

The unsexy secret of great service: containing the system

 By [Patrick Carmody](#)

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What do [McDonalds](#), [my favourite restaurant](#), [Woothemes](#) and [Audible.com](#) have in common? They all offer excellent service in their respective categories and 'customer expectation sets' and they all *contain the offering*, thereby limiting the chances of pain points in the customer experience.

So how do these brands do it?

- Audible.com does it by 'thin slicing' the category of books and content sales, ie, it only does audio books and contains its system by specialising. It contains what it needs to be good at and increase its chance of a smooth customer experience.
- McDonalds does it by limiting its menu options and by automating its processes.
- Aubergine, my favourite local restaurant, does it by limiting the amount of seats in the restaurant and by offering a set menu. You know that you will be attended to brilliantly and you know that the kitchen will cope with your orders. *The system is elegantly designed to do just that.*
- Woothemes, like a lot of settled e-commerce software businesses, is just brilliant because it never really experiences a 'crush' of customers that it can't cope with because it is a virtual business that understands the outer limits of its demand.

Avoiding boredom: variety within a contained system

Within these very contained systems, which work well for the business, how do you keep the user engaged and coming back for more?

- In Aubergine's case, the user expects variety within reason - within the contained system, the chef and owner ensures variety and freshness by changing the set menu and wine list on a regular basis. This controlled sense of variety enables excellent rendering of the experience while avoiding monotony.
- Audible ensures variety within a very contained system by always staying current with new titles.
- Woothemes, much like Audible, keeps the user engaged with new and improved themes and widgets.
- And McDonalds is McDonalds; will we ever stop going back for its addictive Big Mac shaped concoction of sodium, sugar and fat??

Key takeaway

Customer experience or service brand thinking has been led by high-touch environments such as hotels, casinos, restaurants, department stores etc, with these categories offering great examples of 'above and beyond' experiences.

If we were to take the lead from these categories, we would think that variety and sensory engagement are key to a great experience. On closer inspection, however, a great experience is more a result of how brands have understood the *limitations of their systems* instead of the outermost parts that peak the experience.

Brands need to understand how their systems can deliver variety *and* service consistency, because a great experience every now and again is not a branded experience, but a chance encounter. They also need to have an intimate understanding of what kind of demand they can cope with, while rendering a great experience.

Only once they have understood these more mundane things can they design an optimal service system to meet this 'brief', which can create unprecedented levels of customer satisfaction. So, the feather boas and bright lights merely punctuate the experience.

If you can find systems which are not contained in some way, you will also find examples of bad service: miscommunication between departments, long call-centre waits, long delivery waits, etc - also known as open systems that are vulnerable to chaos (great in a brainstorm, not so great in a high-service space).

Notable exception: service success by removing the limits

Zappos.com, though, has opened up a traditionally closed loop (the call centre) by giving its customer service consultants free rein to delight customers in ways which are [unexpected and whacky](#). In terms of systems design, it has gone outside of the norms of the category and, instead of arming automatons with a script, it lets well-educated, premium employees loose.

I am sure it also has very contained parts of its system (such as warehousing and logistics) but the contact-centre approach is open and refreshing.

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