Multi-channel banking – A user experience (UX) perspective

Achieving good multi-channel UX is not rocket science. It just requires banks to spend more time understanding the opportunities afforded by good UX rather than the difficulties.

Aditya Chati
As connectivity becomes ubiquitous and Internet interfaces multiply, the traditional service and support ecosystems that created, maintained, and enhanced the functionalities available on the Internet are undergoing a sea change.

The multi-channel UX model

For system designers and builders, in particular, the ability to provide requisite services to clients hinges on their understanding of two basic aspects:

• How is the fundamental business model of their clients changing?
• How can they change their development methodologies and adopt best practices to meet new and changing needs driven by their clients’ dynamic business cycles?

Traditional sales and service channels have been dramatically transformed across multiple industries – including retail, travel, hospitality and banking. From a traditional banking perspective, while the transition from human tellers to physically-located ATMs may have happened in a comparatively gradual manner, the recent extension of service delivery via multiple channels has been fast and disruptive.

Some customer segments have adopted these new digital interaction channels so fast that banks haven’t been able to keep pace with the demand. This demand-supply gap is a critical factor driving banking transformation through multi-channel interaction. Following is a representation of how important multi-channel service delivery is from an organizational perspective and how critical the gaps in such delivery are:

Figure 1: How much does multi-channel delivery matter to an enterprise?
The proliferation of channels and interface devices, and the cross-channel journeys that customers often undertake, have made a significant impact on user experience and by extension, on brand and service perception, as well as on how new user experiences must be designed.

The traditional virtues of brand positioning, consistency and seamlessness of experience have acquired a new importance and urgency, along with newer factors like multi-channel experience mapping, context-maintenance and experience continuity. Importantly, banks (and by extension, UX designers and system engineers) need to realize the consequences of maintaining a presence (24x7 presence, in some cases) on multiple channels and model their offerings with a service (instead of a product) perspective and an extended ‘storefront’ kind of mindset.

Some examples of these include services like instant online transactions, digital wallet-type features, and using micro-blogging as an outreach tool.

Customers are becoming increasingly knowledgeable and demanding, and understanding their needs and exceeding their expectations makes all the difference between success and failure. It is here that user experience design plays an important part in a multi-channel environment.

So what is this customer like? What are the common behavioral traits and customer expectations, in the matter of interactions, that banks must understand? How do you understand customers? And how exactly do we define multi-channel user experience?

At the highest level, multi-channel user experience is the consolidated impression of the organization’s brand, service ethos and service competency that an end user (generally the customer) carries away from an interaction with the various service delivery channels that the organization offers. In subsequent sections, we will break this definition down into its constituent parts with a view to further understand the agents that influence user experience and how user experiences across various channels come together.

The impact on user experience and user experience design

The proliferation of channels and interface devices, and the cross-channel journeys that customers often undertake, have made a significant impact on user experience and by extension, on brand and service perception, as well as on how new user experiences must be designed.

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As mentioned earlier, from a customer's perspective, multi-channel user experience is the aggregated impression that she/he carries away. As per conventional wisdom, multi-channel user experience is often closely aligned with the devices that customers use to interact with their bank. It is the sum of the UX that the customer has while accessing, for instance, the bank’s account management functionality on the Web, or over phone, or at the ATM. These interactions constitute a large part of how customers interact with the bank and are important drivers of user experience. Fundamentally, UX comprises three key aspects:

- Service delivery through multiple channels
- Potential points of interface across multiple channels
- The plotting of the customer journey across these channels
A customer’s journey while using a single service occurs through multiple channels over multiple devices. It is critical for organizations to take cognizance of this fact and design their experiences on that basis, to ensure customers have an optimal user experience. Following are some high-level sketches of cross-channel customer journeys:

**Figure 3: Service touchpoints across channels for a bill payment service**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journey milestones / channels</th>
<th>Enquire about bill payment service</th>
<th>Login</th>
<th>Look up account balance</th>
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**Figure 4: Example of a cross-channel customer journey**

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Multi-channel for banks

From a banking perspective, understanding a customer’s multi-channel experience involves understanding the points of intersection between the service and the channels. This is, however, easier said than done because these intersection points are not constant. Instead, they keep shifting due to environmental factors like bandwidth, geography, and social conditions. For example, in developing economies, there is far greater mobile phone penetration than Internet bandwidth. Typically, we see customers using mobile phones for an array of services like payments, small transactions, and SMS for payments and alerts. These factors, of course, drive the larger service and product packaging, but from a UX perspective, understanding these environmental factors, usage scenarios, and the channels used, results in more enlightened UX design.

In the banking world, customers exhibit changing behavior for various reasons. These changes clearly indicate the adoption by customers of multi-channel access and the willingness of customers to shop around. As a result, multi-channel UX becomes critical in order to attract and retain new customers.

Following are some of the changes in customer behavior:

- Majority of customers (57%) are multi-channel customers
- Majority of customers use two to four banking channels
- Gen Y is driving the increase in number of channels, with 41% using more than five channels
- Majority do not expect to pay fees, with 82% expecting free checking, and even a modest fee could motivate attrition
- Majority of customers (71%) are willing to consolidate their wallets

These behaviors clearly indicate that not only are customers using multiple channels but are very likely to switch from channel to channel. Price is a key factor and customers could switch banks if faced with even modest fees. More importantly, when they switch, customers are very likely to take all their money with them.

(Source: FIS Enterprise Strategy, September 2010)

Figure 5: Changing customer behavior

Adopting direct and self-service channels 63%
Seeking better, more personal service 49%
Price sensitivity, discount seeking 44%
Decreased loyalty or more propensity to switch providers 34%
Customer de-leveraging 29%
Concentrating banking relationships with single provider 22%
Diversifying banking relationships amongst multiple suppliers 17%
Other 17%
Adopting non-traditional suppliers of financial services 15%

Emerging changes in customer behavior

What do you think are the top three emerging changes in customer behavior that will impact your business over the next 1-3 years?

Source: Accenture Customer 2012 Bank Executive Interviews, 2010
Though the end-to-end customer experience is cross-channel, we will limit (for the purposes of this paper) the term ‘user experience’ to the ‘experiences that customers have online on digital media, like the Web and mobile’.

As we have demonstrated through the example of a bill payment transaction, a single banking service manifests itself across various channels. Today's customers are not only able to access the service through non-traditional channels, but are also liable to hop across various channels even as they are completing a single transaction. Unless companies realize this basic fact and proactively aim at designing seamless and cohesive user experiences, their multi-channel user experience will suffer. While designing user experience, companies must consider the existing experiences the customer currently has with both — the brand and various expressions of the brand (like a traditional ‘brick and mortar’ bank branch), which have an established history. Else, their multi-channel user experience is likely to suffer.

The key difference in designing user experiences for all these channels in the cross-channel world is the fact that customers expect a seamless experience, and UX design techniques need to take into account various channels. Design efforts (even for a specific channel) can no longer be undertaken in silos, but need to assess and accommodate the impact of other channels.

The single most important change required is the change in focus — from being task-based to experience-based. UX designers need to transition from merely providing usable access to stand-alone content and functionality to recognizing the fact that content and functionality represent only one aspect of a continuous customer experience that a customer undergoes. Now more than ever, UX designers need to understand the big picture and create designs on that basis. Long-established UX design methodologies, principles, techniques and best practices can still be used to design the new UX, but these need to be tweaked to ensure the customers’ expectations of a seamless experience are met.

Additionally, as the image below shows, old favorites like brand positioning, perception of customer service, and ease of use are back as lead players to address this change in customer behavior. And, in the online world, it is user experience that is the mechanism that delivers all three — brand positioning, perception of customer service, and ease of use!

Figure 6: How to differentiate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keys to differentiation</th>
<th>What are the top three success factors required to differentiate you from other players in the eyes of your customers?</th>
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![Chart showing key differentiators](chart_url)

Source: Accenture Customer 2012 Bank Executive Interviews, 2010
Hallmarks of good multi-channel UX

Before considering how to deliver a good user experience, it’s important to understand what makes good multi-channel UX. The most important feature of multi-channel UX is about enabling customers to hop across channels in a single customer journey. Thus, maintaining a consistent experience across all channels is of paramount importance.

Accordingly, a good UX design will feature the following:

• Consistency and cohesiveness in content and branding across all channels – to achieve this, UX designers need to research, analyze, and understand experiences across all channels even if they are designing for a single one.

• Personalization to customer interests and preferences – a customer-centric view. Now, more than ever, understanding the customer is critical to ensuring you can meet their expectations.

• Interoperability and intuitiveness across channels and devices – understanding the channel and device capabilities. For example, a smartphone has multiple sensors and understanding the capabilities of those sensors will set UX designers free. To cite another example, unless UX designers know a device’s capabilities, they cannot design for contactless payment (‘wave to pay’).

• Understanding usage scenarios and environmental factors – this is another important prerequisite for any UX designer. Consider this usage scenario, what happens if my smartphone user wanders into a bad network area? How will it impact her/his payment transaction?

• Specificity toward a channel or device – UX designers need to act in a device and channel-specific manner and must avoid the temptation to, for instance, shrink Web interfaces to fit a smartphone. However, irrespective of channel or device, it is crucial that the brand’s unique visual attributes always be represented clearly and accurately.

UX design considerations – an example

As we have seen, the unique characteristics inherent in a multi-channel experience means that designers have to take into consideration various factors based on how a specific customer is likely to access specific services or parts of a single service.

Following are some factors that impact design:

• Channel – Internet, social media, email, mobile, phone, print

• Platform – Web, iOS, Android, Mac, Windows

• Device – desktop, laptop, tablet, smartphone, TV, kiosk, telephone

• Nature of mobility while accessing service – car, walking, shopping, in bed, public transport

• User location – home, office, airport, branch

• What time of day – morning, evening, night, late night

• How critical is the service for the user – urgent, relaxed

• Purpose – personal, business

The fundamental UX design for a service and incorporation of usability features is driven by some of the factors mentioned above.

In our earlier example around bill payment, while accounting for the considerations mentioned above, some usability features automatically recommended themselves. The image below depicts how some of the design considerations impact UX design and usability features.

Figure 7: Points to ponder while designing a multi-channel customer journey
From a UX designer’s perspective, nothing has changed – yet everything has changed, to some extent. As mentioned earlier, the fundamentals of good design have not changed. Design decisions of earlier times continue to be right even today. What has really changed are the methods and techniques that help UX designers arrive at good decisions around design. Some of these are brand new techniques, while others are earlier techniques refurbished and turbo-charged to meet new design realities.

Figure 8: The old vs. new conversation in UX design

Traditional UX design vs. the new paradigm

**Personas**

Personas involve the identification of types of potential users of a system and their personification to help in understanding their behavior patterns, attitudes, their lifestyle choices – all factors that drive their online behavior and hence impact user experience design.

**Contextual inquiry**

A contextual inquiry is a user research technique used to understand how users accomplish specific tasks ‘in context’ i.e. Interviewees are interviewed in their context, when doing their tasks, with as little interference from the interviewer as possible.

The aim is to gather as much data as possible from the interviews for later analysis.

**Sitemaps and wireframes**

Sitemaps and wireframes are design artifacts to communicate the various components of the system and the information layouts of representative screens.

**Single channel evaluation**

For system redesign initiatives, UX designers frequently start with evaluations of the existing system’s user experience – to understand UX gaps and painpoints.

**Multi-dimensional usage scenarios**

The whole underpinning of a multi-channel UX is that, as users switch channels, their ‘contexts’ keep changing. There is not one constant environment within which users accomplish the whole task. So, contextual inquiries need to be carried out in the various environments that users access specific functions.

**Cross-channel experience analyses**

In a cross-channel scenario, the totality of various experiences needs to be analyzed to get a clear picture of the gaps and painpoints.

**Experience maps, system models**

In a cross-channel design scenario, initially experience maps of the various channels are first modeled and then individual wireframes for these experience models are then produced.
Navigation design
Traditional navigation design focuses on defining the most usable ways to access various areas of the system and the quickest paths to accomplish tasks.

The old

The new

Navigation design + cross-channel connections
In addition to traditional navigation design, in a multi-channel experience, designers need to understand and provide for users’ potential ‘leaps’ from channel to channel.

Design consistency
Consistent design in all its facets (visual cues, branding, position of controls, navigation, access to tasks etc.) is an important driver of good user experience.

Design consistency + cross-channel continuity
Designers need to ensure consistent design not just within specific individual systems but also across the various channels that users are likely to access to perform various tasks.

Efficient task design
Designers identify specific tasks, understand their components and sub-tasks and devise the most usable and efficient ways for users to accomplish those tasks.

Cross-channel task breakdown
In the multi-channel world, along with identifying the tasks and their sub-tasks, designers also need to understand how tasks are likely to span across various channels and then devise the most usable and efficient ways that allow users to accomplish these tasks.

Platform and resolution optimized designs
All user interfaces (UIs) need to be built such that users accessing them from various platforms (Windows / Mac) and with different screen resolutions have the most optimal UX.

Platform, resolution, channel and device-optimized designs
In addition, designs now need to be optimized to various devices.
As we saw earlier, only 22% of respondents to a survey said that they had a multi-channel strategy. Obviously, this means that there are multiple opportunities for banks to implement true multi-channel capabilities and reap the corresponding benefits. Additionally, this also means that service providers can engage with their customers in various ways – strategic and tactical – and thereby extend their portfolio of offerings, while providing additional value to their customers. Nevertheless, devising and deploying a multi-channel strategy is not easy. Respondents to the same survey also responded on the difficulties in implementing one.

![Figure 8: Implementing a strategy to improve customer experience – How easy is that?](image)

**Figure 9: Roadblocks in driving multi-channel customer experience to the next level**

Methodology note: respondents could check up to three options

![Figure 9: Roadblocks in driving multi-channel customer experience to the next level](image)

Obviously, a true multi-channel strategy comprises multiple elements, user experience being an important component. Let’s take a look at some of the elements that need to be addressed while devising a UX strategy for multiple channels. Importantly, a multi-channel UX strategy needs to address not only user experience design, but also how it is going to be delivered. These strategic constructs are the ones that will ensure the creation of sustained delivery models and frameworks that will continue to deliver effectively into the future.
Drivers of a multi-channel UX strategy

Banks find themselves at various stages of evolution when it comes to multi-channel offerings and user experiences. While the adoption of multi-channel offerings itself is driven by various parameters, including overall product and service roadmap and appetite for investment, there are certain common factors that impact multi-channel user experience. These factors will ultimately differentiate between a good and bad user experience across various channels. Ideally, accounting for these factors at the beginning of a design cycle provides the most value in terms of designing the most optimal user experience and avoiding potentially expensive rework. But using these factors as benchmarks to assess the UX of existing multi-channel offerings also adds a lot of value and provides valuable inputs for future redesign.

Following are some elements from traditional UX design that are highly relevant to multi-channel user experience design.

Given that so much of customer behavior is measurable, UX practitioners need to start by listening to customers. This involves mining social media, using Web analytics, etc. – anything that can deliver insights into what customers are thinking, what they want and how they are likely to behave. This is especially true when banks already have an existing multi-channel offering. For example, if data indicates that customers are repeatedly using their smartphone apps to check account balances, incorporating a ‘push notification’ feature provides for a better user experience.

Only a workable and multi-channel-oriented design methodology will allow for the sustained delivery of a multi-channel user experience. Traditionally, most organizations have used variances of the user-centered methodology to design and deliver UX. This same methodology can now be tailored to address the needs of multi-channel design. For instance, extending traditional user research mechanisms (like personas and contextual inquiries) to include mechanisms that will account for multi-channel user experience will allow for a methodology that accounts for multi-channel UX in a simple and cost-effective way without having to resort to major changes.

Research and design can be expensive. Once conducted, it is extremely important to distill and reuse any conclusions and design decisions coming out of research. Design frameworks and design vocabularies allow UX teams to enshrine and reuse design decisions. These are the biggest drivers of design consistency, feasibility and quick and easy implementations.

Multi-channel means multi-device and multi-access. Without access to the necessary infrastructure, UX teams (or any team) will find it very difficult to deliver anything meaningful. Infrastructure needs are an important component of the multi-channel UX strategy. These include ongoing access to the latest smartphones and tablets based on target markets and connectivity.

Like it or not, an important feature of the multi-channel experience is rapid change. Accordingly, anticipation of – and planning for – new technologies, devices and channels must be included as part of the multi-channel strategy.

From a service provider perspective, customers need to be provided a strategic solution that will continue to address their needs. A delivery model that works will need to address customers’ goals, cost and quality. Let’s assume that many banks decide to adopt a hybrid native app+ browser strategy to deliver core functionality. Typically, this involves limited clearly defined functionality delivered through a native app while the more general banking functionalities are delivered through a browser. This allows for scalability, reduces multiple development cycles and controls costs. To service such clients, vendors need to build a delivery model that includes a balance between skillsets that cover native app development and HTML 5.
The rapid evolution of multi-channel banking and its adoption by customers means that every bank, without exception, will soon have a multi-channel mix that takes advantage of the unique strengths of each one of its channels. The only way a bank can stand out in the multi-channel stampede is by providing a unique, seamless, cost-friendly, and not-so-easily-replicable experience for the customer. This, and only this, will help ensure customer retention, given that customers are cost conscious and don’t mind switching banks at the slightest dissatisfaction.

What next in multi-channel banking?

He has more than thirteen years of experience in designing online products and providing user-centered solutions across domains and is well-versed in all aspects of the UX design process across multiple distribution channels like online and mobile. He has built and managed UX Centers of Excellence (CoE), large usability programs and led multi-skilled, multi-location UX teams.

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- Just what the insurer wanted: a ‘tabletized’ future
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