

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT: ALTUITION'S CUSTOMER JOURNEY ESPE

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Abstract: *Scholars in the field of Customer Experience Management (CEM) propagate the application of the customer journey method in the relevant domain. It is therefore not surprising that several scientists and especially consultancy firms have been developing their own customer journey approach that aims to meet the objective of CEM, i.e. a better and optimal customer experience. However, most of the approaches show one or more shortcomings in achieving that objective. Altuition, on the other hand, has succeeded in developing a proven approach, the Customer Journey ESPE, which is based on practical experience and project executions gained over several years. This article aims to demonstrate and prove that claim.*

Key Words: *Customer Experience Management, Customer Journey, Customer Journey ESPE, Evidence-based Management*

1. INTRODUCTION

Customer Experience Management (CEM) has been on the rise in recent years in the marketing sciences, the service sciences and their practice [1], [2]. More and more organizations are recognizing that sustainable success requires more than delivering the right product or service on time for the agreed price. They explicitly look for possibilities to make an emotional connection with the customer and want to understand what the customer 'experiences' in his contact with the organization. Customer experience (CX), i.e. the functional and emotional benefits the customer experiences in his interactions with a firm or brand has replaced customer satisfaction [3]. The customer journey, an essential part of CEM [4] offers that opportunity and enables firms to look at their own services from the customer's perspective and to improve them in a targeted manner. The customer journey has therefore been discovered and embraced by many organizations in many commercial, non-commercial and public services organizations, that make full use of the customer journey as an analysis and improvement method.

Although much attention has been paid to CEM and customer journeys in both academia and practice, both academics and practitioners still search for or attempt to

develop the best way to model and improve the consumer decision journey [5]. Altuition – a Netherlands-based leading consultancy on CEM, see www.altuition.nl – was one of the first parties to introduce the Customer Journey methodology (ESPE™) in the Dutch market and has executed over several hundreds of projects in the past 15 years for large, medium and smaller companies in various sectors, gaining not just experience in the field, but also succeeding with a design science approach [6] in developing an evidence-based answer to this apparent lack of a suitable method.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the Altuition's Customer Journey ESPE in the context of the practical need for a robust and comprehensive approach to effectively deploy CEM. We start with a literature review of the importance of the customer journey in CEM, followed by the identification of four main shortcomings of most known approaches in achieving CEM objectives. The next section describes the Altuition Customer Journey ESPE. We then discuss the way this approach addresses the shortcomings in current approaches and elaborate on the evidence to proclaim it as evidence-based management. We conclude with limitations and managerial impact.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

In this section we review literature on the importance a customer journey approach in achieving CEM objectives and evaluate existing approaches that have been published in academia on the extent to which they achieve these intended goals. To this end, we first describe what CX and CEM mean in management science and what it is intended to achieve. The application of the customer journey technique is then explained in that light. Then, using systematic literature studies by other authors, we examine the shortcomings of existing and published methods in the context of CEM.

2.1. Customer Experience and Customer Experience Management

Customer experience (CX) is a totality of cognitive, affective, sensory, and behavioral consumer responses during all stages of the consumption process including pre-purchase, consumption, and post-purchase stages, like

use and relating to the customer [2]. Pine and Gilmore describe the experience economy as the next level after commodities, goods, and services with memorable events as the final business product [7]. Dimensions of customer experience include senses, emotions, feelings, perceptions, cognitive evaluations, involvement, memories, as well as spiritual components, and behavioral intentions [2][8]. Customer service, a brand's ethical ideals and the shopping environment are examples of factors that affect a customer's experience. Understanding and effectively developing a positive customer experience has become a staple within businesses and brands to combat growing competition. A brand that can provide these gains a competitive advantage over its competition [9].

The total, overall customer experience must be considered [8]. The development of a positive customer experience is important as it increases the chances of a customer to make continued purchases and develops brand loyalty [2]. Brand loyalty can turn customers into advocates, resulting in a long-term relationship between both parties. how emotions build experiences in interactive society. Emotions play an essential role in experiences and are essential both in offline and online environments [10].

Customer experience management (CEM) is the process that companies use to oversee and track all interactions with a customer during their relationship. This involves the strategy of building around the needs of individual customers and to manage a customer's cross-channel exposure, interaction and transaction with a company, product, brand or service [3][11]. CEM has been recognized as the future of the customer service and sales industry. The aim of CEM is to optimize the customer experience by gaining the loyalty of the current customers in a multi-channel environment and ensuring they are completely satisfied. It's also to create advocates of their current customers with potential customers as a word-of-mouth form of marketing [12].

2.2. Customer Journey

Customer experience is not limited to the purchase alone. It includes all activities that may influence a customer's experience with a brand [9]. Customer experience is therefore often described as the "cumulative impact of multiple touchpoints" over the course of a customer's interaction with an organization [8]. Applying CEM successfully therefore requires the use of the customer journey approach or method, a now embedded metaphor for the method [4]. Customer Journey is an analysis technique that visualizes the changing expectations and perceptions of the customer during the different phases of the (omnichannel) sales, customer service or service process. The term addresses the processual and experiential aspects of service processes as seen from the customer viewpoint [13]. This enables organizations to visualize the latent expectations, uncertainties and emotions of a customer and plot them together in one graph. The results are then mirrored with the actual communication and process from within the organization: where are we doing well, where can we do better? With these insights, effective improvements can be made in the propositions, communication and contact

moments and customer processes. The results can also be used to focus on a digital transformation. The Customer Journey has therefore been discovered and embraced by many organizations in many industries, such as banking [14], construction [15], energy [16], bookshops [17], hospitality [18], ICT [19], tourism [20], healthcare [21] and government [22].

Typically, to make the best use of CEM and ensure its accuracy, the customer journey must be viewed from the actual perspective of customers, not the business or organization [8]. Understanding the customer's journey means also to understand the expectations a customer has before starting the journey and the customer assessment of the journey, which is done by the customer when the journey is over [8].

The customer journey mapping approach for service design was first introduced in the late 1990s. It has subsequently become one of the most widely used tools for service design and has been utilized as a tool for visualizing intangible services. A customer journey map shows the story of the customer's experience. It not only identifies key interactions that the customer has with the organization, but it also brings the user's feelings, motivations, and questions for each of the touchpoints. Finally, a customer journey map has the objective of teaching organizations more about their customers. To map a customer journey is important to consider the company's customers (buyer persona and user persona), the customer journey's time frame, channels (telephone, email, in-app messages, social media, forums, recommendations), first actions (problem acknowledgment), and last actions (recommendations or subscription renewal).

Customer journey maps consider people's mental models (how things should behave), the flow of interactions, and possible touchpoints. They may combine user profiles, scenarios, and user flows; and reflect the thought patterns, processes, considerations, paths, and experiences that people go through in their daily lives. Mapping the customer journey helps organizations understand how prospects and customers use the various channels and touchpoints, how the organization is perceived, and how the organization would like its customers and prospects' experiences to be. By understanding the latter, it is possible to design an optimal experience that meets the expectations of major customer groups, achieves competitive advantage, and supports the attainment of desired customer experience objectives [13].

2.3. Shortcomings in existing customer journey approaches

More and more practitioners nowadays are offering Customer Journeys. Following this trend, academic interest in the application has also increased. It is therefore inevitable that literature studies have also started to focus on the value in these practical methods and literature [5], [13]. Although many articles discuss customer journey mapping (CJM), both academics and practitioners still question the best ways to model the consumer decision journey. It seems that none of the published approaches concrete, comprehensive or sufficiently applicable. This

is due to some serious shortcomings associated with these contemporary – academically published – methods.

Firstly, as indicated in the definition of customer experience, it is mainly about evoking the most desirable emotions in the customer during his customer journey. Emotions therefore play an important role in the customer experience [10], [23]. Emotions drive human behavior [24]–[26]. Most applications or approaches seem to focus on the functional experience and not on the emotional experience [8]. Asbjørn and Knut [13], for example, found only one publication in which, in addition to the functional, also the emotions experienced during this were mapped: Crosier and Handford [27] illustrate customer experience in terms of “emotional response” scores as an integrated part of the customer journey visualization. Rojas & Quiñones found in their review of customer experience measurement the most evaluated CX dimension by firms corresponded to “sensorial” (i.e., functional), while the least evaluated CX dimension was “emotional” [28].

A second shortcoming which is found in most approaches is the focus on the experience at only touchpoints with the organization. For example, Kankainen et al. [29] describe the customer journey as “the process of experiencing service through different touchpoints from the customer’s point of view” (p. 221). Patrício et al. [30] define the customer journey as “a series of touchpoints, involving all activities and events related to the delivery of the service from the customer’s perspective” (p. 182). Zomerdijk and Voss [31] report that case study companies often referred to a series of touchpoints as the customer journey. Rosenbaum, et al. [32] even contend that most customer journey maps are critically flawed. They assume all customers of a particular organization experience the same organizational touchpoints and view these touchpoints as equally important. For a specific customer journey, like the process of buying a product, the whole customer journey consists of different phases, such as search, purchase, consumption and after-sales phases of a product or a service. Those different phases influence CX for that journey and they are not only phases, which are described through touchpoints but also from non-touchpoints [8]. These non-touchpoints or in-between touchpoints are quite risky for a company because there is no any interaction between the customer and the company, so it is difficult to establish a direct influence on customer’s experience. Therefore, a customer journey approach has to provide in mapping and monitoring these non-touchpoints as well as touchpoints. Rawson and Duncan [33] assert that companies that emphasize on touchpoints can create a distorted picture, suggesting that customers are happier with the company than they actually are and diverts attention from the bigger—and more important—picture, the customer’s end-to-end journey. Traditional approaches for addressing customer satisfaction or perceived service quality are often limited in that they only reach out to customers who have completed their goals or onboarding journeys [33]. Thus, the customers’ pain points and root causes of churn may go undetected by the service provider [11]. This “single-channel mindset” of service provisioning is a risky, albeit well known, practice [34].

Thirdly, customers now interact with firms through myriad touchpoints in multiple channels and media, and customer experiences are more social in nature. These changes require firms to integrate multiple business functions, and even external partners, in creating and delivering positive customer experiences [4]. However, in practice we see that, for instance, brand values play an insufficient role in the customer journey and vice versa; we do not see the brand values sufficiently reflected in the services [35]. Not only are brand strategy development and operational marketing and communication development organized separately in many companies, as a result of which brand strategists are, as it were, far removed from the customer, but brand values are insufficiently reflected in the communication with the customer. This problem has only gotten worse with increasing digitization. Because it often involves very similar functional and transactional communication with competitors, it has become more difficult for many service providers to distinguish themselves in this area in terms of their brand. A brand-worthy customer experience will only arise if the brand values are in all contact moments and must therefore be propagated by the staff and the communication specialists, so-called ‘internal branding’. Management lacks an understanding of how to use the customer journey method as a cross-functional, strategic tool that promotes service innovation [32]. That is why we propagate to also look at and design the employee journey in addition to the customer journey. It can help in the training and coaching of staff to translate customer needs and brand values into ‘guiding principles’ that guide staff through all phases of the customer journey.

Applying the customer journey method requires an integral vision and working method. This concerns the coherence and mutual reinforcement of the different elements of the customer journey method: journey mapping, service (re-)design, measurement and management [2]. As it were, the well-known PDCA cycle should apply here. But most academic and practice approaches focused on journey mapping, i.e. describing the customer journey ‘as is’, while neglecting other important steps as monitoring and re-designing the journey. Only few approaches are about designing the service process, but eventually forgetting on monitoring the acquired customer experience in journey mapping and monitoring [29]. A solid customer journey approach should contain, as noted earlier, all phases of service design, including mapping, measurement and management [2].

The implications of such shortcomings, of which one or more can be found in the published approaches, is that the practice does not have an all-encompassing method available to properly apply the customer journey approach. It is therefore forced to extract the best parts from those existing methods and to “link them together” to sort out the desired effects to some extent. But even then the question remains whether the result is effective.

3. ALTUITION'S CUSTOMER JOURNEY ESPE

3.1. About Altuition

Altuition is a SME consultancy founded in 1997, based in the Netherlands, and an expert in CEM and all related aspects. The firm consists of about twenty employed consultants and associates. The firm also partners with international management consultancies, like for instance Olson Zaltman Associates and Strategic Horizons LLP – co-founded by Joseph Pine II [7] – and several national and international scholars in the field of experience management. Although small-sized, Altuition became the Dutch leading Customer Experience Consultancy firm by specializing in innovation and change processes in which the experience of customers, employees and clients is central in both B2C and B2B environments.

3.2. The origins of Customer Journey ESPE

One of the CEM foundations that Altuition, unlike other practitioners in the same field, has embraced is the principle that emotions largely determine human behavior [24]–[26]. The company was the first in the Netherlands to make a distinction between functional experience and emotional experience. Being not the first to adopt the method, Customer Journey was introduced early in 2006 in the Altuition toolbox, using that particular and distinguishing element of “emotional experience”. The first client was a health insurance firm whose intention was to redesign its business processes. Analyzing and adding the emotional component to the journeys was an essential element that distinguished Altuition from other candidates competing for the client-order with the health insurance company.

Since then, Altuition has been developing the customer Journey in more and more projects in the Dutch market at many leading organizations in all industries. Until now experience has been gained in roughly 560 customer journeys, employee journeys or related projects.

From the outset, investments have been made in Emotional Customer Journeys, which are developed together with client teams. By responding to the experience and deep needs of customers and employees, unconscious expectations are regularly exceeded with 9+ experiences that touch emotionally. As a result, the organization in question becomes top-of-mind with its customers and employees, which leads to spontaneous recommendation behavior, loyalty and organic growth. It enables clients to distinguish themselves in a targeted manner and to provide (extra) added value to their customers, where that is hardly possible anymore with a good product and service. The methodology has been expanded in the last few years and is now also widely applied in special applications of the Customer Journey, such as the Employee Journey™, the Patient Journey and the 'brand-worthy' Signature Journey™.



Fig. 1. Customer Journey ESPE components

3.1. The components of Customer Journey ESPE

The Customer Journey ESPE provides the required cohesion and mutual reinforcement of the several elements Journey Mapping, Journey Making (including service design and implementations), Journey Mining (including feedback, voice of the customer programs and analytics) and Journey Management (including the brand, KPI control, 9 + leadership, strategy and governance) See Figure 1.

Customer Journey Mapping is a (process) analysis step that visualizes the changing expectations and perceptions of the customer during the different phases of the (omnichannel) sales, customer service or service process. This enables organizations to visualize the salient and latent expectations, uncertainties and emotions of a customer and literally bring them together in one visual graph. For mapping the unconscious customer experience use is made of, among other things, the ZMET® method [36] and qualitative in-depth interviews with customers.

Emotions are plotted in a graph using a scale that divides the experience in three categories: “insufficient or unsatisfactory” (a score of 6 or less on a 1 tot 10 scale), “satisfactory” (7 to 8) or “excellent” (9 or more), hence the use of “7+” and “9+”- experiences. The results are then mirrored with the actual communication and process from within the organization: where are we doing well, where can we do better? With these insights, effective improvements can be made in the propositions, communication and contact moments and customer processes. Key to these improvements is that not all pains and minor experience have to be improved: focus is on improvements that will matter in the mindset of the customer [37]. The results can also be used to focus on a digital transformation. An example of such a customer journey map is exhibited in Figure 2.

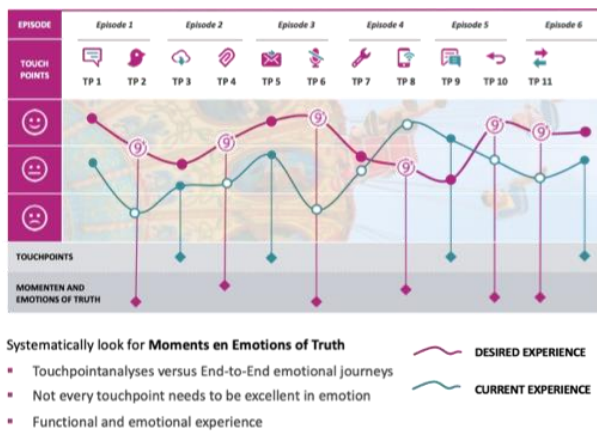


Fig. 2. Customer Journey ESPE map

Customer Journey Making is not only about implementation. It consists of two important parts: first, converting the rich outcomes of a Customer Journey Mapping project into a new 9+ Way of Working, in which management and employees are directly involved and activated, thus initiating organizational change. And secondly, the results of a Customer Journey are converted into new services, experiences and products up to and including completely new service concepts for customers: proposition development. Altuition typically translates this second part into practical small and larger propositions that make the difference in the customer's experience: 9+ Designs.

Altuition organizes this through an agile approach, together with the teams of employees of the client in co-creation. Not just because employees who work with customers daily have good ideas, but also because employees receive immediate emotional feedback about the effect of the intended improvements in customer experience and there is more ownership. This creates a culture of continuous customer improvement. Typical activities in this component are: determination of key insights, defining potential opportunities based on the key insights, design of the associated 9+ concepts and 9+ propositions, co-creation and concept testing of the (breakthrough) propositions in a state-of-the-art environment and business casing.

Customer Journey Mining stands for the process of monitoring, analyzing and reporting Customer Journey data and improvement processes and customer feedback. After all, organizations want to know whether the conceived and implemented 9+ Design concepts actually contribute to a better experience during the customer journey, and thus to the realization of the predetermined objectives. In addition, monitoring, analyzing and reporting the actual (online and offline) customer behavior in the Customer Journey, together with feedback from Voice of the Customer methodologies, can provide useful insights to be able to implement any further improvements. For such customer feedback programs Altuition cooperates with several independent specialized partner organizations, like Underlined (<https://underlined.eu>), CYS (<https://www.cys.group>) and Expoints (<https://expoints.nl>). They are leading in the Netherlands in co-creation with data-driven Customer

Journey Analytics, respectively customer feedback design and monitoring.

Customer Journey Management. Not only in commercial organizations, but also in non-profit organizations in healthcare and education, the Customer Journey is increasingly developing from (just) a 'method' into the central proposition and even into an organizing principle. For this reason, more and more organizations have a need to structure, validate, maintain and innovate Customer Journeys on a continuous basis. Altuition helps these organizations with this. It's about addressing and answering questions like: How do we realize a true customer-centric organizational culture? How do we make the transition from 'knowing' to 'doing'? We know more and more, but what does our customer notice in concrete terms? How do we integrate the Customer Journey way of looking, thinking and acting in our entire organization – whether it works in an agile way? And how do we use this to organize a continuous improvement organization? How do we ensure that we do not lose sight of the customer during our digital transformation and that we can become a 'high tech' and 'high touch' organization? How do we organize Customer Experience in our organization, and where do we invest which responsibility and freedom?

Answering these questions together with the client and organizing the solutions is what Altuition understands with Customer Journey Management. This can result in transforming an entire organization (including the structure and processes) around Customer Journeys, using the customer insights generated by Customer Journeys as the basis for new core propositions of the organization, and the start of using Customer Journeys as a starting point/blueprint/framework for organizational development, fully based on the customer's ideal service concept, in which, in addition to a decently running basic service (7+), a number of moments are built into the service that exceed the customer's expectations (9+). More and more software is being developed to support this activity of Customer Journey Management. To this end, Altuition works together with software developers such as Milkymap and TheyDo, where Altuition takes care of the consultancy.

3.2. The Employee Journey: to an optimal employee experience

Customer Journeys are usually used to map the (functional and emotional) experience of customers/clients/patients. However, the technology is also excellent for gaining more insight into what an organization's own employees experience. Altuition named this variant the Employee Journey. In an Employee Journey Altuition assists organizations to understand the perspective of a (new) employee his or her experiences the workweek (for example: 'a week in the life of a call center employee'). In these times of labor shortages, a common Employee Journey is the so-called Onboarding Journey of new employees. How do they experience (functionally and emotionally) the selection process, hiring, entry into service and the first six months of employment? What is going well – and what could be improved, so that new employees really feel 'at home' in the company? Altuition has also gained extensive experience in executing and

analyzing Employee Journeys, including conducting interviews with (new) employees. Together with its clients, Altuition determines which concrete improvements are possible to achieve an optimal employee experience, and therefore, optimal business results.

4. DISCUSSION

We have observed earlier that existing – academic publications – methods fail in terms of four major shortcomings. The Altuition Customer Journey ESPE, on the other hand, has not yet been reviewed by literature researchers, so it has not yet been noticed that the method actually and adequately avoids or addresses all these shortcomings.

For the first shortcoming - a lack of focus on emotional experience - it has become clear that the entire CEM and Customer Journey approach by Altuition takes the emotional experience as the most important starting point. All actions in the approach are aimed at providing insight into and improving the emotional customer experience, rather than the functional experience. The instruments used herein are mainly aimed at creating insights with regard to that emotional experience.

The second shortcoming - a focus on purely touchpoints - is circumvented by Customer Journey ESPE by looking at the end-to-end journey in accordance with Rawson et al. [33], which also includes non-occurring or non-existent "touchpoints".

As in respect of the third shortcoming, an organizational approach in journey management, Altuition's vision is that real 9+ organizations do not see Customer Experience (CX), Employee Experience (EX) and emotional customer experience as separate projects, but as a means to offer the customer a good service across the organization (with customer satisfaction from 7 to 8 +). In addition, they see it as an instrument and (increasingly also as a) field of expertise to regularly mean something special for the customer and employee (9+).

The fourth and last shortcoming, observed by Følstad and Kvale [13] is that there is lack of detailed descriptions of customer journey proposition or (re-)design approaches, while this is a significant and important characteristic of customer journeys. However, we have shown that the Altuition's Customer Journey ESPE also has this feature in the Customer Journey Making component. It is therefore not only about describing the current experience, but also about redesigning the service to create the desired experience [3].

Our last point of discussion concerns our own observation on Customer Journey ESPE being an evidence-based management solution to CEM. Evidence-based management means translating principles based on best evidence into organizational practices. Through evidence-based management, practicing managers develop into experts who make organizational decisions informed by social science and organizational research moving professional decisions away from personal preference and unsystematic experience toward those based on the best available scientific evidence. Evidence-based management derives principles from research evidence and translates them into practices that solve

organizational problems [38]. The main research principles that the Customer Journey ESPE are based on is the principle that human behavior is driven mainly by emotions and heuristics [24]–[26] and that the most significant emotions through-out time are the most memorable ones [37]. These principles, in a way, are the foundations of Customer Journey ESPE, both in the description of the experience "as is" and the desired experience. In this way, using the method avoids a large amount of data that makes no significant contribution to distinguishing the service from competitors - turning a 6 into a 7 or 8 is not distinctive [39] or is mainly targeted on functionalities.

Actually, we can speak of an evidence-based management design science research (DSR) development in case of Customer Journey ESPE. A requirement of DSR in evidence-based management is that there must be a well-tested solution concept or a generic intervention to solve a generic field problem, tested in the field of its intended use [6]. The Customer Journey ESPE is a generic approach to redesign service processes. The solution concept should then be assessed in terms of its real-world practical use, which is pragmatic validity [40]. The design should consist of synthesis-evaluation iterations to determine how well it solves the problem [6]. In the Altuition approach of customer journey an iteration – coming forth from a previous project – is tested by evaluation project results with a client after several months. Depending on the scope of the project the evaluation addresses questions like how accurate the emotions, how coherent the moments of truth, how effective the implemented ideas, how reliable installed measurements and how workable the results are. If the results aren't satisfactory, the approach is re-designed and evaluated again, until a satisfactory design is obtained. It should be noted, however, that the new design is not to be used as a set of instructions or fixed protocols, but as a generic solution to the field problem. Design Science Research produces a critical part of the evidence to be used in evidence-based management. Evidence-based management involves acting, rather than (only) decision-making, based on evidence [6].

5. CONCLUSION

In this article it is argued that, in order to give an adequate interpretation to CEM, it is necessary to apply the customer journey method. However, such a customer journey method must meet a number of criteria. Four of them, however, usually appear not to be guaranteed in scientifically published practice, so existing methods fall short in those respects, which is apparent from literature reviews by others. It is about the focus on emotional experience instead of functional experience, thinking in end-to-end journeys, an approach that considers the entire organization, and applying a cycle of mapping, measuring, (re)designing and safeguarding (PDCA).

Altuition's Customer Journey ESPE, however, appears to have not been previously considered by the literature, while it appears that it addresses the shortcomings identified in other existing methods. Through an integrated approach with an emphasis on emotional experience, a generic and robust interpretation

is given to the Customer Journey assignment in a cycle of Customer Journey Mapping, -Making, -Mining and -Management, in collaboration with a client organization, so that organizations focus on customer experience - and results - actually distinguish themselves from their competitors.

Through years of experience, Altuition has been able to iteratively improve the method in projects to a generic approach where organizations, regardless of the industry they operate in, have a method at their disposal to systematically and successfully play on customer experience that matters. An evidence-based management approach in Design Science Research.

Our observations that most customer journey approaches currently do not meet the criteria for using the method are based here on scientific reviews of also scientific literature. So, in theory it is possible that in practice there are practitioners who have also developed a suitable customer journey. On the other hand, drawing on our many years of experience, we can say that we have not yet come across such a practitioner who meets all the criteria.

In terms of managerial implications, we can say that with Altuition's Customer Journey ESPE practice no longer has to rely on "stitching together" the best components of the described methods, but has a robust, comprehensive and proven customer journey approach to apply CEM in all its glory.

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