time (Pollay & Swinth, 1969). For clients it is a major prior to work with a digital marketing agency

(DMA) which recognizes the right needs. The content management system (CMS) is responsible for the site content, and if the DMA knows the value of CMS scalability forecasts, it will effectively grow the client's business (Bawab, 2014). The DMA must also make sure the website design reflects what the client's business wants to communicate, and the image and identity of the client (Bawab, 2014).

It has been observed that clients expect their agencies to be creative (Hill & Johnson, 2003; West, 1999; West et al., 2008). However, commercial inventiveness requires a delicate balance. Experience working on competing brands has been found to be a significant factor in choosing agencies (Henke, 1995). Clients appear to anticipate local market expertise and category experience from agencies when doing business in foreign markets (Turnbull & Wheeler, 2017). Nevertheless, a thorough investigation into the type of service rendered by each party has not been conducted.

One of the main factors to make a digital agency successful is by satisfying the customers. By optimizing the customer experience and customer journey, the digital agency can benefit in the long-term. An example of such an agency is Growing Lemon in Hengelo. The research will be done at the agency Growing Lemon, to get a clear image of the customer journey in a digital marketing agency.

3.2 Research design

The study will use a qualitative approach, through a case study design of the digital agency Growing Lemon. This research will consist of interviews with customers of the case company, the digital marketing agency Growing Lemon, to map the different touchpoints of the customer journey. The company is based in Hengelo, the Netherlands, and exists for 4,5 years now. The company consists of technical, ads, strategic, and content growth specialists. Nowadays, the team consists of twelve colleagues, both full time employees and stagiaires. The digital agency Growing Lemon helps companies to grow with use of digitalization, ICT and smart and measurable marketing solutions. The data will be collected using semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling to select the participants. After this, the interviews will be transcribed, coded and analysed. There will also be a collection of data through observation of the customer journey, how customers enter and proceed the partnership with the case company. Together with the results of the customer interviews, the customer journey design principles/ mapping structure found during the literature study, will be used to redesign the customer journey for the digital agency.

The research started off with a literature study. This literature research was mainly about the customer journey, customer experience, digital touchpoints, and mapping a customer journey. This literature knowledge was collected from different articles found on Google Scholar, CORE, and Scopus. The articles were discovered using relevant keywords, such as 'customer journey', 'customer experience', 'digital touchpoints', '(marketing) agency', 'mapping customer journey', 'CLV'.

3.2 Data collection

This study, which focusses on the touchpoints within the customer journey, and with this understanding helps to optimize the customer journey. This will be examined with qualitative research. According to (Fossey et al., 2002) 'Qualitative research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds.' Qualitative interviews let us gaze at what is regularly looked at but rarely seen, and let us see what is not usually on display (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Because researchers react to what they hear from interviewees and then follow up with additional questions, instead of depending solely on pre-planned questions, this method of conducting in-depth interviews is also known as responsive interviewing. Working with interviewees as partners in the process rather than seeing them as study subjects is emphasized by responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The results will be conducted with semi-structured interviews. Typically, they are structured around a planned list of open-ended questions, with additional questions arising from the interviewer's conversation with the interviewees. The most popular interviewing approach for qualitative research is semi-structured in-depth interviews, which can be conducted with individuals or in groups (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible yet systematic approach, allowing for both predetermined questions and the exploration of emergent themes during the interview process (Smith, 2015). This method enables in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and suggestions related to their interactions with the digital marketing agency, providing valuable insights into the customer journey optimization process (Bryman, 2016).

Purposive sampling will be utilized to select participants for the interviews. Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants who possess relevant experiences, characteristics, or knowledge related to the research topic (Campbell et al., 2020). In this case, participants will be selected based on their status as current or past clients of the digital marketing agency, ensuring that insights are gathered from individuals who have firsthand experience with the agency's services and customer journey. Interviews will be conducted remotely via video conferencing to accommodate participants' preferences and logistical constraints. Each interview is anticipated to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. The interview protocol will consist of a set of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' interactions with the digital marketing agency across different stages of the customer journey. Questions will cover topics such as initial engagement, service delivery, communication channels, satisfaction levels, and suggestions for improvement. The semi-structured nature of the interviews will allow for flexibility to probe into specific areas of interest and explore emergent themes as they arise during the interview process. The minimum non-probability sample size of a semi-structure interview should be between 5 and 25 (Saunders et al., 2012). For this study a sample size of 7 was collected, as can be seen in table 1 below. The questions for the interview can be seen in the

appendices. Together with the data retrieved from the interviews, the data from the literature research will be used to redesign the customer journey.

Customer name	Current status	Time as customer
ExpatRentals	Current customer	1 year
Hypotheekdesk	Current customer	9 months
Kuechenzentrum Gronau	Old customer	9 months
Pearl Capital	Current customer	1 year and 3 months
Realforce	Current external partner	3 years
StoreContrl	Current customer	9 months
Waarderingsmeesters	Current customer	3 months

Table 1 – Interviewees

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis is a critical phase in qualitative research, allowing this study to make sense of the rich and nuanced insights gathered from semi-structured interviews. In this study, thematic analysis will be employed to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns and themes within the interview data. Interview recordings will be transcribed verbatim to capture participants' responses accurately. The interview transcripts will be analysed critically to gain an overall understanding of the data. During the initial coding phase, relevant segments of data will be systematically identified and labelled based on their content and meaning. Open coding will be conducted, allowing for the exploration of a wide range of concepts and themes without preconceived categories (Williams & Moser, 2019). Through a process of constant comparison and iterative analysis, initial codes will be grouped into broader themes based on similarities and connections (Weston et al., 2001). The themes will be refined and developed through discussion and consensus to ensure thorough coverage of the data. Once themes are identified, relevant data extracts will be organized and categorized within each theme to create a coherent and comprehensive dataset. Data matrices or charts may be utilized to facilitate the organization and comparison of data across themes and participants. Identified themes will be reviewed and refined to ensure their relevance, coherence, and representativeness of the data. Themes will be critically examined for consistency and validity, with adjustments made as necessary to accurately reflect the nuances of participants' experiences. Following theme development, the findings will be interpreted in relation to the research objectives and theoretical framework. Themes will be synthesized to generate overarching insights and conclusions about optimizing the customer journey of the digital marketing agency. The findings of the data analysis will be reported in a clear

and structured manner, utilizing quotes to support key themes and insights. This resulting data will be used in the process to redesign the customer journey. Looking at the results from the literature research, the design principles for a customer journey will be taken into the process of redesigning the customer journey. Additionally, the improvement points found from the results of the interviews or points indicated by customers will be included in the process of redesigning a new customer journey. The research report will adhere to established guidelines for qualitative research reporting, ensuring transparency and rigor in the presentation of findings.

Looking at the table 2 below, the different empirical questions are collected and analysed differently. Through interview questions and literature study, these empirical questions will be answered.

Question	Collect the data	Analyse the data
"In which stage of the customer journey do digital touchpoints play the most pivotal role?"	Collect data by asking interview questions 1, 3, and 10. These questions will help understand the initial awareness stage, the first interactions, and the online platforms/tools used.	Analyze the data by coding the responses to identify common themes regarding the impact of digital touchpoints in different stages of the customer journey.
"What are the primary digital touchpoints that hold strategic significance for the company, and what factors justify their importance?"	Collect data by asking interview questions 1, 5, and 10. These questions will help identify key digital touchpoints such as the website, social media, and communication tools.	Use thematic analysis to identify and categorize the primary digital touchpoints mentioned by respondents. Analyze the justifications provided to understand the factors that make these touchpoints strategically significant.
"How does the current (online) customer journey perform in terms of meeting established metrics and objectives?"	Collect data by asking interview questions 6, 7, and 9. These questions will gather feedback on the overall experience, expectation fulfillment, and service/support quality.	Perform a qualitative analysis to assess performance against established metrics and objectives. Identify positive and negative feedback to evaluate overall satisfaction. Use content analysis to compare respondents' experiences with the expected outcomes and objectives set by the company.
"What actionable measures should be enacted to implement solutions aimed at enhancing the online customer journey?"	Collect data by asking interview questions 8, 11, and 12. These questions will provide insights into the current processes, potential improvements, and specific changes suggested by clients.	Use a gap analysis to compare current practices with client expectations and needs. Identify common suggestions for improvements and categorize them into actionable measures. Prioritize these measures based on the impact they are likely to have on the customer journey.

| **"How can the design criteria for a customer journey effectively be integrated to redesign the customer journey for a digital agency?"** | Collect data by synthesizing responses from all interview questions, particularly focusing on questions 4, 5, 8, and 13. These questions provide a holistic view of decision factors, online presence, project processes, and future support needs. | Integrate findings using a design thinking approach. Identify key design criteria based on client feedback and map these criteria onto the stages of the customer journey. Develop a redesigned journey framework that incorporates these criteria, ensuring alignment with client needs and expectations. |

Table 2 – Collecting and analysing data for empirical questions

3.4 Reliability

Verification of reliability is essential for ensuring credibility in qualitative research. Seale (1999) asserts that the foundation of validity and reliability in qualitative research is the trustworthiness of research reports, as stated on page 266. This is in line with the usual discussion of validity and reliability in research. Reliability in qualitative research, also known as dependability or credibility, ensures consistency and trustworthiness of findings. Triangulation, involving multiple data sources, methods, or investigators, strengthens credibility (Patton, 2002). Prolonged engagement with participants and persistent observation contribute to reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking, involving participants in the research process, validates findings (Morse & Mitcham, 2002). These techniques together enhance the reliability of qualitative research, ensuring consistent and dependable findings.

4.0 Findings

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the customer journey at Growing Lemon, seven in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews included five current customers, one former customer, and one external partner. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a systematic coding process. Initially, open coding was used to identify key concepts and ideas. This was followed by axial coding, which grouped these concepts into related categories. Finally, selective coding was used to divide these categories into key themes that summarize the central aspects. Through this analysis the empirical questions mentioned in chapter 1.3 can be answered.

4.1 Stages of the customer journey and digital touchpoints

The first empirical question focuses on identifying the stage of the customer journey where digital touchpoints play the most pivotal role. Digital touchpoints play a crucial role at various stages of the customer journey, particularly in the consideration stage. Initial engagements with Growing Lemon

often occur through physical meetings or referrals from existing customers. For instance, one customer became aware of Growing Lemon through a referral of another customer:

"How did I become aware of Growing Lemon? It was through Amstelland Makelaars, who advised me."

However, digital touchpoints such as LinkedIn and the company's website become significant in providing initial information and facilitating the first contacts. Clients frequently use these digital platforms to understand the company's offerings and credentials. Another example is Justin, as a customer, recommending Growing Lemon for website renewal, which led to new cooperations:

"Well actually through Justin, because he is a customer of ours. and then he said: Gosh, I'd like to check out your website. Well, it turned out that there were some things wrong with it, and he made a proposal for that."

As the customer journey progresses, digital touchpoints like WhatsApp and email become increasingly important for maintaining communication and providing updates. These tools help to manage ongoing relationships and to ensure that clients are informed about the progress of their projects. As shown in figure 1 below, digital touchpoints play a crucial role throughout the customer journey. Their importance becomes especially pronounced after the initial contact, supporting clients through the consideration stage and into ongoing interactions.
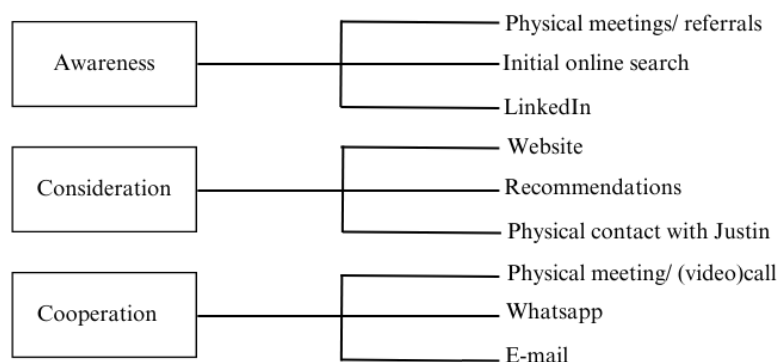

Figure 1 - Stages of customer journey and its touchpoints

4.2 Primary digital touchpoints

The second empirical question, "What are the primary digital touchpoints that hold strategic significance for the company, and what factors justify their importance?" was answered through careful coding and analysis of relevant responses to targeted questions.

The primary digital touchpoints for Growing Lemon are the website, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and email. The website serves as a platform for potential clients to gather information about the company, its services, and its values. During initial engagements, several clients checked the website to understand

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who they were dealing with and what the agency stood for. However, this was not the factor to choose for Growing Lemon, they also mentioned. An external partner noted that Growing Lemon could still improve on their online visibility:

"Indeed, a customer whom I had introduced to Justin, with whom I had then viewed the website together. That is also the first thing they noticed, that the website with the cases is fairly casual. It could be filled more with content or, for example, with statistics or yes, certain goals that have really been achieved, so that it is more visual, and not just written out."

LinkedIn is crucial for establishing professional connections and initiating contact, often leading to more in-depth engagements. WhatsApp and email are vital for ongoing communication, allowing for quick and efficient exchanges of information and updates. These touchpoints are crucial because they help establish initial contact and maintain strong communication channels. They also support clients throughout their ongoing engagements with the company. WhatsApp and Email help to keep clients informed, address their needs promptly, and ensure continuous interaction. Thereby enhancing client satisfaction and loyalty.

4.3 Performance current customer journey

The third empirical question assesses how well the current online customer journey at Growing Lemon performs in terms of meeting established metrics and objectives. This is addressed through coding and analyzing responses to relevant survey questions.

The current online customer journey at Growing Lemon generally performs well in meeting established metrics and objectives. Clients have reported positive experiences, noting that their expectations were often met or exceeded, especially regarding service quality and communication. Many clients appreciate the active attitude of the team and the effectiveness of the digital communication tools used. One customer highlighted this positive experience:

"The expectations of the website, which were certainly met or at least even exceeded."

However, there are areas for improvement, particularly in terms of creativity and the proactive provision of new ideas and strategies. The operational aspects and communication are strong. However, clients suggest that the journey could be enhanced by offering more innovative solutions and adopting a more forward-thinking approach. For instance, one client mentioned the need for a more structured marketing plan and proactive communication:

"I had the expectation that everything would be taken care of, and that we were actually being chased: well, we are now going to do this and do that, and we are going to set up a marketing plan, but that is not there."

Overall, the customer journey meets most objectives but has room for growth in delivering unexpected value and creativity, as can be seen in figure 2 below.
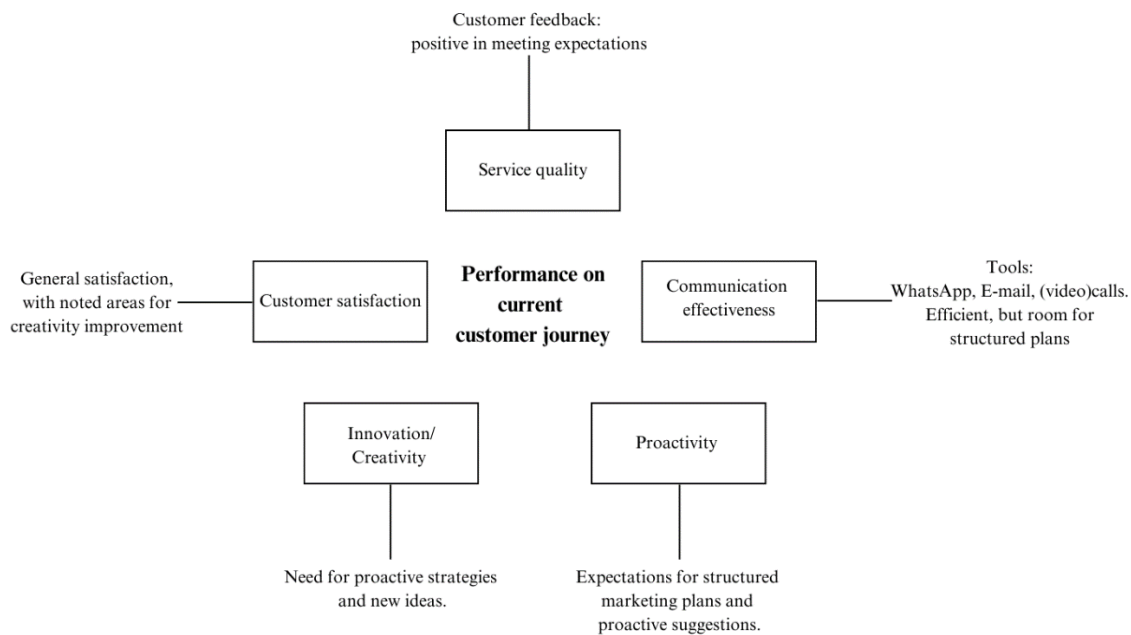

Figure 2 - Performance of the current customer journey

4.4 Measures to enhance online customer journey

The fourth empirical question addresses actionable measures that can enhance the online customer journey at Growing Lemon. This can be answered after the analysis and coding process of the interviews.

To enhance the online customer journey at Growing Lemon, several actionable measures should be considered. First, the company should focus on increasing proactivity in suggesting new strategies and ideas to clients, ensuring they feel continuously supported and inspired. This customer expressed that:

"You actually want to be constantly surprised: wow they have come up with that again, oh this is all nice!"

Clearer communication about team roles and responsibilities can help clients understand who to contact for specific needs, improving the overall interaction experience. One customer stated that:

"That was a bit messy, in the first real interaction was just with Justin himself, then you kind of go on the carousel and everyone does something."

Additionally, investing in better tools for managing interactions with external partners, such as comprehensive project management platforms or communication tools, can streamline processes. This can also make it easier for customers and partners to track progress and share feedback. An external partner suggested implementing tools for easier file sharing and tracking action items:

"A checklist system to keep tasks organized and transparent was also recommended. This can help to ease the inside processes between external partners and Growing Lemon."

Enhancing the creativity and quality of content, especially for social media and marketing materials, can also contribute to a more engaging and effective customer journey. As shown in figure 3 below there are measures that will help fill current gaps and elevate the overall client experience.
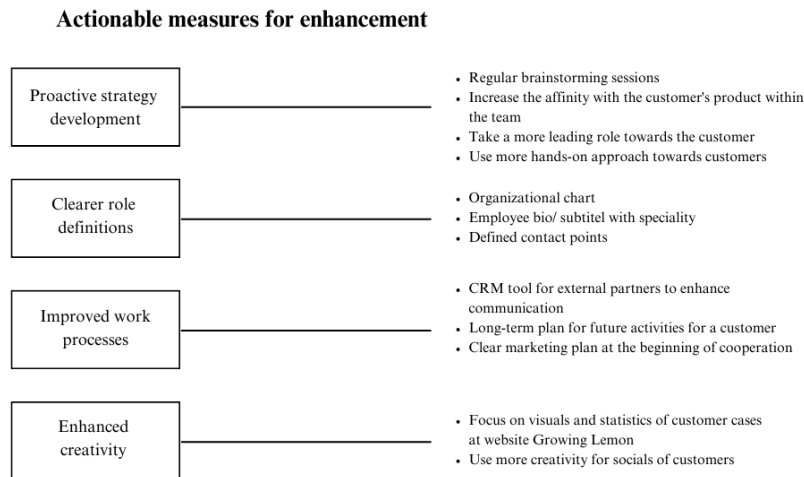
Actionable measures for enhancement

Proactive strategy development	• Regular brainstorming sessions • Increase the affinity with the customer's product within the team • Take a more leading role towards the customer • Use more hands-on approach towards customers
Clearer role definitions	• Organizational chart • Employee bio/ subtitel with speciality • Defined contact points
Improved work processes	• CRM tool for external partners to enhance communication • Long-term plan for future activities for a customer • Clear marketing plan at the beginning of cooperation
Enhanced creativity	• Focus on visuals and statistics of customer cases at website Growing Lemon • Use more creativity for socials of customers

Figure 3 - Measures to enhance the customer journey

4.5 Integrate the design criteria

The final empirical question explores how design criteria for a customer journey can be effectively integrated to redesign the customer journey for a digital agency like Growing Lemon.

Integrating design criteria for a customer journey involves focusing on clear communication, proactive service delivery, and effective use of digital tools. Growing Lemon should ensure that their website and other digital touchpoints provide broad and up-to-date information that is easily accessible to clients. Clear and consistent communication is crucial, so the company should establish robust communication channels like WhatsApp groups and regular email updates to keep clients informed and engaged. One client emphasized the importance of communication:

"I can call Justin on weekends, in the evenings, everything and I appreciate that so much and that kind of possibility is greatly appreciated and I think that will also take Growing Lemon further."

Proactive service delivery means anticipating client needs and offering innovative solutions before clients ask for them. Thereby moving away from a purely reactive "you ask, we deliver" approach. One customer even hired another agency for a one-time campaign to make a video, but indicated that Growing Lemon could also have done this if they showed more initiative. This requires a deep understanding of client businesses and a commitment to ongoing improvement and creativity in service offerings. Leveraging digital tools effectively, such as project management software and

communication platforms. This can enhance collaboration, making the client experience smoother and more satisfying.

By focusing on these areas, Growing Lemon can redesign its customer journey to be more client-centric, responsive, and dynamic, ultimately leading to higher client satisfaction and loyalty.

To effectively redesign the customer journey for a digital agency like Growing Lemon, it is essential to integrate key design criteria based on client interactions and feedback. As can be seen below in figure 4, this involves enhancing personal engagement, optimizing online presence, understanding customer needs, managing expectations, refining workflow processes, enhancing service and support quality, and improving clarity and communication.

Stages of the customer journey

Design criteria	Awareness	Consideration	Cooperation
Initial contact and engagement	Personal referrals, through other customers	Personal interactions and story	Maintain initial engagement quality
Online presence	Website as first impression	Website content (improvements noted)	Website enhancement for dynamic content
Customer knowledge and needs	Understand general needs for digital services	Assess specific marketing needs	Ongoing adaptation to customer needs, clear marketing plan
Customer expectation and satisfaction	Build trust through direct/ physical meetings	Set clear expectations	Continuously meet or exceed expectations
Workflow and processes	Establish initial engagement processes	Develop and explain workflow processes	Optimize creative content, increase affinity/ knowledge with product of customer.
Service and support quality	Initial understanding of service quality	Proactive service suggestions	Provide detailed guidance, take a more leading role and hands-on approach, maintain a proactive attitude
Clarity and communication	Clear initial communication channels	Clear reports and updates	Ensure clear language in reports, provide long-planning and goals, clear role definitions/ employee bio

Figure 4 - Integrating the design criteria within the customer journey

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the customer journey at Growing Lemon, a digital marketing agency, several key insights emerge regarding the design criteria for developing effective digital touchpoints. To answer the research question, "What are design criteria for the development of digital touchpoints in the customer journey of traditional marketing agencies?" several important criteria can be identified.

The customer journey, as described in the literature and validated by the findings from Growing Lemon, involves multiple phases and numerous touchpoints that collectively shape the overall customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These touchpoints are critical for establishing trust, delivering value, and fostering long-term relationships. To develop effective digital touchpoints, traditional marketing agencies should consider several design criteria. Personalized initial contact and engagement is crucial. Encouraging satisfied customers to share their positive experiences and featuring these testimonials on digital platforms can build trust. Face-to-face interactions are much appreciated by customers, which gives confidence especially at the beginning of the process. Professional networking via LinkedIn can be used for initial contact, using tools like LinkedHelper to facilitate introductions and build professional connections. An engaging online presence is important for a marketing agency to enhance its online presence. Ensuring the website features dynamic content, including statistics, visual elements, and case studies, can engage visitors effectively. Regular updates and blog posts help keep the content fresh and relevant. Clear storytelling and case studies should highlight the agency's narrative and approach, using personal stories and examples of success to convey its expertise effectively. However, this is not the main factor customers rely on, they focus especially on the personal interactions and story of the marketing agency.

Understanding customer knowledge and needs is another key criterion. Providing educational resources such as meetings, guides, and tutorials can help bridge the knowledge gap in digital marketing for customers. This enhances their understanding of the value and processes involved. It is also important to clearly introduce marketing strategies and plans from the start of cooperation. This helps to ensure clients believe in the proposed approaches. Managing customer expectations and ensuring satisfaction involves clearly outlining what clients can expect from the service, including timelines and deliverables, to ensure transparency. Regular progress updates, like the monthly reports, can keep clients informed about project progress and maintain their involvement.

Efficient workflow and processes should be maintained, not only with customers but also with external partners. Transparent project management, can improve idea exchanges and project tracking, increasing collaboration and transparency. Ensuring content is high-quality, creative, and aligned with client expectations through review processes is also wanted by customers. Making sure all team members reach a certain level of product affinity is important for customers, in order to convey the message properly.

Proactive service and support quality is important for optimizing the customer journey. Providing proactive and strategic guidance can surprise clients with innovative ideas and strategies, showing commitment and driving engagement. The marketing agency should take a leading role and offer guidance for customers. It is also expected for a marketing agency to offer unsolicited advice and innovative ideas and strategies, to keep the customer surprised. The holistic approach and in-house

expertise to manage various aspects of digital marketing is very much appreciated. Effective communication practices are also essential. Using accessible language in all communications, particularly in reports and certain documents, ensures clients can easily understand the information provided. A mix of communication platforms, such as email, WhatsApp, and video calls, should be tailored to client preferences for preferred types of communication. Ensuring team members remain accessible to clients and maintaining a personal touch in communications fosters strong, trusting relationships. This can be fostered by giving customers a clear introduction of the team member they are talking with, including their expertise.

In conclusion, the design criteria for the development of digital touchpoints in the customer journey of traditional marketing agencies include personalization in initial engagement, an engaging online presence, understanding customer knowledge and needs, managing expectations and ensuring satisfaction, maintaining efficient workflow and processes, proactive service and support quality, and effective communication practices. By incorporating these criteria, traditional digital marketing agencies can optimize their digital touchpoints, enhancing customer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty throughout the customer journey.

6.0 Discussion

6.1 Discussion and theoretical contribution

The literature on digital touchpoints and customer journeys outlines several key insights for developing design criteria in traditional marketing agencies. Touchpoints, defined as interactions between customers and businesses, vary in intensity and can be one-way or two-way exchanges (Schüller, 2016; Schüller, 2016). These interactions influence brand preferences and include categories such as in-store communications, traditional media, and digital platforms like email and social media (Baxendale et al., 2015; Leeflang et al., 2014; Straker et al., 2015). Effective digital marketing strategies should aim to transform every customer interaction into a meaningful touchpoint (Bakhtieva, 2017).

Customer experience is foundational for marketing success and encompasses both direct and indirect interactions with a company (Homburg et al., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). These experiences are shaped by past interactions, market conditions, and competition, requiring systematic tracking and evaluation (Følstad & Kvale, 2018b; Ieva & Ziliani, 2018b). The customer journey, which includes prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase phases, is a dynamic process with recurring cycles rather than linear paths (De Keyser et al., 2015; Kranzbühler et al., 2018; Siebert et al., 2020). Understanding this journey involves identifying and optimizing touchpoints to enhance customer satisfaction and engagement (Baxendale et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2007).

To design an effective customer journey, organizations should collect internal insights, develop hypotheses, research customer processes and perceptions, and visually map interactions (Temkin, 2010). This process should focus on identifying key touchpoints, understanding customer emotions, and ensuring consistency across all channels (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Continuous monitoring and optimization are crucial for maintaining an effective and seamless customer journey. By comprehending and improving digital touchpoints throughout the customer experience, marketing agencies can better align their offerings with customer expectations and enhance overall satisfaction.

The analysis of the in-depth interviews, held at Growing Lemon, revealed that digital touchpoints play a crucial role in the different stages of the customer journey at Growing Lemon. Initial contact often occurs through physical meetings or referrals, highlighting the importance of personal connections in the early stages. Digital platforms such as LinkedIn and the company's website then become significant in providing detailed information and facilitating first contacts. As the relationship progresses, tools like WhatsApp and email are essential for maintaining ongoing communication and ensuring clients are updated on their projects.

The website serves as a foundational resource for potential clients to gather information. Though it was noted that there is room for improvement in terms of content and visibility. LinkedIn is vital for professional networking and initiating contacts, while WhatsApp and email are important for efficient and effective communication throughout the customer journey. The performance of the current online customer journey at Growing Lemon is generally positive. With customers reporting satisfaction with the service quality and communication. However, there are areas of improvement, particularly in offering more innovative solutions and being proactive in suggesting new ideas and strategies.

6.2 Managerial implications

Building on the insights from client interviews, Growing Lemon should prioritize personal referrals and face-to-face interactions as key approaches for acquiring new customers. Clients highlighted the importance of personal connections and word-of-mouth recommendations. For instance where they were referred to the agency by existing customers or met representatives in person at networking events. Therefore, implementing a formal referral program and investing in networking opportunities can build on these insights and further strengthen client acquisition strategies. After creating this awareness, customers emphasized the importance of meeting Growing Lemon (Justin Leemkuil) in person. These physical meetings were very much appreciated. So, this is important for Growing Lemon to keep up.

Client feedback emphasized the varying significance of Growing Lemon's website in their decision-making process. While only a few clients relied on the website to understand the agency's services and values, others placed more importance on direct interactions with representatives like Justin.

Therefore, improving the website's content and visual appeal is essential. However, it should complement rather than replace the personal connections established during face-to-face meetings. According to an external partner the perception of the website and online visibility has evolved over time; at first it was considered less effective, but recent improvements and more frequent postings have been noted positively. However, there is also a desire for more dynamic content on the website. He expressed a preference for seeing more statistics, visual elements, and concrete goals achieved, rather than predominantly written content. This feedback suggests that while the website is a useful tool for initial impressions, its role could be increased by incorporating more engaging and visual content.

Clients consistently highlighted the impact of personal connections and the narrative conveyed by representatives like Justin in influencing their decisions to engage with Growing Lemon. This shows the importance of training staff to effectively communicate the agency's story and values during client interactions.

Insights from customer interviews revealed the need for clear communication and proactive management of client expectations throughout the engagement process. A customer expressed a desire for comprehensive marketing plans at the start of the cooperation, which was missed. Therefore, establishing structured onboarding processes and providing educational resources, as suggested by clients, can enhance client understanding and satisfaction. The monthly update, which Growing Lemon sends, is very much appreciated by the customers.

Customer feedback highlighted the importance of streamlining internal workflows and enhancing creative content quality to deliver on client expectations. There were areas identified for improvement. Some clients have observed that content, particularly social media posts, occasionally lacks the critical touch expected and sometimes appears as though generated by AI. This suggests a need for higher quality and more creative content that better aligns with client expectations. Internal knowledge dissemination within the team also emerged as an area for improvement. While Justin's proactive approach is praised, there is a perception that other team members may lack the same level of product affinity, leading to disconnects in social media content. Incorporating suggestions from customers, such as investing in training programs and fostering a culture of innovation. This can help Growing Lemon optimize its operations and produce compelling content that resonates with its customers.

One common suggestion is for Growing Lemon to provide more proactive and strategic guidance. Clients expressed a desire for the agency to take a more leading role. Furthermore, providing more detailed explanations and guidance, particularly with technical documents like keywords reports, could improve client understanding and satisfaction. Taking a more hands-on approach to educate clients on such deliverables would enhance the perceived value of the service. Multiple customers

expressed that offering unsolicited advice and surprising clients with innovative ideas and strategies would be appreciated. Thereby moving away from a purely reactive "you ask, we deliver" approach. Client feedback highlighted the importance of effective communication channels and practices in fostering strong client relationships. By customizing communication plans based on client preferences and providing clear guidelines for interactions, Growing Lemon can enhance client satisfaction. Incorporating feedback from interviews into staff training programs can further improve communication skills and ensure consistency in client interactions.

The creation and communication of a comprehensive marketing plan at the outset of engagements would be beneficial. A customer noted that a clear timeline and plan for upcoming activities in the long-term would help manage expectations and ensure all necessary steps are completed. Improving communication tools and methods is another area for enhancement. An external partner suggested implementing a tool for easier file sharing and tracking action items to reduce the need for frequent check-ins and streamline communication. A checklist system to keep tasks between external partners and Growing Lemon organized and transparent was also recommended. This can help to ease the inside processes between external partners and Growing Lemon.

There is a mixed response regarding the initial interactions and subsequent delegation of tasks to different team members. At Growing Lemon there is one main mail account where team members communicate with customers. From this mail account every team member is able to react, which also applies to WhatsApp where every colleague has access to. Some clients feel this can come off as impersonal, as they initially interact with Justin but then deal with various team members. This indicates effective communication within the agency. Though there is also an opportunity to enhance the personal touch in these interactions. Growing Lemon should consider implementing a more structured approach to introducing team members to clients at the outset of engagements. This could include providing brief bios or profiles of team members, highlighting their roles, expertise, and how they contribute to client success. By humanizing the agency's team and showcasing the diverse skills and abilities of its staff, Growing Lemon can ensure that client interactions feel more personalized and build stronger connections with clients. A visualization of the redesign of the customer journey at Growing Lemon can be seen in figure 5 below.
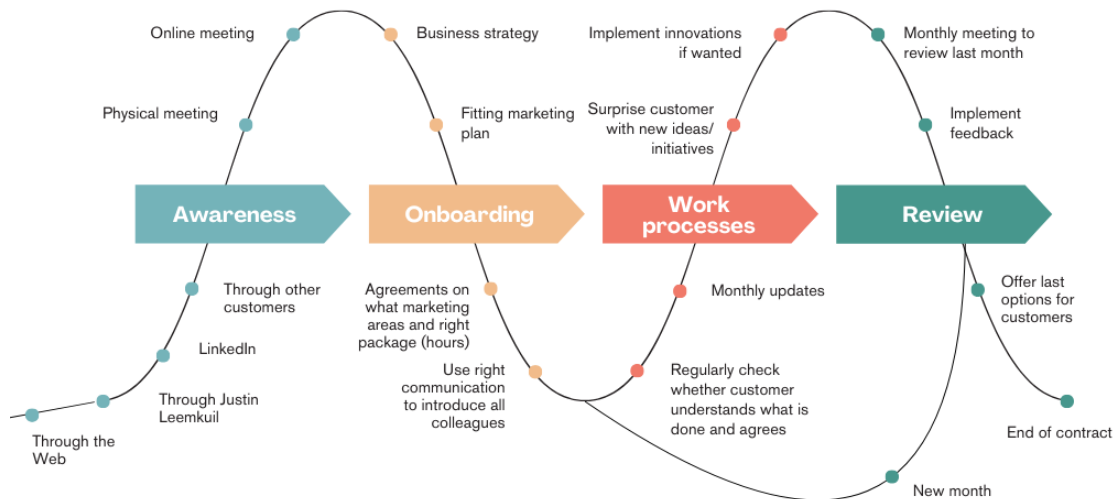
Figure 5 - Redesign customer journey

6.3 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small, consisting of only seven interviews. This may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all customers. Additionally, the study focused on one specific agency, which limits the validity of the findings to other contexts. Future research could address these limitations by including a larger and more diverse sample. These results could eventually also be compared across multiple agencies, to make the research even more reliable.

Future research should explore the customer journey in different types of marketing agencies to identify common patterns and unique challenges. Further studies can provide deeper insights into how customer relationships evolve over time and the long-term impact of digital touchpoints. Investigating the effectiveness of specific digital tools and strategies in enhancing customer engagement and satisfaction would also be beneficial.

Appendix A

The survey questions:

1. How did you first become aware of our digital marketing agency?
2. What prompted you to consider working with Growing Lemon?
3. Can you describe your initial interactions with our agency, including how you reached out and what information you were seeking?
4. What factors influenced your decision to choose our agency over others during the initial stages of your search?
5. How do you feel about our agency's online presence overall? Do you think it accurately represents our brand and the services we offer?
6. What has been your experience working with Growing Lemon since the official start of the partnership?
7. Could you describe what expectations you had before you began working with Growing Lemon, and to what extent these expectations were met?
8. Can you describe the process of working with our agency on projects or campaigns, including communication, collaboration, and problem-solving?
9. How would you rate the overall level of service and support provided by our agency during the course of our partnership? So, when for example during a normal week a task (social post, google ads optimalisation) is done, how do you feel about the way this is communicated to you?
10. During your time working with our agency, which online platforms or tools have you found most helpful in communicating with us or accessing our services?
11. How would you rate the communication process with Growing Lemon? Are there improvements that could be made in terms of frequency, clarity or responsiveness?
12. Are there any specific changes or updates you would like to see made to our processes, services, or communication strategies to better meet your needs?
13. How do you think our agency could better support clients like yourself in the future, both before and during the partnership?

Additional questions for old customers:

14. What was the reason for ending the collaboration?
15. Would you be open to working with Growing Lemon again in the future?

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