

# Exploring the Optimal Customer Experience Online

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## 1. Executive Summary

- Customer experience research is widely considered to be cutting edge. Despite this very little research has been conducted on the optimal online customer experience.
- Whilst some research has been conducted on the Business to Consumer Sector (B2C) there appears to be very little on Business to Business (B2B).
- Work conducted on behalf of the Henley Centre for Customer Management explored the perceptions of both B2B and B2C customers with online experience in both Europe and the United States.
- 132 people were interviewed in depth using a qualitative version of Repertory Grid. Over 100 hours of interview were analyzed. The research also adopted a cross industry approach as an aid to generalizability.
- We found 13 themes and 109 factors for the optimum B2C experience. Themes include; interactivity, security, informative, trustworthy, personal, community, emotional engagement, aesthetics, usability, quality of content, commercialization customer orientation, fulfilment.
- We found 13 themes and 97 factors for the optimum B2B experience. Themes; usability, aesthetics, subject relevance, hedonic experience, information processing, trustworthy, relational, learning, contemporary, customer oriented, community, commercialization, fulfilment.
- The report also contains a checklist of factors members should consider when crafting the optimum experience for their online customers.

## 2. Introduction

This report explores the perceptions of 132 individuals in both Europe (Denmark and the UK) and the United States regarding their optimum customer experience online. Whilst the popular press has said much about ideal experiences very little research has been conducted on this to date. The research team conducted extensive research on online customer experience to help frame the research, identified an appropriate exploratory research technique for data collection and analyzed the results for the membership.

### Objective

The objective of this research was;

***To identify the factors that contributes towards the optimum online customer experience in both B2B and B2C online environments.***

## 3. Literature on Customer Experience

The research team identified 79 papers relating directly to the issue of online customer activity either in terms of usage, behaviour and/or attitudes. A systematic review of these papers identified a significant number of topics or themes that are covered by authors when discussing the subject of customers in the online environment. The purpose of the literature review was to identify how existing research might inform our investigation of the critical factors that make for an optimum online customer experience. A categorisation system was applied to this extensive set of papers by using *three* perspectives from which online customer experience can be viewed. We label these categories as:

1. Determinants
2. Web tactics and
3. Outcomes.

Below we discuss the importance of each category and provide indications of the key themes that emerged within each category.

### 3.1. Determinants

A significant amount of research work has been conducted that looks at the pre-conditions that influence the customer's experience online. Such determinants have been investigated either from the perspective of the internal characteristics of the customer or alternatively from the perspective of external environmental conditions that influence the customer's actions.

Internal customer characteristics that have been identified include the *user's ability* and competency to work online, and overall level of *interest* and *attitude* towards the online environment (Elliott and Speck, 2005; Hodgkinson and Kiel, 2003, Cheung et al., 2005). The formation of attitudes is strongly influenced by the customer's internal perceptions in

particular of *perceived benefits*, *perceived control* and *perceived risk* associated with either shopping or searching online (Teo, 2002; Perea et al., 2004; Hong-Youl Ha, 2004; Wolfenbarger and Gilly, 2001). Finally, when interacting with the online environment either to search for information and/or purchase, customers bring with them *prior knowledge* and/or *prior experiences* of the brands with which they interact. Prior knowledge and experience which is held within the customer's internal memory support and influence the manner in which the customer searches for information and ultimately judges and decides upon a purchase (Cheung et al., 2005; Holloway et al., 2005; Chih-Chung and Chang, 2005).

External conditions that will influence the customer's online experience include the *market context* (e.g. a highly competitive marketplace with many brands from which to interact online versus a less developed one with fewer brands) and the degree of marketing activity to which the customer has been exposed. The influence of the brand in driving trust and therefore affecting customer experience is strongly documented (Bart et al., 2005; Ha and Perks, 2005; Danaher et al., 2003). Other factors which influence the customer will be the cost of going online, specifically *search costs* in terms of money, time, and emotional energy (Kumar et al., 2005) and the *reliability* and *accessibility* of the website. Such factors have been identified in models of online service quality and satisfaction (Cheung and Lee, 2005; Lee and Lin, 2005; Lim and Dubinsky, 2004).

It is important to note that some of these determinants of online experience are within the control of the website owner such as the promotion and awareness of the brand and the level of accessibility and reliability of the website. Similarly development of customer perceptions of low risk, high control and clarity of perceived benefits are within the domain of the organisation via effective communications. Other factors such as the customer's own level of ability and overall attitude towards the online environment are not, however awareness of the level of development of these within target customer segments is an important source of customer insight.

### **3.2. Web Tactics**

Articles within the literature reviewed identify numerous themes that relate to aspects of the website for which the organisation is responsible. These give us an indication of the activities and tactics that management need to undertake in order to create an online environment which will be conducive to an optimum experience for the customer. A list of 18 tactical themes resulted from our review which is listed below in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of web tactic themes within the reviewed literature

Web Tactic Theme	Description
Security	The security provided on the website with regard to privacy, financial details, card payments and/or personal interactions with others.
Aesthetics	Elements of the visual appeal of the site including colour, style, and layout.
Up-to-date	The degree to which the site is contemporary and provides up –to-date and current information. Also relates to the degree of innovation shown on the site.
Search capability	The capability of the site to assist the customer to make relevant and efficient searches.
System quality	Relates to aspects of the site such as functionality and performance.
Website design/features	Aspects of the website in terms of structural design and features.
Community	Opportunities afforded by the website to interact with others.
Information	Aspects of the site relating to the provision of information such as the depth, quality, layout, relevance of the information provided.
Ease of Use	Aspects of the site design that afford easy use by the customer.
Navigation	Navigability of the site.
Interactivity	Opportunities for brand-customer and/or customer-customer interactions. This elements links closely to “community”.
Service quality	Aspects of the site that provide service elements to the customer such as contact points, helplines or support. Links closely to “responsiveness” and “fulfilment”.
Fulfilment	Relates to aspects of the ordering and final delivery of the goods.
Responsiveness	Speed of response to customer queries, order delivery etc.
Product offering	The degree of range, quality and performance versus the competition in terms of product offering.
Price	Aspects of price and level of competitor pricing.
Personalization	Opportunities provided by the site for the customer to personalize their page on the site.
Service recovery	Responses by the organisation to failure in service level.

This extensive list of web tactics indicates the level of detail to which organisations must pay attention in term of website management. It is interesting to note that certain web tactics are

consistently mentioned in relation to online customer behaviour. These include *security* of the site (Trabold et al., 2006), *aesthetics* (Constantinides, 2004), the *system quality* including the functionality and features of the site, and the *ease of use* and *navigation* that the site affords the customer (Cheung et al., 2005). These aspects influence the experience and likelihood of return to the site. Of increasing relevance is the *community* element of the website which refers to the mechanisms provided by the site that enable communication and discussion brand-to-customer as well as customer-to-customer (Bart et al., 2005).

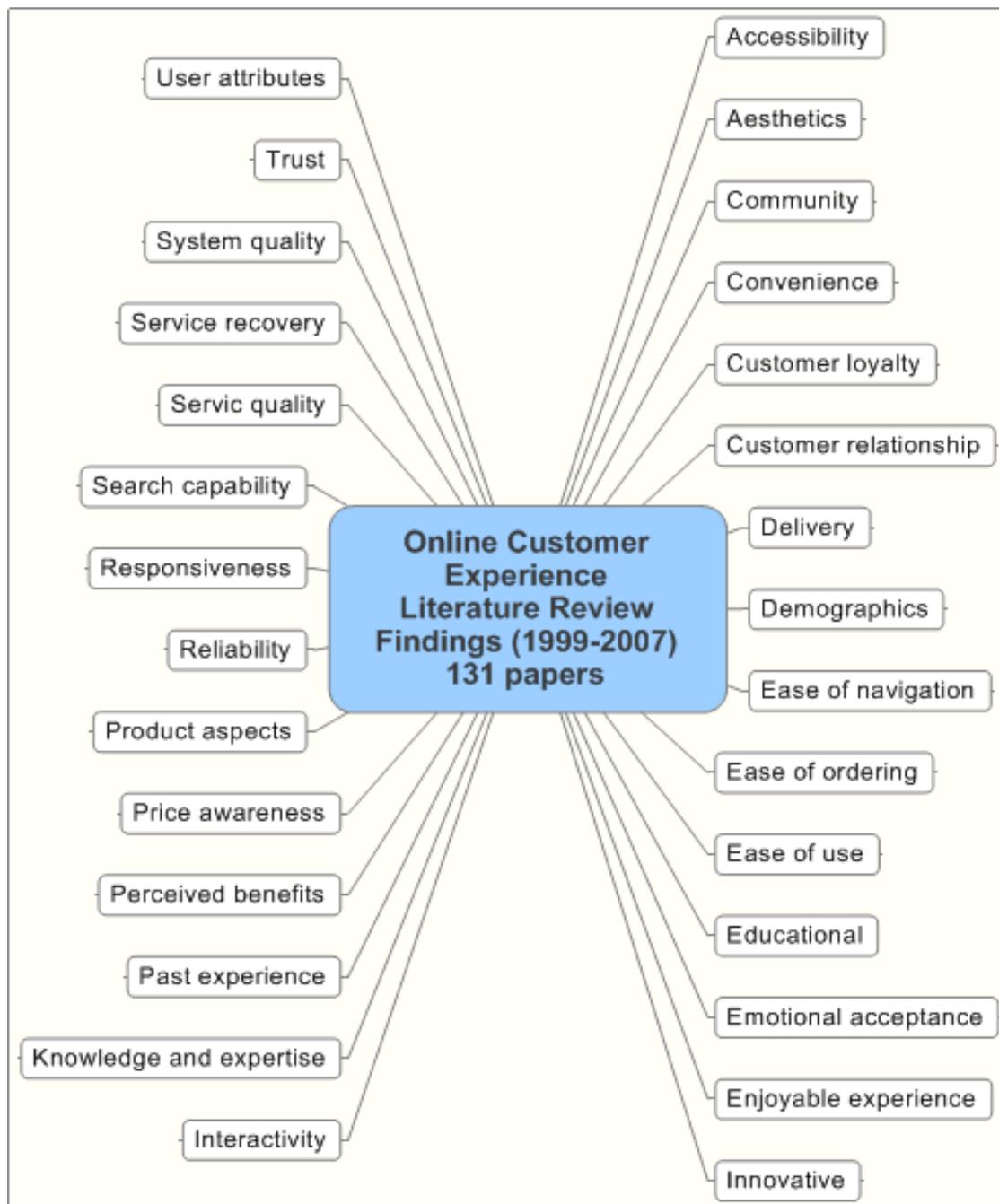
### 3.3. Outcomes

Finally, our categorisation of the literature involved identifying articles that have looked at the resulting impacts upon the customer of exposure to the online environment. Here we see elements that refer to internal changes within the customer, in particular towards their view of the website owner (the brand and/or organisation). A significant number of papers discuss the concept of *trust* from a number of perspectives. Trust can be viewed as both an antecedent of online activity ie the customer will use a branded website that he/she trusts (Elliott and Speck, 2005) Alternatively researchers have looked at the level of trust that is created as an outcome of an experience (Lee and Turban, 2001). Other outcomes that we seek from effective customer online interactions include customer *satisfaction* and *loyalty*, each of which are closely aligned in the literature with *trust* (Ballantine, 2005; Rodgers et al., 2005; Danaher et al., 2004).

Having identified the numerous themes around which research and discussion has taken place, we embarked upon our exploration of online customer experience. Whilst we had identified that a diverse range of themes existed, we entered into our research activity with an exploratory approach to our investigation.

Papers were then categories into key themes (Figure 1). These were then subdivided into three categories: 1) determinants of online experience (such as technology proneness on the part of the user), 2) web tactics used (such as search engines, ease of navigation etc.) and 3) outcomes (such as trust, commitment, satisfaction).

Figure 1: Literature Review: Key Themes



## 4. Research Design – Qualitative Repertory Grid

The research team utilized in-house expertise in qualitative research techniques aimed at probing customers' perceptions of optimal experience online. The Repertory Grid technique has received attention in the management literature for its effectiveness in uncovering hidden meanings. Its roots can be found in the psychology literature and in particular the theory of George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955). Two popular approaches of Repertory Grid exist: quantitative (with a focus on the numbers elicited in a grid) and qualitative (where focus is placed on the meanings of the descriptions people use). This research has adopted the qualitative approach.

### *Steps in the approach:*

1. Individuals are selected in the basis of their prior experience in using websites as a consumer OR as part of their daily work activities.
2. Participants then identify ten websites, three where the experience is optimal, three where the experience is negative and four other sites of their choice that can be either positive or negative.
3. The interviewer then selects three of these sites at a time asking 'within the context of an optimal online experience how do two of these sites stand out as being different from a third'.
4. This triadic approach elicits a differentiating factor that also has an opposite.
5. The respondent then articulates reasons as to why these factors are important in the context of the optimal or less than optimal experience online.
6. Respondents are then asked to rate this experience against all of the websites used.
7. The process is then repeated with new triads (three different websites), new differentiating features are then recorded together with explanations on the grid until saturation is reached (see example of completed grid below).

**Table 2: Example of Completed Gird by Joeann Humbert, Director, Online Learning**

		<b>Websites</b>											
		Educause	Sloan C	Capella	Chronicle of H. E.	Oracle Payment net	Campus Technology	NMC	NVTN	WCET	Inside Higher Ed.		
<b>Description (score 1)</b>												<b>Description Opposite (score 7)</b>	<b>Provide additional information that explains your answer</b>
1	Easy to find non-profitable info	1	2	1	6	7	2	1	5	5	7	hidden or non existent	my mind doesn't work the way this site is set up
2	Intuitive	2	4	1	6	7	2	2	2	4	6	can't navigate through site	I hate wasting time trying to find simple information
3	Well Developed structure	1	4	3	7	7	6	2	6	4	6	superficial	tentacles that reach down across the whole site
4	Dynamic	2	2	1	4	1	2	2	6	3	3	stale	if I go to a site I don't want information from 2005, I want fresh
5	High speed	3	3	1	7	5	5	2	3	3	4	not easy to drill down	waste of time
6	Remembers password	1	7		7	7						inconsistently	I have a tendency to compromise on security, never change PW.
7	I know what to expect	3	2	2	2	2	6	3	5	6	6	unpredictable	I get an email w/ topics - love this - but going to the page is different
8	Good Site layout	3	3	1	7	7	6	2	6	5	7	unusable information	Contacts would be contacts - give me correct info
9	at a glance	1	3	1	5	7	2	2	4	6	6	have to dig for info	its demotivating to return to that site
10	Inspirational	4	4	2	7	7	6	2	7	3	6	demotivating	the have it together
11	Soothing to eye	4	3	2	7	7	6	2	7	4	7	Choppy	its all over the place, its choppy, I'm looking all over the place
12	Quality of info	2	7	2	3	7	2	3	5	2	2	Ineffective	sold resources that I trust
13	leaders in the field	7	1	1	6	7	2	2	4	1	4	trusted-not	I'm getting the latest thinking in the field
14	edgy	6	6	6	6	7	7	1	7	6	7	little attention paid to detail	pushes my thinking
15	Relevant & appropriate advertising				6		7				7	in my face advertising	Its almost offensive
16	shared content	7	7									closed world	access to well-informed individuals, it's where I have to go

## 5. The Sample

The research sample comprised 132 interviews lasting from 30 to 90 minutes (the average being 60 minutes). In total over 100 hours of interviews were conducted. Participants ranged in age and gender split, with varying commercial experience. 40 B2B interviews were conducted and 93 B2C. The researchers found that more individuals had direct experience with B2C experiences than they did work related online experience. A wide range of industries were also covered in this work in order to aid the generalizability of the results.

	B2B USA	B2C USA	B2B UK	B2C UK and Denmark
Sample Size	30	63	10	30
Constructs	418	560	82	158

B2B 38 (16 female, 22 male)

B2C 94 (42 female, 62 male)

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Important Business-to-Business Factors

#### 6.1.1. Combined B2B Results - 13 Meta Categories (97 factors)

##### 1. Usability

- Intuitive / self evident
- Easy to navigate
- Easy to use
- Good search facilities
- Open access (no login required)
- Simple
- Structured
- Easy to find information
- Ease of using favourites
- Able to track (and make suggestions to me)

##### 2. Aesthetics

- Visual impact
- Colourful
- Image rich
- Good look
- Visually attractive
- Multimedia
- Well written
- Not busy
- Good design
- Rich media

##### 3. Subject Relevance

- Business focused
- Subject specialist
- Relevant to me
- B2b / B2C are separate entities
- Latest products
- Professional

##### 4. Hedonic Experience

- Emotional impact
- Pleasure giving
- Stimulating
- Instant gratification
- Memorable
- Satisfies
- Fun

- Rewarding
- Enjoyable
- Engaging
- Interesting
- Inspiring
- Attention grabbing
- Empowering

#### **5. Information**

- Relevant information
- Knowledge delivery
- Extensive links (to other sites)
- Downloads (ease of)
- Consistent (quality)
- Accurate
- Filtered (more precise)
- Regular updates
- Good data
- Case studies
- Learning (user)

#### **6. Trustworthy**

- Trusted data
- Trusted information
- Up to date content
- Consistent over time
- Privacy
- Error free

#### **7. Relational**

- Longer term relationships (fostered)
- Open and accessible
- Community
- Responsive
- Personalized

#### **8. Efficient**

- Fast
- No flash
- Easy access/ logon
- Effective use of time
- No crashing
- No time outs
- User friendly
- Stable interface

#### **9. Contemporary**

- Latest news

- Up to date
- Leading edge
- Keeps me informed

**10. Customer oriented**

- Personalized
- Helpful
- Flexible
- Saves me time
- Service oriented
- User in control
- Listens to me
- Online help

**11. Community**

- Networking
- Chat function
- Community feel
- Interactive
- User based identified (and responded to)

**12. Commercialization**

- Appropriate advertising
- No pop ups
- Well branded
- Limited up selling
- Uses well known brand

**13. Fulfilment**

- Ease of payment
- Easy delivery
- Order status update
- On time delivery
- Flexible payment

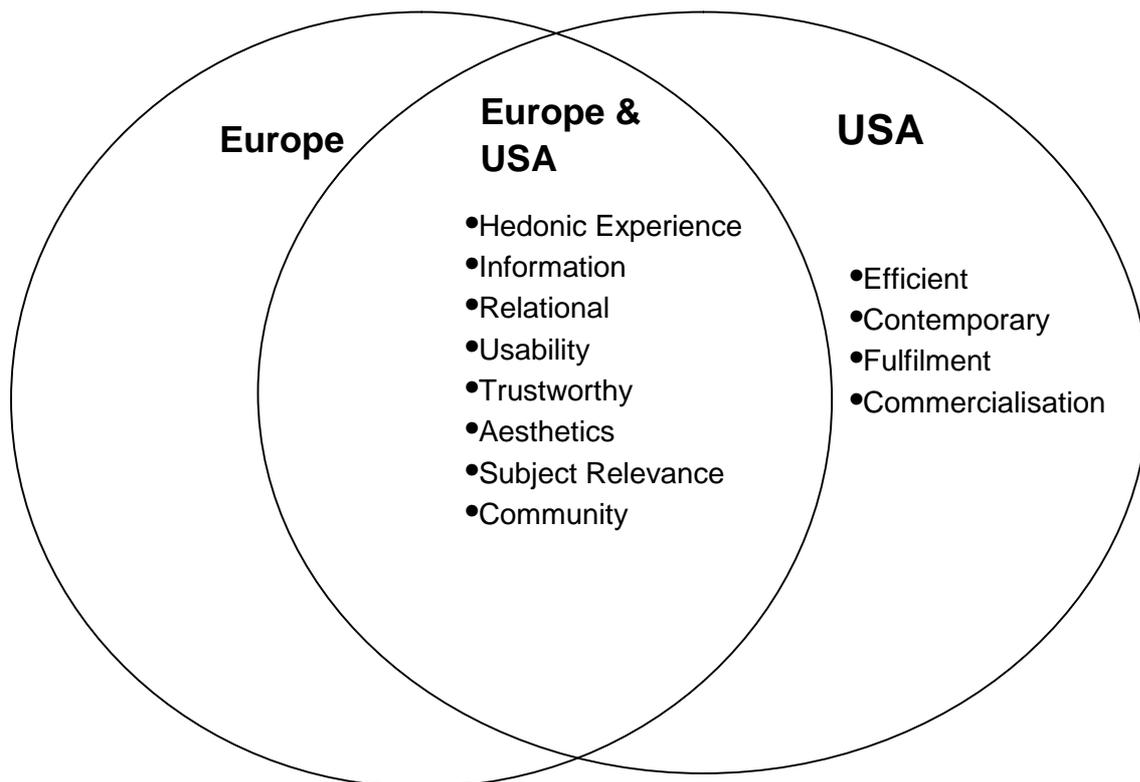


Figure 2: Business to Business Combined Results

### 6.1.2. Business to Business Factors – Discussion of Themes

Results from B2B sector identified thirteen (13) themes that were important to the overall optimum experience online. In total 97 experience factors were revealed across the European and American sample of managers. Since the purpose of repertory grid is to uncover and explore participants' perceptions of optimum experiences online it is not possible to establish the relative importance of each theme (although frequency counts are sometimes used as an illustration of pertinence). The relative importance of each theme is heavily context dependent. Further research which develops a personalized scale mechanism for members specifically is therefore suggested.

#### **Theme 1. Usability**

Usability was a consistently stated theme in respondent interviews. Respondents perceive their optimum experience in their ability to use a site effectively for achieving their objectives. Factors include a site that is intuitive in use, easy to navigate, simple and well structured.

*“The links flow in order that makes sense, keywords and searches work”*

*“Quite a few clicks to find what I need. The search often doesn't result in useful information.”*

*“Useful sites are where the interface is easy and I trust that I will find what I need even if it wasn't part of my target and original focus for using it in the first place.”*

*“My mind doesn’t work the way the site is set up”*

*“Need clear structured site navigation, things shouldn’t be too layered, three clicks at most”*

**Good examples:** Easyjet.com (UK), Graphicmail.com (US)

Chase.com (US) Educause (US) Capella (US) NMC (US) Nasoc.com (US)

### **Theme 2. Aesthetics**

Site aesthetics are a strong indicator of a user's optimum experience in the use of B2B sites. Visual impact, image rich and visually attractive sites were preferred over excessively 'busy' sites.

*“Aesthetics.....If I go to a site that looks “dated” for instance colors, fonts, flatness of color, using Courier type font, no gradients used or sense of depth”*

*“The look and feel of the site speaks for the company’s professionalism. I like to feel the company has a strong defined personality”*

**Good examples:** Educause, Apple.com, Salesforce.com, Webct.com, Dice.com Oracle.com (video)

### **Theme 3: Subject Relevance**

A site's subject relevance was also consistently stated in managers' perceptions of optimum experiences. Sites that offered subject specialism, relevance to the user communicated in a professional manner fared well in users' perceptions.

*“If you are looking for business information, I don’t want to be distracted by consumer focused messaging”*

**Good examples:** [www.orange.com/english/home.php](http://www.orange.com/english/home.php) (shows entry to services via “business” or “personal”)

### **Theme 4: Hedonic Experience**

Surprisingly managers in this study felt hedonistic experience was important to their perception of the optimum experience online. Whilst it differed markedly from B2C perceptions managers consistently stated that sites that were personally rewarding, engaging and inspiring produced more meaningful experiences online than those which did not.

*“Keeps you interested and makes you want to come back”*

*“Instant gratification – I need to get things done and out. Having too many steps slows me down. “*

*“Should be pleasure giving rather than tedious”*

**Good examples:** liveperson.com, Webct.com, Webboard, DHL, Fedex, MediaSupplies

### Theme 5: Information

Participants reported information as one of the most important factors relating to an optimum experience. The provision of good data that is regularly updated, extensive in nature and relevant is vital. Similarly the provision of case studies facilitates a strong learning aspect to the optimal online experience.

*“Sites that provide relevant links that I can go back to is valuable to me. It is disappointing to go to a site that is very “flat” and doesn’t offer enough related links”*

*“Getting information quickly, Information is relevant and what is actually needed.”*

*“Wisdom of the crowds should not outweigh experts”*

*“Keeps me on top of my game”*

**Good examples:** orbitz.com, Colgate.edu, nyaaa.com, Cognospartner

En.wikipedia.org, [www.Cnet.com](http://www.Cnet.com), Kolabora

### Theme 6: Trustworthy

Trust in the content of a B2B site was considered important. Consistency over time, respect for privacy and being error free critical in the perceptions of an optimum experience in this area.

*“I’m getting the latest thinking in the field, pushes my thinking”*

*“Solid resource that I trust”*

*“Mustnt make me look bad, I have to be able to rely on their work”*

**Good examples:** Atomicdesign.com PSPrint.com KellerInternational.com

### Theme 7: Relational

Relationships were also considered important by respondents. Managers felt that their optimum experience should include open and accessible representatives, a responsive site that is personalized in nature, and fosters a longer term consideration of the relationship between the user and site.

*“A site with “forums” or places where the actual users can share input and struggles is great. I’m much happier sometimes getting suggestions from a user than from the “owner” of the site who is pushing the product”.*

**Good examples:** Kolabora, Cnet.com

### Theme 8: Efficient

The physical infrastructure of a site is also considered to be important to participants when considering optimum experience. Sites that are fast, perform consistently over time and avoid flash and other features of multimedia were mentioned. Having a stable interface which is user friendly was also cited.

*“I’ve got other things to do, give me what I am looking for.”*

*“I need to find solutions just in time, don’t want to be hung up finding info when I’m working on a project”*

**Good examples:** OS Views, Salesforce.com, Apple.com, liveperson.com

### **Theme 9: Contemporary**

Optimum experience in the B2B sector also involves the provision of up to date information that is leading edge and helps keep respondents informed.

*“I want current information and data so that I can be an informed customer”*

*“If I go to a site I don’t want info from 2005, I wasn’t fresh”*

*“In my field you either stay ahead or you’ll be behind.”*

**Good examples:** Wired, OSViews, Google, Capella, Educause, engadget.com

### **Theme 10: Customer Oriented**

Participants also cited customer orientation as important to their overall experience. Sites that are personalized, facilitate user control and offer online help facilities were rated as optimal experiences.

*“Sites that allow me to create my own experience and understands my needs versus imposing their needs on me is critical”*

*“Experience my experience versus experience their experience”*

*“A customer specific request to a real person is important”*

*“With cdwg.com I can quickly see multiple methods of contacting support and sales reps”.*

**Good example:** Salesforce.com, apple.com, liveperson.com, CDWG.com

### **Theme 11: Community**

Interestingly community was also cited as an important feature in optimum experience. The ability to network and chat contributes towards an interactive experience with a community feel.

*“Balanced opinion, not just one person’s sales pitch”*

*“Sense of community versus on my own. It so nice to be able to post a question and get an answer from someone directly involved in a situation.”*

**Good examples:** Slashdot.com, LinkedIn.com

### **Theme 12: Commercialization**

One feature consistently rated by an American audience is the notion of how commercial a site is. Sites with appropriate levels of advertising that are well branded but not excessively focussed on up selling were cited as good experiences. Popups were consistently mentioned as leading to a frustrating experience.

*“Should be representative of the industry versus giving you what they think you need”*

**Good examples:** Adobe.com, Microsoft.com, IBM.com, Apple.com

### **Theme 13: Fulfilment**

American B2B participants also cited fulfilment as key to the optimum experience online. This included ease of payment, flexible delivery options, status updates and online delivery.

*"Its about timely delivery, planning"*

**Good examples:** PSPrint.com KellerInternational.com Cheaptickets.com graphicmail.com

## **6.2. Important Business-to-Consumer Factors**

### **6.2.1. Combined B2C Results - 13 Meta Categories (109 factors)**

#### **1. Interactive**

- Action oriented
- Proactive

#### **2. Security**

- Safe
- Secure

#### **3. Informative**

- Expansive
- Good linkages
- Current / up to date
- Hot, trendy and current
- Interesting
- Necessary
- Increased knowledge (of user)
- Objective
- Tangible (downloadable)
- Links
- Impartial
- Filtered
- Frequently updated
- Useful

#### **4. Trustworthy**

- Credible
- Believable
- Accurate
- Reliable
- Professional
- Security

#### **5. Personal**

- Personalized
- Relationship oriented

- Contact points
- Service oriented
- Customization
- Ad flexibility
- Useful
- Work related
- Needs (focus on)
- Wants
- Important to me
- Availability
- Gratifying
- Easy to use
- Relevant

#### **6. Community**

- Social
- Friendly
- Network
- Communicate with others
- Interactive
- Feedback
- Participate
- Message boards
- Many to many
- Connectivity

#### **7. Emotionally engaging**

- Fun
- Exciting
- Escapist
- Entertaining
- Enjoyable
- Leisure
- Happy to use
- Addictive

#### **8. Aesthetics**

- Colourful
- Good layout
- Multimedia
- Visual
- 3d
- Good looking
- Image rich
- Nice style
- Good appearance
- Creative
- Uncluttered

- Logo

## **9. Usability**

- Easy to navigate
- Easy to use
- Easy to get information
- Fast
- Intuitive
- Logical
- Efficient
- Helpful
- Straightforward
- User friendly
- Quick to load
- Easy to browse
- Fast to load
- User friendly
- Easy access
- Easy log on
- Simple
- Layers
- Accessible
- Easy search

## **10. Quality of content**

- Clarity of information
- Transparent
- Range
- Breadth

## **11. Commercial**

- Pushes
- Subscription
- Product images
- Branding
- Cool name
- Corporate public relations
- No pop ups
- Advertising available

## **12. Customer Oriented**

- Good customer service
- Personalized
- Educational
- Notification
- Helpful
- 

## **13. Fulfilment**

- Credit card usage
- Payment options
- Ways to pay

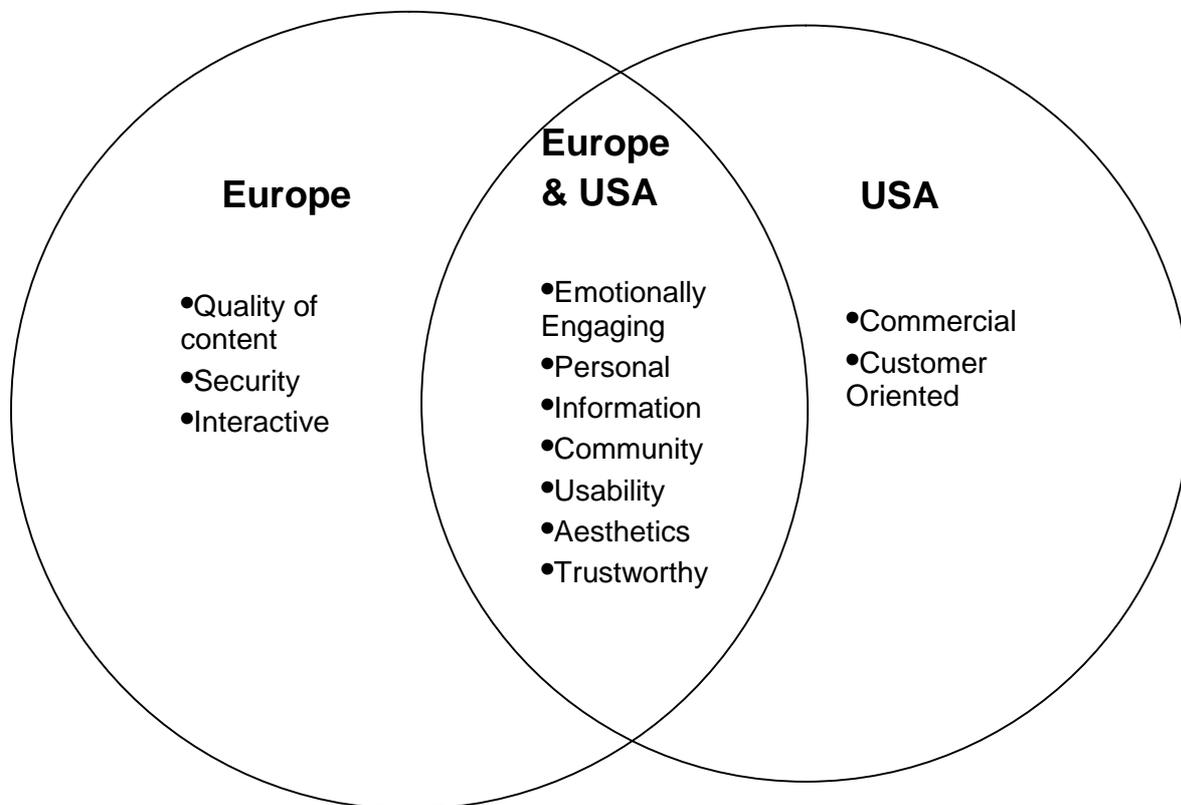


Figure 3: Business to Consumer Combined Results

### 6.2.2. Business to Consumer Factors – Discussion of Themes

A number of differences emerged from our analysis of the data. Interestingly European consumers identified security more readily than their American counterparts as important to the optimal experience online. The research team attributed this difference to the enhanced state of internet use for American consumers, particularly related to payment online. American consumers appear more aware of the commercialization of their online experience (though this did not make them more accepting of it). Unsolicited messages, upselling and heavy use of online advertising were consistently cited as detrimental to an optimum experience. Similarly the American sample also noted the importance of customer orientation in this experience.

#### *Theme 1: Interactive*

The opportunity to interact either in discussion forums, blogs, or contacts with the brand owner of the site directly was an important feature within the B2C online environment. The researchers view this as a consequence of the shift to higher levels of interactivity within the Web 2.0 environment. Consumers sought out websites that were pro-active in their design

and which enabled active communication with the customer. High interactivity is achieved when the site enables user-generated content to be uploaded or downloaded or the use of graphics or downloads with which the consumer can work.

*“can be creative, can do lots of things”*

*“I often work with tasks which are not well defined, and I am alone – inspiration is helpful.”*

**Good examples:** Google Image, [www.Youtube.com](http://www.Youtube.com)

### **Theme 2: Security**

Security appears to be more front-of-mind as a concern for European consumers. Concerns surround privacy of personal information, security of financial information e.g. credit card details and generally being able to assess the level of risk attached to using a particular site. Consumers seek reassurance with regard to the safety of important information. This can come from trust in the brand name of the site, the professionalism of the design and appearance of the site but also the mechanisms used to transact with the customer. There is an increasing awareness of the safety element in relation to access to other individuals and safety from other people who may be able to make contact during community interactions.

*“I do not want to be on a site that is visited by people who might be offensive”*

*“I don’t want to use a site with creepy people that can look at my stuff”*

**Good examples:** [www.Amazon.co.uk](http://www.Amazon.co.uk); [www.firstdirect.com](http://www.firstdirect.com); SIS (infocenter.com), Collegehumour.com ebates.com

### **Theme 3: Informative**

A key benefit afforded to consumer by using the online environment is access to information. This may be in the pre-purchase stage of the buying process or it may be to access useful information on a day to day basis such as the weather or news reports. Given the importance of information to all such activities, it is not surprising that a significant number of factors emerged in our research relating to information. These included: *Expansive, Good linkages, Current / up to date, Hot, trendy and current, Interesting, Necessary, Increased knowledge (of user), Objective, Tangible (downloadable), Links, Impartial, Filtered, Frequently updated, Useful*. These factors give an insight into the importance of information and the need for it to be reliable and current.

*“Teaches me something new”*

*“I love sites with great product galleries and images to help in purchasing process”*

*“Provides information going on outside my world”*

**Good examples:** [www.excelsior.ai](http://www.excelsior.ai) [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com)

[www.lunchinbox.net](http://www.lunchinbox.net) [www.target.com](http://www.target.com), facebook ebay

### **Theme 4: Trustworthy**

A feeling of trust in the site appears to be a strong component of a good online experience. Trust is strongly linked to perceptions of security and reliability surrounding the site. Feelings

of trust are engendered by sites that are professional, accurate, reliable and that appear to be credible and secure. The aesthetics of the site, ie the look and feel play a bit part in making the consumer feel secure and therefore trusting of the site. Responents often mentioned their own bank as an example of a trust site, i.e. they would not be banking online unless they had a high level of trust in their online environment. Established online brands such as Google and Yahoo also achieve high levels of trust from consumers.

*“Work13.com has spelling errors a lot. I can’t trust info where there are errors”*

*“People won’t buy if they don’t trust”*

**Good examples:** “my bank”, www. springwise.com, [www.Yahoo.com](http://www.Yahoo.com), www.Google.com

### **Theme 5: Personal**

The opportunity for the consumer to personalize or tailor their own area of a website emerged strongly. In part this enables the site to feel tailored and customised to their own needs and wants. It was felt to make the site easier to use and more rewarding. Where the site is personalised, consumers feel remembered by the organisation (e.g. Amazon.com) and feel that they are being identified in terms of their needs as a customer with relevant products for them.

*“Makes it a bit more human”*

*“I like to own my own spot”*

*“Personalising can be like your own house”*

**Good examples:** Infocenter.com, MyCourses.com, Myspace

### **Theme 6: Community**

The advent of Web 2.0 and the ability that it affords the consumer to communicate with others and create and pass on their own content has led to a higher level of expectation amongst the consumer in terms of an ability to mix within a relevant community. Mechanisms such as blogs, message boards, and sites such as FaceBook and MySpace have encouraged such expectations. The advantages of being able to interact and communicate within a wider community are both social and functional. Such interactions enable sharing of information and experiences of products and services as well as the customer-to-customer promotion of brands.

*“Connects people through similar interest or leads to new things”*

*“Makes it easy to meet people”*

*“I am interested in connecting with people and being able to talk socially”*

**Good examples:** Facebook, Youtube, [www.Beeradvocate.com](http://www.Beeradvocate.com)

### **Theme 7: Emotionally engaging**

Given the wide range of situations in which consumers use the Internet we similarly see a wide range of emotional needs and responses associated with its use. Consumers want the experience to be enjoyable, but more than that, when viewed as a leisure pursuit, it should it should also be fun, exciting, and highly entertaining. The nature of the activity to some

extent determines the level of expectation. However even when browsing for functional information such as train times the respondents often felt the site should make it enjoyable and less onerous.

*“Would rather visit an entertaining site than a boring site”*

*“I don’t go to a Website to be bored”*

*“Online should be fun and easy to use, not a chore – not a lot of time, needs to be entertaining too.”*

**Good examples:** Virgin Wine, [www.MarksandSpencer.com](http://www.MarksandSpencer.com)

### **Theme 8: Aesthetics**

As in the B2B context, the aesthetics of a website environment appear to be very important. Factors identified included: Colourful, Good layout, Multimedia, Visual, 3D. Good looking, Image rich, Nice style, Good appearance, Creative Uncluttered (not busy), Logo. A well presented, attractive-to-the-eye site encourages feelings of professionalism and builds trust as discussed above.

*“Colour is what appeals on a Webpage. Black is a bad choice of color. Font needs to be readable”*

*“Aesthetics are crucial and determine my trust”.*

**Good examples:** [www.MarksandSpencer.com](http://www.MarksandSpencer.com)

### **Theme 9: Usability**

The consumer’s online experience is enhanced when a site has a high level of usability. This refers to how easy or difficult the site is to access, navigate and general use. Key factors included: ease-of-use, ease-of-navigation, efficient, fast, intuitive, easy-to-search, quick-to-load, user-friendly, easy log-on, helpful. Consumers often referred to the “layering” within a website i.e. the number of pages into the website before finding what they want. A “3clicks” rule seemed to prevail whereby consumers often ceased to use a site if they could not locate what they wanted within 3 clicks of entering the home page.

*“I’m impatient, I need to be quick”*

*“I do not like to spend too much time to figure things out. It should be easy to figure out”*

*“Broken links are not appealing”*

**Good examples:** [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), [FaceBook](http://FaceBook), [yahoo](http://yahoo), [Amazon](http://Amazon)

Easy to navigate: [www.aramarc.net](http://www.aramarc.net), [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), [www.bluefly.com](http://www.bluefly.com)

### **Theme10: Quality of content**

The quality of the content provided within a website is a key influence upon the experience for the European customer. Key factors included the range and breadth of the information or product range, transparency and the clarity of information. Quality of content similarly fuels judgements of the professionalism and therefore feelings of trust and reliability.

**Good examples:** [www.MarksandSpencer.com](http://www.MarksandSpencer.com)

### **Theme 11: Commercial**

Consumers in the US appeared to be more aware of when heavy commercialisation was applied to a website. Whilst consumers expected to be sold-to, the heavy use of advertising (pop-ups) and overt sales orientation was disliked and detracted from the experience of the site.

*“Pop ups are annoying”*

*“Pop ups slow computer and make for an unpleasant shopping experience”*

**Good example:** [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)

### **Theme 12: Customer Oriented**

A contributory factor towards a good online experience would appear to be the degree to which the website is oriented towards the customer. This theme links closely with that of ‘personalization’ in that it encourages the consumer to feel that the organisation remembers them and is directing relevant messages and/or products towards them. Elements of good customer orientation include notifications to the customer of products that they may deem relevant and helpful, easy support. This theme was predominant within the US sample.

*“Web pages need to have address and phone number contacts”*

*“If I have concerns or questions I can satisfy these immediately. I hate no phone number forcing me to leave a message”*

**Good examples:** Google, [www.Bank of America.com](http://www.Bank of America.com)

### **Theme 13: Fulfilment**

The online experience was influenced by aspects of the fulfilment for US consumers. This includes the mechanisms for credit card payment, payment options, and delivery methods. This may be a more relevant issue for US consumers due to the wider range of payment and delivery options offered and the degree to which retailers have dis-engaged from the fulfilment process.

*“Timely delivery, planning”*

**Good examples:** [www.PSPrint.com](http://www.PSPrint.com), [www.KellerInternational.com](http://www.KellerInternational.com) [www.Cheaptickets.com](http://www.Cheaptickets.com)  
[www.graphicmail.com](http://www.graphicmail.com)

### 6.3. Results: B2B Vs. B2C

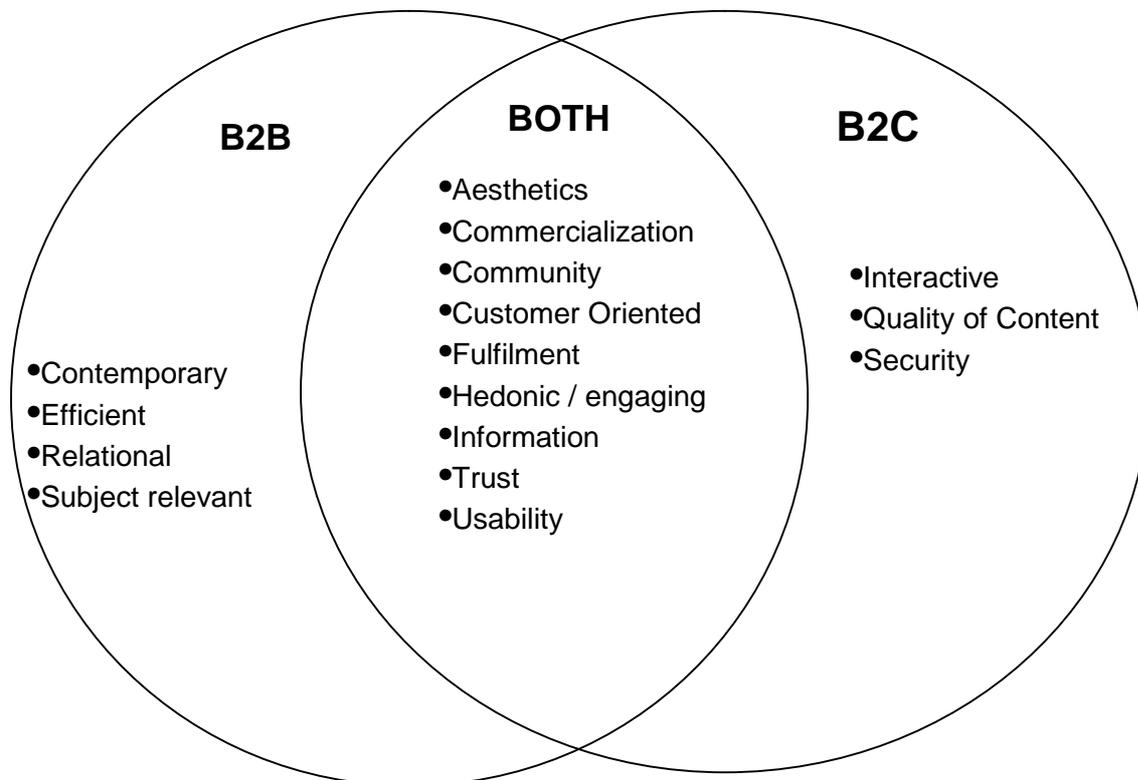


Figure 4: Comparison of B2B and B2C Results

A number of differences emerged from the research team's analysis of interview data. B2B users are consistent in their linkage of good experiences with a contemporary looking website. Respondents were overwhelmingly critical of the majority of B2B sites used as part of their daily work life. Similarly B2B users identified efficiency factors as important to their overall experience. This included fast response times and sites that were designed with their efficient usability in mind. B2B participants identified relational aspects of web sites as being consistent with positive online experience. These included factors such as being remembered by the infrastructure (log-in facilities), and developing a consistent relationship with specific individuals. Finally our B2B sample expected a high degree of subject relevance in their online experience. This was facilitated by more effectively structured websites and stronger site search facilities.

B2C experiences place more emphasis on site interaction than their B2B counterparts. These included more physical interaction with a site (such as larger click through rates). Similarly quality of content and having a personalized experience were cited consistently as contributing towards the optimum online experience. Security also played a much larger role in perceptions of experience than it did for the B2B sample. The research team attributed this to the fact that payment facilities in B2B are more flexible and very rarely involve employees' personal finances.

## 7. Implications for Managers

Our research has identified a range of themes and factors that relate to individuals perceptions of the optimum online customer experience. A number of similarities and differences were identified between European and American customers in both the B2C and B2B sector. There are a number of implications for managers;

1. The themes and factors can act as a checklist for reviewing the optimal experience of their customer base. Whilst this list is heavily context dependent members can now validate these points with an importance / performance matrix for use with their customers. We suggest a sample size of 100 customers for this purpose (for B2C) and 20 customers (for B2B). Both B2C and B2B checklists are contained within the report.
2. The results of a bespoke study could then be used as a benchmarking tool for assessing performance improvements.
3. Similar research can also be conducted profiling competitor performance to assess the comparative experience from a consumer perspective.
4. More specific research could be conducted across customer types. For example, further research could be undertaken on key accounts or across demographic profiles.

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