



A CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE REFLECTION

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As a 20-something university student who prioritizes both personal style and comfort, Uniqlo has somehow found a way to take over my wardrobe and heart. It's cheesy and almost embarrassing but I can guarantee there's no one as loyal to Uniqlo as I am.

Being such a big fan, I want to delve further and explain why Uniqlo's shopping experience is that enjoyable and where it sets itself apart from other competitors. I will go through the multiple stages that make up my shopping experience with Uniqlo and discuss what works and what doesn't.

ABOUT UNIQLO

Uniqlo is a Japanese casual clothing chain with presence in 15 countries including Canada, USA, Singapore, China and Australia. Some keywords to describe Uniqlo clothing are modern, classic, minimal, basic, high quality, innovative and affordable. What makes Uniqlo stand out from retailers like Gap, H&M and J Crew is its inventive apparel lines such as HEATTECH, AIRism, UV Cut and Miracle Air jeans.

A CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAP

Before diving deeper, I believe choosing a specific instance to visualize my journey as an Uniqlo customer would help us understand our thought process as consumers and how a brand can communicate with us. The overall picture allows us to see the connections when we break down and discuss the pieces that engage customers to Uniqlo.

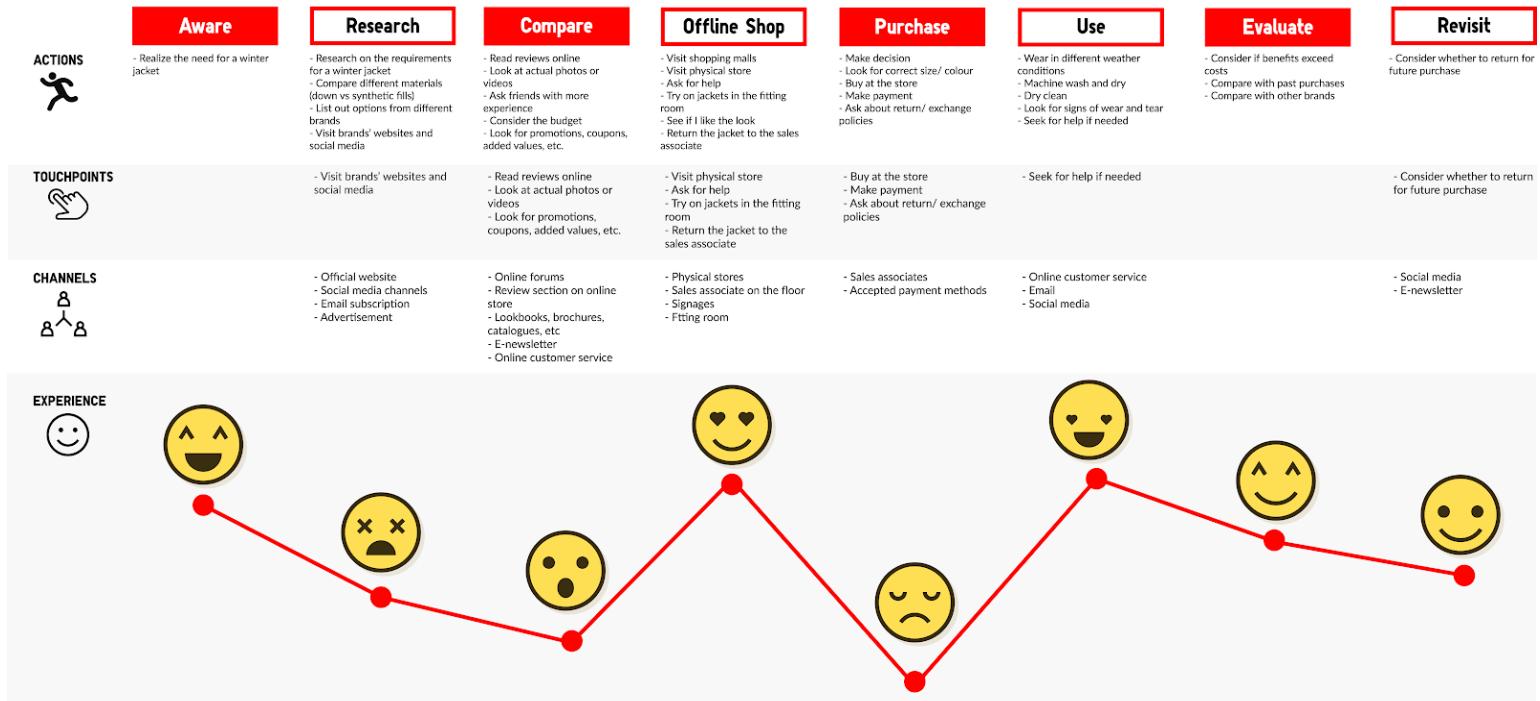
SCENARIO:

It's my first winter in Canada. Previously in Singapore where I lived for the last 7 years, the weather was always either hot and humid or hot and rainy. It suffices to say, I was in dire need of a heavy-duty winter jacket and I wasn't entirely sure about what I need.

GOALS:

- To purchase a winter jacket that is warm and within a reasonable price point
- To purchase a jacket that is comfortable, functional, versatile and good-looking
- To be happy with my purchase in the long term

CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAP



Visit goo.gl/qK37Ll to access the customer journey map in full size.

WHY UNIQLO IS WINNING?

I. STAYING TRUE TO CORE PRINCIPLES

Uniqlo's vision is simple, to be the number 1 clothes retailer in the world by providing the best customer service experience. Its mission is to encourage the world to dress casually by providing accessible prices, superior quality and versatile clothing. At the core, its philosophy banks on the concept LifeWear, which encompasses simplicity, quality and longevity. As a customer, it's clear to see that Uniqlo hasn't deviated from its vision. Instead of conducting researches to find the latest fashion trends or copying looks off of the runway, Uniqlo's R&D team focuses on creating 'life-enhancing' clothing staples that are accessible to everyone. As the result, Uniqlo is able to differentiate itself from competitors and create its unique selling points.

UNIQLO CEO Tadashi Yanai says:

"We don't chase trends. People mistakenly say that Uniqlo is a fast-fashion brand. We're not. We are about clothing that's made for everyone."

Source: <http://www.businessinsider.com/uniqlos-success-story-2012-10>

Looking from a customer's perspective, Uniqlo's business strategies build trust and loyalty to the brand. As a customer, its designs and aesthetics fit my lifestyle and personal style. I know I can always trust Uniqlo to find clothes that suit my taste whenever I choose to shop. This is unlike to other retailers, where it depends heavily on trends. For example, just last year when I was looking

for a business casual top for an upcoming internship job interview. The trip to Zara, a clothing retailer, left me confused and baffled. It turns out that the latest trend then was cutouts at weird places and unnecessary and nonfunctional ruffles. In contrast, I was able to find what I needed in Uniqlo within minutes of shopping.

2. LOCALIZED APPROACH

Having shopped at Uniqlo in both Singapore and Toronto, I'm able to compare my experiences in both countries. The reason why Uniqlo can succeed in different region markets is because it understands the differences in our cultures and lifestyle norms. It tailors its approaches and strategies to adapt to our expectations. For instance, Uniqlo has different websites and social media channels for different country markets. In countries like UK or Canada, Facebook and Instagram are the main platforms Uniqlo engages its customers. However in China, where Facebook is banned, Weibo is the main social media channel.

In Singapore, where it's hot and humid year round, AIRism and UV Cut product lines are featured heavily in store while a modest collection of HEATTECH line and down jackets is displayed at the end of the year to cater to tourists and travellers. On the other hand, winter clothing and HEATTECH line take over the majority of the Toronto branch in the fall and winter time.

It's also interesting to see how Uniqlo adapts to local sale cycles. In Singapore, the biggest sale event called the Great Singapore Sale happens every June/July. This would also be the time when I stock up on my Uniqlo essentials. In Canada, I observed that sale events usually occur during the holiday season when gifting and receiving sentiment is at all time high.

Staying true to its principle to produce clothes for everyone, Uniqlo collaborates with UK designer Hana Tajima to bring hijabs and fashionable, modest clothing to Muslim women in Canada, US, UK, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, where a significant population of Muslims are currently residing. Being adaptable to cultural practices and expectations explains Uniqlo's success in different markets.

3. EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE

Going back to the customer journey map, we can see that the touchpoints are the important interactions between a brand and its customers. Channels are mediums used to engage customers and these are what make or break customer satisfaction. Knowing this, Uniqlo has utilized these channels, turning them into its assets:

a. Channel: Physical Store Environment

I can honestly spend hours shopping inside an Uniqlo physical store. Brightly-lit, wide-open aisles, neatly-stacked display shelves and logically-planned floor, what's not to like about Uniqlo store? Regardless of locations, I've always found my visits to Uniqlo pleasant and enjoyable. If you have visited a Forever 21 before, you know what I mean when I said the difference is night and day.



A picture is worth a thousand words. Left is Uniqlo, right is Forever 21. It's not uncommon to feel overwhelmed when shopping at Forever 21. Garments are often left disheveled or misplaced. Photos are submitted by Yelp user Wen-Ju C and Tj M. respectively.

At Uniqlo, I can leisurely walk around and browse the merchandise without feeling like my personal space is invaded. Everything is folded neatly and there's always plenty of space for multiple shoppers to look at the same product. In addition to a price tag on each article of clothing, shelves and tables are labeled appropriately at eye level so shoppers are informed about the prices and sizing chart. Despite being spacious, important signages are always in shoppers' field of vision. There's no pointless walking around when the cash register and fitting rooms are placed at strategic corners.

In addition to creating the best environment for offline shopping experience, Uniqlo ensures its brick-and-mortar locations are as accessible to shoppers with disabilities as possible. Uniqlo's floorplan is stepless with ample space for wheelchairs to navigate. Additionally, "service animals welcome" signs are displayed to inform customers with disabilities and to raise awareness in general.

b. Channel: Team of Sales Associates

UNIQLO Japan upholds "Three Promises" to its customers. The staff review them together every day to ensure that the company maintains an on-site, customers-first approach in everything it does.

UNIQLO will always:

- 1) Keep the sales floor clean**
- 2) Keep advertised items in stock**
- 3) Accept returns and exchanges within three months of purchase***

Source: <http://www.fastretailing.com/eng/sustainability/customer/satisfaction.html>

What makes Uniqlo different is how its retail staff go above and beyond to provide the best shopping experience. The moment a shopper steps into the store, a sales associate would welcome them with the cheery phrase "Welcome to Uniqlo!". At Uniqlo, there's no avoiding the shoppers' eye contacts, no relentlessly following the shoppers until they leave or buy something. Although the team on the floor is always busy maintaining the optimal shopping environment, they are just as diligent to check up on shoppers occasionally to see if they need any help. I was never left alone to

dig through the shelves to find what I want in my size. Even at the fitting rooms, there are call buttons in case shoppers need assistance and the staff is always attentive and helpful. Small details like receiving and handing out cards and receipts with both hands, being apologetic to shoppers who have to wait or being gracious and friendly to shoppers make all the difference. It shows how much training Uniqlo sale associates have to go through to offer impeccable and consistent customer service.

c. Channel: Social Media

Another factor that adds to Uniqlo's customer experience is its social media management. Instead of spamming the feed with photos of its products and unrelated articles, Uniqlo features important announcements, lookbooks, collection release dates and most importantly, promotions on its platforms. Personally, the exclusive offers are what convinced me to follow Uniqlo on social media.

As a social media user, I prefer to follow the people I actually know instead of following brands, celebrities and influencers. Personally, I'm more interested in connecting with people I care about and seeing glimpses of their daily lives. However, I made an exception for Uniqlo. At first, I thought it was because of the sales notices. Now that I think about it, I believe the bigger reason is how its campaigns and lookbooks always come off as authentic and genuine to me. Instead of putting glamorous models in artificial sets, Uniqlo shows real people doing real things. It's simple yet elegant. It's real and relatable. Instead of making me feel its ideals are unattainable, Uniqlo shows me it cares about its customers' lives. These personal touches humanize our transactions and meaningfully engage me as an audience.



Uniqlo Instagram features diversity and people doing people things.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

1. ONLINE SHOPPING IN CANADA

Currently, the biggest hindering block that weakens Uniqlo's customer experience in Canada is the lack of e-commerce. Given how big the Canada market is, there's only 4 physical branches in the entire country. While I understand that Uniqlo is being cautious in Canada, the lack of online shopping really frustrates me as a loyal customer who lives far from Toronto. Looking at the social media channels, my sentiment is shared by many customers as well. When I approached Uniqlo Canada regarding online shopping, they responded that the online store is currently under development. Considering its vision and mission, I feel that its online store should have been launched earlier. I can only imagine the profit lost to other competitors who offer online shopping.

2. SEAMLESS ACROSS CHANNELS

On the rare occasions when I travel to Toronto, I tend to browse Uniqlo's online channels to look at its new arrivals. I wish its catalogue was more interconnected across the channels. For example, I'd see a shirt on Instagram. If I want to look at it at other angles or find out if there are other colour options, I'd have to go to the official website and search for it myself. And there might be a chance where the official website is not updated and the shirt I'm looking for doesn't exist on the website. Moreover, there's no way of knowing if the shirt is available in store. I just have to try my luck at the physical store itself. I foresee this issue continuing when Uniqlo launches its online store. As a customer, I expect to be offered the same products available in physical locations online and even more. This can be solved if Uniqlo social media managers include a direct link so customers can find out more about the product. Even better, when I browse the online catalogue on the website, I'd like to find out if the shirt in my size and my preferred colour is available at certain locations.

Personal biases aside, it was hard for me to find faults in Uniqlo, and rightfully so. The lack of online shopping in Canada is a huge one but it's currently being rectified. Soon, we'll be able to access Uniqlo clothes online. As for the issue of interconnectedness across channels, it's very much relevant to other retailers as well. To stay ahead, Uniqlo has to cover all their bases to deliver the best experience possible to customers.