

Online purchasing process

How can Sitòfono be used in a purchasing process to improve selling performances of an e-Commerce site?

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Internet is a very competitive environment. A user who wants to make a purchase on the net will come across lots of information and a vast **choice**. Thousands of online “shops” offer the same product and a lot of very similar products, but with different prices and features. How can you disentangle the web of information to make the best choice? What will make you choose one product instead of another, this or that online “shop”?

To better understand the complexity of the problem, let’s look at an example: a consumer goes shopping for a digital camera. There are various reasons why he will go to one or another shop in his town or area. He can go to a large electronic store, where there is no problem parking and where he is sure to find a satisfactory digital camera, if he is not too demanding. Otherwise, for a more careful choice, he can go to two or three specialist shops, which takes more time, because he wants to make an informed decision, **asking shopkeepers questions** and checking the **best price**. He may even go to both the large store and the specialist shops, with the sole purpose of getting the best price, not bothering too much about the rest.

However, there is a common element in all the situations described above: ninety per cent of the time the consumer will ask the shop assistant questions. Perhaps in the specialist shops he will ask for a detailed explanation of some of the functions described on the box. If he is more experienced he may wish to understand why there is one price instead of another for the different cameras he considers.

In short, what these examples have in common is the **human contact** between the potential customer and the sales agent.

Usually the consumer will look for the product in a limited number of shops.

But what happens on the Internet? A *Google* search can produce thousands of results and it sometimes gives you an online service comparing products/shops with hundreds, if not thousands of options.

What criteria will the user choose? What makes the difference? How can one “shop” stand out from the rest?

The following paragraphs will explain the buying process dynamics and how **Sitòfono** can enormously improve a site’s selling performances and “*hold on to*” visitors, turning them into satisfied, paying customers.



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THE PURCHASING PROCESS PHASES

There are several purchasing process classifications: by changing the point of view and the approach, it becomes a selling process. In this phase we will consider a specific documented purchasing process, elaborated by Kotler.

The purchase is articulated in 5 phases, plus a sixth concerning post sales:

1. **Unawareness**
2. **Awareness**
3. **Search**
4. **Assessment**
5. **Purchase**
6. **Post-purchase assessment**

UNWARENESS

The potential customer is not aware of his role. He still does not know he has a need to satisfy. This behaviour can often be seen in the purchase of clothing and hi-tech products. Every year we think **we need that** item of clothing or **can't do without a satellite navigator**. This is true in the B2B environment too, if we take as an example the need to promote the online business; an e-commerce site, alone, is not enough, it has to be promoted too. Everybody knows this now, but they didn't at first.

To induce a purchase, someone or something has to suggest to the potential customer that he needs that product/service. The potential customer has to be made aware of his need.

For this purpose, *online marketing* uses advertising banners, PR, link exchanges, blogs and tools which are increasingly more sophisticated and powerful.

AWARENESS

The consumer becomes aware of his role. He realises that a specific product/service could be useful and starts to understand its utility, persuading himself that the purchase of that product/service could benefit him.

In this phase, **it is fundamental that the seller can be found**, and that he can provide an image of the need and how it can be satisfied by his product/service. Be careful! This is not the time to list the product's features. The potential customer still has to officially recognise his need. He is still at an emotional stage.

In *online marketing* some website sections are used to create awareness, through the company blog, etc. It is important to measure the site's effectiveness by looking at the visitors statistical data, checking the length of the visit and the pages viewed. The product/service Search phase then follows.



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SEARCH

Now, the “conscious” customer looks actively for the product and starts an **information-gathering** phase. As always, the first impression matters a lot. That’s why it is important to provide a strong and clear image of your product. The potential customer must be kept as close as possible to the “shop window” and must be put in a position to assess any information you want to transmit. Sometimes, especially if the customer does not know the product well (i.e. Which satellite navigator is the best? Which features of a digital camera he has to look for to understand which is the best?), a list of the product’s features on the site is not enough. The customer may need precise information in response to his specific question which, in a normal shop, he would ask the clerk/sales agent.

Be careful! “The customer” does not exist yet, it is only a convenient but not accurate idealization. A further step consists in establishing several customer typologies, each with a different need or a specific wish to be satisfied, each belonging to different cultural and social backgrounds. This, together with age and income, will help to further refine the analysis later. This phase is called **segmentation**. The key to success is being good at attracting potential customers and putting them on the right path to keep them interested.

In *online marketing* it is very important to know how to encourage interested people to discover your product. That is why it is essential to have a good position on search engines, create specific informative paths and keep the visitors traffic permanently under control.

By checking the “*bounce rate*” and the losses or the deviations along the “*funnel*” it is easy to understand what can be modified to improve the effectiveness of your site. Sometimes visitors get distracted or cannot understand the message immediately, or simply get confused. You cannot afford to “lose” this visitor, you must keep his interest and attention level high.

This is where Sitòfono comes into play, offering “reassurance” and support to complete the information gathered about a product. By placing Sitòfono on your home page or on the pages which come up as a result of searches done through the site you can “hold on to” the customer if he looks for more information or is not satisfied with the search. Indeed, it is here that many potential customers are lost. The visitor simply changes over to another site which suggests the same kind of product but better satisfies his information need, through *Google* or other tools. Using Sitòfono instead, the customer will find an immediate answer to his specific, personal question. This is a determining factor which could persuade him to buy that particular product/service.

ASSESSMENT AND SELECTION

The potential customer now has all the essential elements to decide what to buy, but you cannot expect him to purchase immediately. Product assessment will probably occur in different steps, because the acquiring of elements on which a choice is based is an on-going process.

¹ *Bounce rate*: bounce back or defection rate. *Funnel*: typical path of a visitor through a site, all conducted by the same site maker.



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Sometimes the potential customer **does not have much time** so finding and providing the information required in real time is important. For this reason **the use of the telephone is fundamental** since it helps us to understand the customer's real needs and give him the answers he is looking for, without delay. **The sales agent has to capture** his attention and turn him into a qualified sales lead.

In online marketing, it is important to evaluate the return times of visitors. How often does he visit your site? After how long does he come back to your site? Make sure visitors remember you!

Online support tools, such as chat or click-to-call, help the sales lead to clarify his ideas and get a clearer image of your product and your company.

Market analysis confirms that the contribution of human operators during this phase significantly increases online purchase rates.

One of the risks you run in this phase is that of overloading the customer with information. A customer may also get to a specific website (through a search engine, advertising, banners, etc.) but does not find the product he is looking for. This often happens if he uses the wrong search keys on internet. In this case **human support is vital** (just think about when you look for a product on a shelf but you can't find it... it is probably on another shelf and a shop assistance's intervention helps solve the problem).

A recent article in the New York Times underlined how "human" contribution during the sales process still has a fundamental importance in raising the success rate:

"Any online selling company has been warned: get ready to invest in traditional "human" customer care, otherwise be prepared to lose customers"

In this phase Sitòfono comes into action as a "search help" and support element to complete the information gathering process about a product. By placing Sitòfono on your home page or on the pages which come up as a result of searches done through the site you can "hold on to" the customer if he looks for more information or is not satisfied with the search. Indeed, it is here that many potential customers are lost. The visitor simply changes over to another site which suggests the same kind of product but better satisfies his information need, through *Google* or other tools. Sitòfono, puts the customer in touch with the company quickly, without shutting down the web page and with no risk of "losing" the customer's attention. It therefore guarantees the human contact which is fundamental to successfully conclude the selling process for the company. It offers the customer reassuring "human support", which is often the psychological factor which seals the purchase.

PURCHASE

The customer has decided: **he wants to make the purchase. Making the purchase easier** is the main objective in the selling process. It is here you risk more, but you can also finally achieve your goal (or rather most of your goal, as we will see later in the post-sales phase). The customer has to know he can pay as he prefers. The purchasing process should be as easy as possible and should not require any particular attention or specific skills, to be completed.



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Even the use of elaborate language can be damaging.

The e-commerce site should be conceived to simplify the selection of the product/service the customer is buying. The search, selection, review and payment procedure must be simple, guided and quick to complete. However it is done, it must allow the customer to go back and start the procedure again at a later time.

The data request (personal, payment, contact) should be limited and essential and all the information, potentially useful for a post sales analysis, should not interfere with the main process. This information can be requested later.

In this phase doubts or indecision may arise: **involving and helping the customer in this phase is of fundamental importance.**

In a "normal" shop the assistant has to facilitate and complete the purchase in a "natural" way: reassuring the customer and giving him all the extra information he may need when he needs it, guiding the customer to his final choice.

In this phase Sitòfono comes into action as a "support element to conclude the transaction". Placing Sitòfono inside the product data sheet and encouraging its usage when something is not clear or when the customer has problems and/or has to face a mistake (i.e. wrong credit card number), stops the customer from going to another site where the product information is more complete, so he can conclude the purchase. Sitòfono encourages the customer to act immediately and he will be rewarded with instant confirmation from those behind the scenes of the site. It is like human intervention in a real shop, always possible, always present. In the online shop, Sitòfono assures that kind of direct, reassuring, conclusive "human" contact.

POST SALES

The customer has purchased the product/service and all is well that ends well

But it is not the end, on the contrary now it is possible to close the sales phases circle and **unleash a chain reaction**. Satisfied customers are inclined to speak well of their purchase: they are happy they have found a bargain and they will recommend you to their friends and relatives or they will simply speak about you and your product. In this way your customers' friends and relatives skip the first, the second and hopefully the third phase of the purchasing process, and will choose you hands down.

Maybe they will make this choice because you have proved you can offer to the customer better support and "human presence" than others!

Make sure that your **customer assistance** is first class and don't forget that "The customer is always right". For this reason, the use of CRM tools (*Customer Relationship Management*) has a key role in the management of any business.

Internet evolves towards an all-encompassing collaborative approach: the number of theme sites which collect consumers and users opinion for several product categories is growing, as is their use.

Do not ignore the communicative power of these tools. Being active in the dialogue with your actual and potential customers is essential for company success.



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In this phase Sitòfono “reassures the customer that the seller is always ready to give support for the purchased product”. Placing Sitòfono inside the buyer’s personal area, perhaps beside any products purchased, gives the customer the assurance that the seller will not abandon him after the purchase and instead will give him the support needed for any doubt or problem he may have. It may even persuade him to make other purchases. Thus the customer becomes in turn a new and further sales channel, because he found the product he was looking for easily, as well as help in all phases of his search in a precise, quick, simple way. In a really “human” way! And all with the help of a unique tool: Sitòfono!