

ZOMBIES/ PHANTOMS/ SHADOWS

3 THREATS TO YOUR EXPERIENCE INNOVATION INITIATIVES

A BRAND TRANSFORMATION PERSPECTIVE



ZOMBIES/PHANTOMS/SHADOWS 3 Threats to Your Experience Innovation Initiatives

PERSPECTIVE IN BRIEF:

3 Threats to Your Experience Innovation Initiatives

The problem

Products fail, market leaders topple, sales slump and industries stumble when the corporate view of "the Customer" slips out of touch with reality.

Why this happens

Cognitive science reveals hard-wired aspects of human cognition that lay subtle and often unseen traps for our thinking about customers, markets and our "theory of the business". Three of these traps (prototype effects, reification and inattentional blindness), which we personify as zombie, phantom and shadow segments, represent particularly notable threats.

The solution

Pay attention to cognitive traps that may distort your view of the customer, use personas to exemplify your customer insights and equip yourself with a strategically actionable segmentation model that is purpose built to serve the goal of strategic differentiation.

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We all know that customer experience matters. We know that in order to do a better job with customer experience, we need to create more customer-focused organizations. And to do that, it's obvious we need to understand our customers better. To help us, there's an arsenal of techniques and readily available consultants and experts who specialize in the area of getting inside customers' heads.

We're motivated and committed. We're well resourced. So, what could possibly go wrong? Not to be too apocalyptic, but are

you prepared for zombies? And phantoms and shadows too? The fact is that in mental models of customers, these creatures are all too real. And they're serious threats to your experience innovation initiatives.

To explain further, we'll start by providing some context.

Prototype effects and the "theory of the business"

In 1994, Peter Drucker published a landmark essay in Harvard Business Review titled The Theory of the Business. Drucker diagnosed a fundamental reason why successful companies stumble and why market leaders get toppled. As he put it, they fall because: "The assumptions on which the organization has been built and is being run no longer fit reality." He argued that integral to any organization's theory of the business are assumptions about markets, about customers and, specifically, about segmentation—the differences between customers that make a difference. Over time, for various reasons, those assumptions can become invalid. And, he recounted how General Motors' (GM) fall from global industry dominance in the late seventies was connected with, and based on, a customer segmentation model that had outlived its usefulness.



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There are several important questions that follow, of which two, in particular, seem critical to understand: First, how is it that a segmentation model could have slipped out of touch with reality? Second, could the same

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thing happen to any organization? We'll take a deeper look at GM's situation in a moment, but first, let's explore these questions by way of a thought experiment.

Picture a Viking. Imagine a Viking living during the dark ages in Northern

Europe, around 1000 AD. Now, we have a basket of precious little kittens—they're so small they don't even have their eyes open yet. We need someone to take care of them. Would you entrust our kittens to the care of your Viking?

We're guessing you just gave an emphatic 'No!' Why is that? You likely imagined a rugged adult male with an apparent proclivity for violence. But, instead of an adult male, you could have just as reasonably pictured an elderly woman, a pre-teen or a young mother. Instead of a warrior, you might have pictured a dairy farmer, fisherman, weaver or merchant. Each of those would likely be more than suitable for taking care of our kittens. Yet, you probably didn't.

What you've just demonstrated to yourself is what cognitive scientists refer to as a "prototype effect," a property of cognition that exerts pressure upon our reasoning. Recall, we told you nothing about the occupational profile, age, gender or tendencies of the Viking towards acts of nurturing or violence. But, in the category we know as Vikings, there is what linguist George Lakoff calls an "idealized cognitive model" or a "prototype" that seems to best represent the category of Viking. And, while this category must logically have contained the full range of ages, genders and behavioral tendencies regarding both nurturing and violence, the Viking that came to mind before you could think about it—was a prototype that influenced your judgment about the care of kittens.

Categories are not inherently bad things; there's lots of experimental evidence to suggest that categories are foundational to our thinking. But, it's helpful to know that wherever we have categories, we are likely to find prototype effects. Some instances of a category strike us as more exemplary, more basic, more representative of the category than others. Because this happens, our reasoning (in this case, regarding the probability of the survival of some cute little kittens) is shaped before we know it is being shaped and by means of a mechanism we don't usually notice.

Returning to our discussion of Drucker and GM, Drucker explained GM's stumble in the car market as follows: "Reality has changed, but the theory of the business has not changed with it." He clarified his observation by pointing to GM's long-standing consumer segmentation model, which was based on income—suggesting that income was no longer a strategically relevant way to categorize customers. Drucker proposed that psychographics and lifestyle patterns were the way GM might have anticipated the introduction of the minivan and the compact car—but didn't.

Note the use of the word "categorize" in the paragraph above. We can say with certainty that customer segmentation is a system of categorization. It's also apparent that this categorization does not belong to an objective external reality; it is, like every segmentation model, a mental tool employed to make sense of reality in the context of a strategic purpose. We've experienced together, through the Vikings and kittens example, that categories have prototype effects. We have felt and acknowledged how these prototype effects affect our reasoning, shaping our sense of probability.

Does prototype theory offer a glimpse of insight into the legendary stumble of GM in the seventies—and so many other market leaders who have been toppled since? Is it possible the customer prototypes in the minds of GM executives—the equivalent to your Vikings of a moment ago—were misdirecting the reasoning of GM executives, causing them not to see the strategic insights about customers that were leveraged by Chrysler and by Toyota?

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And, if we adopt that view, what should we call a mental model of the customer that neither conveys nor elicits strategic customer insight and yet is still

influencing decision-making in your organization? What should we call a mental model of the customer that has, over time. become brain-dead and threatens to infect your ability to reason? Would "zombie segment" serve?

ZOMBIE/SEGMENTS

They're long dead, yet still shuffling in your halls.

Zombie segments are vestiges of a strategic perspective that has been rendered less relevant by time. The perspective has not only lost its ability to inspire ideas, it prevents them. Like a zombie, it's both lifeless and a threat to the quality of your ideas, thinking, strategizing and planning.

How does this happen?

Sometimes organizations get segmentation right for a while—and then the situation evolves. Consider this fairly typical scenario: A B2B organization has grown rapidly, rising to a place of prominence in a growing industry, on the basis of a successful product. During this time, the organizational design and distribution system is built outwith a direct sales force targeting high-value complex sales by industry and with distribution partners addressing the needs of lower-volume customers. As the marketing organization becomes more sophisticated, it conducts studies of the customers serviced by the different channels and arrives at a segmentation model for the business that conforms to the design of the distribution channels.

But, do you notice what has taken place? Without necessarily setting out deliberately to do so, the organization has embraced and then reinforced with research effortsa strategic segmentation model based on a categorization of buyers by vertical sector (an index of tangible feature differences) and the volume of their purchasing power.



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So, what's the problem with that, you might ask? The main issue is that, over time, the differences that make a difference between customers can change depending on the stage of industry maturity. Once markets enter a stage where there is greater capacity than demand and where feature differentiation has been all but eliminated by competitive imitation, the differences between customers that make the greatest difference may migrate from more tangible to less tangible dimensions. Correspondingly, the key drivers of value creation may migrate from "upstream" advantages in product features, quality or cost to "downstream" factors such as business model and customer experience innovations that mitigate costs and risks that customers take on in buying the product. Such an evolution could render vertical segmentation less relevant than an alternative categorization of customers based on motivations and attitudes or, in the terminology of Clayton Christensen, "customer jobs".

There are many possible responses to a maturing market: strategically enacting a shift from "product" to "customer" platforms; engaging new network partners and alliances; pursuing untapped markets through disruptive innovation; changing the business model; improving the customer experience; and, most powerfully, executing combinations of these moves. But, if an organization evaluates these options through the lens of a segmentation model optimized for an earlier stage of competition, as was the case with GM, the decisions are likely to leave openings for competitors to pry customers away. And, while this is going on, it can be far from evident that there is a zombie segment at the root of the issue.

And so, for just a moment, think about your own business—and your own customers. Is there any risk that the main dimension upon which your segmentation model differentiates one customer from another is not the dimension that is most strategically relevant in your present and future reality? Is it possible that when your colleagues use the term "customer" that zombie segments are shaping the sense of probability on "what will work," and "what customers will value"? Finally, is it possible that the gains scored by a competitor against you have been misdiagnosed as the function of an advantage in product, price, distribution or promotion when they are actually a function of a more effective model of the customer?

Zombie segments: Forewarned is forearmed.

PHANTOM/SEGMENTS

You're sure you see them. But, they're not really there.

As we all know from movies, people worried about zombies tend to stock up on supplies and ammo. People worried about the influence of subjective biases in building models of the customer tend to stock up on data, assuming that the more data you have, the more objective your knowledge of customers. But, as the movies show us, stockpiling adventures don't always turn out as planned.

The problem of "phantom segments" rests at the intersection of a desire to build segmentation based on "objective" knowledge of customers and a tendency to misrecognize the artifacts of our own imagination for an objective external reality.



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Look at Figure 1. Do you see a white triangle?



We all do. But, the problem is, it's not really there. It only appears to be. Human beings are pattern-building machines—so much so that, given a collection of unrelated phenomena, we instinctively tend to afford status to the whole as a more fundamental reality than the parts that comprise the whole. That's a foundational observation of Gestalt psychology.

The cognitive mechanism at play here is called "reification"—the tendency for our brains to perceive an artifact of imagination as part of an objective external reality. We experience it as "real" but overlook its origin in the mind.

Do you suppose this mechanism might be at play when the theory of the business becomes detached from the reality of customers, their needs, goals, motivations and trends? That certainly seems like a reasonable hypothesis.

A tendency to give high cognitive status to patterns we impose on perceptions may have served some evolutionary purpose, perhaps helping our ancestors to avoid ambush predators despite their camouflage. The business question, though, is how well does this tendency serve us now, in the era of big data?

The phantom menace is not just the fact that we reify patterns and assign them the status of objective reality. It is that we content ourselves with those patterns as sufficient explanations of causality. If we become distracted by the volume, currency and depth of data available to us and become confused about the kind of work we are doing, we overvalue the data we already have and overlook opportunities to build models of the customer that better meet our strategic requirements. What implications might follow? Niraj Dawar points out that this problem can apply in data-driven marketing perspectives that eschew a strategic segmentation model in favor of the "segments of one" model:

In the rush to uncover and target "segments of one," firms will eventually come up against a disquieting reality: that burrowing ever deeper into data about individual transactions eventually yields only short-term tactical advantage and misses one big and inevitable outcome. When every competitor becomes equally good at predicting each customer's next purchase, all of the companies will spend effort and money to capture that purchase.²

The marketing concept of the phantom was first stated, to the best of our knowledge, in *The Innovator's Solution*, a follow up to the popular and influential business book *The Innovator's Dilemma*. As authors Michael Raynor and Clay Christensen put it:

The odds of developing successful new products begin to tumble when managers collectively begin to assume that the customer's world is structured in the same way that the data are aggregated. When managers define market segments along the lines for which data are available rather than the jobs that customers need to get done, it becomes impossible to predict whether a product idea will connect with an important customer job. Using these data to define market segments causes managers to aim innovation at phantom targets.³



² In Dawar, Niraj. (2013-10-15). Tilt: Shifting Your Strategy from Products to Customers (p. 92). Harvard Business Review Press. Kindle Edition

³ Christensen, Clayton M.; Raynor, Michael E. (2003-10-09). The Innovator's Solution: Creating and Sustaining Successful Growth (p. 88). Harvard Business Review Press. Kindle Edition.





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While the focus of the preceding quote is product innovation, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore in *The Experience Economy* have given the world permission to read this passage and substitute the term "experiences" for "products". Indeed, the issue of phantom segments is arguably more pressing for customer experience leaders than product development specialists because, while new products get customer tested before release, customer experience professionals tend to work on live customer experiences in real time. We have torrents of cash register data, web server data, ad network data, social media data, marketing automation data and CRM data. And, we're trying to make use of it to solve important problems like: what attracts new customers and engages them with our brand? What bothers our current customers and makes them churn out? We can trace and predict behavior through data like never before. But, does this deepen our understanding of causality or of mere coincidence? And does the abundance of data make us too complacent about our causal assumptions regarding who our buyers are, and what jobs they seek to fulfill by buying?

To be clear, we're not suggesting companies should set aside their practical desire to collect all easily available data relevant to these important questions. Rather, we're identifying an issue that appears to be trending with the growth in volume and sources of marketing data. When our model of the customer is formed through looking at the data we've got and then inferring the root cause of customer behavior—rather than through a purposebuilt, deep customer insight process—we run the distinct risk of creating phantom segments, much as we created the white triangle.

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What kind of consequences can phantom segments have for businesses? You may recall, as we do, cases of companies across a broad set of industries including telecommunications, IT, computer hardware and software and agribusiness that have:

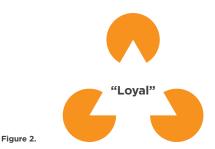
- Lost their advantage as an incumbent when they delayed their reaction to a disruptive technology
- Suffered false starts in new product innovation and customer experience design
- Misunderstood the opportunity for sales growth and, as a result, missed sales forecasts
- Created messaging that backfired and completely undermined the success of a promising technology.



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And think about your own experiences. Have you ever been thanked on the phone for being a loyal customer and thought to yourself: "No, really, I'm not loyal at all. I just look that way to your computer."? These marketers have a reified image of you, akin to what you see in Figure 2.



Think about what phantom segments mean for professionals who want customers to feel a genuine connection and affinity to their product, service and brand. For such people, the task of building customer models is better framed as strategic work that draws upon data, rather than analytical work that draws upon strategy. All models of the customer are artifacts of our imagination. That means they should be subject to change, critical review and evolution in the face of new learning. It is wise to see them for what they are: tools that we have created for a purpose.

And, when our models of the customer are formalized in customer segmentation models, it is wise for us to be aware of their inevitable consequence: the shadows they casts.

SHADOW/SEGMENTS

You can't see them, because they're hiding in plain sight.

We've discussed zombie segments and phantom segments, but our understanding of their impact on customer experience is not complete without speaking about their companion: the "shadow segment".

Once again, to demonstrate where this kind of customer segment comes from, we'll refer to a thought experiment. To fully experience this experiment, we encourage you to watch the video at the link below before reading further.

http://youtu.be/IGQmdoK_ZfY

In this well-known thought experiment, designed and discussed at length by Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris in their book The Invisible Gorilla, the cognitive scientists showed people a video and asked them to count how many times three basketball players wearing white shirts passed a ball. During the video, a woman in a gorilla suit walks into the scene, faces the camera, thumps her chest and walks away. Incredibly, half the viewers in Simon and Chabris' experiment missed her. Even more surprisingly, some people looked right at the gorilla and did not see it. Simons shares that "although 90% of people [were] convinced they would notice the gorilla, only 50% actually [did]."4 This experiment illustrates the principle of inattentional blindness, "the failure to see something obvious while focusing on something else." As Simons explains it: "We consciously see only a small subset of our visual world, and when our attention is focused on one thing, we fail to notice other, unexpected things around us—including those we might want to see... The striking disconnect between what we think will grab our attention and what actually does has important theoretical and practical implications."





A CURVE JUMP STORY:

Disrupt or be disrupted: Embracing a shadow segment.

The context: A global IT leader that had effectively invented a product category was threatened as its competitors introduced incremental innovations. The company's market share was eroding and its reputation declining just as changing customer perceptions of the very nature of the product category were altering the market. The situation called for a deep design revolution in the user experience and the conceptual architecture of the product.

The customer challenge: On one hand, there was internal appetite for a leapfrog design concept. On the other, there was notable resistance to such a design change among advocates of existing customers within the product management organization.

The approach: Consumer ethnography was employed as a foundation for personas built around "stances"—habitual patterns of response to a tension in motivations discovered in the research. The ensuing strategy-development process combined the selection of primary, secondary and anti-personas (used for targeting purposes) with projections of the speed-of-market adoption of each persona.

The action that changed the game: To succeed with building and getting adoption for a leapfrog design, the organization needed to explicitly set aside its consensus-view model of the customer and instead make the primary design target a persona that had occupied a shadow segment.

In the experiment, attention to the basketball passes distracted viewers' attention from the gorilla. In turn, we would ask: Is there a chance that in Drucker's examination of the GM case, income bracket was the equivalent of the basketballs, and the soccer mom was the gorilla? Following that line of thinking, you might ask yourself: Is there a chance that the factors you're using to categorize your customers are serving a role similar to the passing of basketballs? And if so, what are you missing? Might there be customer segments hiding in plain sight? Those kinds of customers exist in what we call shadow segments.

Shadow segments are groups of prospective customers who are united by a strategically actionable commonality, but who remain

invisible to, or obscured to, your organization by virtue of your existing market segmentation model. They are an inevitable outcome of selecting a segmentation model. Inevitable because there is a nearly infinite number of

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things one could notice about customers and the choice to direct attention towards one type of difference is a choice to deflect attention away from another.

For example, if you are a manufacturer of scissors, the difference between left-handed and right-handed people might be a valid basis upon which to segment a market-place. Yet, there may be other differences (for instance, whether the scissors are used for hair, paper or fabric, or where the scissors will be used—salon, kitchen, studio or workshop— or perhaps whether the scissors are primarily functional or decorative) that may also have a bearing on your capacity to create relevant value for different customers.

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Given that shadow segments are inevitable, you might ask whether they're worth worrying about. There are two moments when shadow segments should be a subject of particular concern for market leaders. The presence and influence of a shadow segment should be suspected when competitors have dominated market niches despite a market leader's incumbent advantages. We find Drucker's comment from The Theory of the Business quite interesting in this respect: "Unexpected failure is as much a warning as unexpected success and should be taken as seriously as a 60-year-old man's first 'minor' heart attack." Christensen's observation that disruption usually begins with non-customers also underscores the caution that shadow segments should be treated with particular attention when there is a whiff of disruptive technology or business model innovation in the air. Of course, that tends to be happening more frequently these days.

And so, here is the question that's probably creeping up on you: If thinking in the hallways of your business is being shaped by prototype effects and reified inferences—by zombies and phantoms—then what customers, what trends, what competitively relevant customer insights are obscured in the shadows? That's a great question because it reveals that the real threat to your business is neither zombies nor phantoms nor shadows on their own; it's actually the team of them working together to sabotage your customer experience.

But rest assured, the good news—as in any good zombie movie—is that there's something that can be done.

Avoiding the apocalypse

The threat of zombies, phantoms and shadows to your experience innovation initiatives is real. But in the face of these clear and present dangers, some organizations are clearly making more progress than others on customer experience innovations. Is it possible that these organizations are adopting practices that anticipate these kinds of hazards in their own thinking and processes and seek to proactively protect themselves from them?

What does protecting yourself look like? How do you best support your marketing, sales, product development, innovation and other internal functional processes to avoid falling prey to these threats?

In our view, the short answer is to equip yourself with a strategically actionable segmentation model that is purpose built to serve the goal of strategic differentiation. A relevant and strategically actionable segmentation model is one that can be used to guide decision-making within disparate operational groups and to improve communication between groups focused on different stages in the customer acquisition process. Personas are often employed for this purpose, and this shared view of the customer across portfolio strategy, product development, marketing, sales and service has been identified by Forrester Research and other business thought leaders as a prerequisite for differentiating a brand on the basis of customer experience. (Our exploration above of the cognitive drivers of dysfunction often surrounding segmentation provides a new insight into why personas are effective. Briefly stated, they exert a countervailing cognitive pressure to combat zombies, phantoms and shadows.)



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The longer answer requires a lengthier treatment on the methodology of strategic segmentation, which we won't delve deeply into here. However, what we will share is that, from our perspective, segmentation is inherently strategic—a scientifically informed, but ultimately creative response to the relationship between an organization and the people relevant to it. We do not believe there is a single formula for success. But, our experience leads us to pay particular attention to the success factors listed below. Here are five tips for avoiding the apocalypse:

1. Frame your research problem carefully.

Conduct executive interviews as an input to research design. If a new strategic segmentation model is going to be delivered to the organization by the executive team, it's a very good idea to ground the entire project on an up-to-date assessment of the strategic context as seen through the eyes of the executive team. And, in addition to the executive team, consider who the users of the insight will be, what problems they will need to address and what factors will make it more or less actionable for them.

2. Meet customers in their environment.

The relationship of people to their environment is a relevant part of the research data. Contextual research provides a richer basis for strategic insight. And, because a critical factor in strategic segmentation insight is originality, under most circumstances it would be foolish to attempt to build a strategic segmentation model by means of quantitative research that was not preceded by primary qualitative work and a strategically thoughtful interpretation of that study.

3. Study the problem-space, not the market-space. To paraphrase Drucker, people rarely buy what the company thinks it sells them. If the research focuses too narrowly on the use of a particular product or service, it will be mostly blind to the substitutes and alternatives that are also part of the customer's problem-space. Pav attention to Theodore Levitt's question "What business are you in?" and if the answer sounds too much like the way other people in your industry speak, then broaden the scope of your enquiry. Also, pay attention to non-customers. Drucker argues: "[T]he first signs of fundamental change rarely appear within one's own organization or among one's own customers. Almost always they show up first among one's non customers." Clayton Christensen, commenting on why great companies fail argues that:

...good management was the most powerful reason [the companies] failed to stay atop their industries. Precisely because these firms listened to their customers, invested aggressively in new technologies that would provide their customers more and better products of the sort they wanted, and because they carefully studied market trends and systematically allocated investment capital to innovations that promised the best returns, they lost their positions of leadership.⁵

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4. Look for tensions in motivation.

There can be no innovation without a problem. A tension in motivation is a problem worth solving. When, in the context of the problem-space you are studying, you find one or more tensions in motivationthe tug of contrary desires or an apparent contradiction in the justifications for a customer's behavior or decisions-vou have a basis for categorizing customers in ways that lend themselves to strategic creativity. There are many differences between customers; differences in habitual orientation to a widespread tension in motivation become a powerful predictor of how people will react to experiences and innovations that don't yet exist.

5. Don't stop when the research is finished.

A strategic segmentation model can expand over time with new layers of data and with new heuristics for interpretation and application of the insights. When the research is finished, the real work is just beginning. Change leaders know that structuring strategic segmentation insights and data in ways that can be used by people to solve their problems and do their jobs is absolutely critical to the success of the segmentation model and the survival of the insight it can produce.

...your segmentation model...may be the first critical step...in destabilizing the safe havens that competitors presently enjoy, in preventing those safe havens from becoming the platform for a disruption of your business and in designing experiences for your customers that really connect.

The process of defining and renewing segmentation, keeping it current with present market circumstances and integrating multiple factors (for instance, by layering up behavioral and demographic covariates over attitudinal clusters) in the segmentation framework can reduce the scale and opacity of the shadows. It can refresh your view of the customer, clobbering zombies and chasing off phantoms. Whether you're deliberately establishing your segmentation model for the first time or refreshing one that's become stale, such a strategic initiative may be the first critical step in shaking up your industry, in finding blue oceans, in destabilizing the safe havens that competitors presently enjoy, in preventing those safe havens from becoming the platform for a disruption of your business and in designing experiences for your customers that really connect.

About Curve Jump

Are you looking for help in making the jump to a transformative strategy? Curve Jump™ serves change leaders by discovering strategically actionable insights and using them to help transform branding, customer experience and innovation initiatives. Curve Jump is the experience innovation practice at Quarry, a buyer experience agency with four decades of expertise serving global clients in agribusiness, telecommunications, IT and other highly engineered industries. Discover more at quarry.com/curvejump.

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