The traditional purchase funnel has been running on empty for a while now. In fact, it was probably misguided right from the beginning — from its radical oversimplification of consumer behavior all the way to the silly funnel metaphor that dutifully squeezed out brand advocates at the narrow end.

So, what is this “networked world” we live in and why is it forcing us to rethink a model everyone took for granted for decades? Ben Edwards, VP of Digital Strategy and Development at IBM, captures the main ideas in this succinct “from-to” slide (title and other minor tweaks are mine):
To boil it down: we live in a hyper-networked, real-time world of mass participation in product design, development and marketing. In this world, trust—and hence value creation—is primarily mediated through social relationships, and the scarce commodity is no longer content, but attention.

I’ve seen a few valiant attempts at updating the model for this networked world, including McKinsey’s Consumer Decision Journey and Google’s Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT). Both capture the overwhelming importance of search and social discovery at the start of the customer journey. And both acknowledge that trust, mediated via social interactions between informed and empowered consumers, is becoming the primary source of value creation for brands.
What I haven’t seen, though, is a general-purpose model that marketers can adapt to the unique engagement patterns of their individual brands. Something that can serve as a diagnostic tool for current brand engagement, and suggest a course of action for improving business outcomes.

So I started exploring a model of my own. It has its own built-in shortcuts and simplifications, but they’re not meant to dumb down the real world — they’re just placeholders for the work you’ll need to do as a marketer to adapt the model to your specific brand.

EXPOSURE

The model starts with how people first encounter your brand, and how those exposures work together to trigger a response.

**See** These are all the traditional interruptive exposures like TV, print and online ads. If you’re marketing a physical product, it also includes all the “ambient” exposures to the product being used in the real world, e.g. the guy next to you on the train using that sexy new tablet.

**Search** Combined, organic and paid search now deliver about 70% of all brand exposures. Often it even serves as a kind of memory aid for people who actually saw your paid media but can’t remember your brand – they’ll search for that “lizard with a funny accent” or some other noteworthy element in your ads. So you have to be prepared to show up in search however people actually search for you – enough said.

**Social** means either *people you know* or *people like you*. People you know can range from friends in the real world to more tenuous online connections, aka “weak ties”. Research shows that weak ties can actually be more influential than strong ones when it comes to product recommendations. That might seem counter-intuitive, but think about it. When you’re buying a car, whose advice do you listen to? Your best friend, or that gearhead neighbor who owns the model you’re lusting after?

People like you can be perfect strangers, but you trust them anyway because at this moment, they share your interests or goals, have some knowledge or experience that’s valuable to you, and are completely impartial in their opinions.

Any brand exposure delivered like this has built-in credibility that paid and owned media just can’t compete with.
To make the model work for you, think about how your constituents are currently discovering your brand, whether the three components are mutually reinforcing each other, and which kinds of exposures are most likely to yield the behaviors in the next part of the model. Then decide where to focus your efforts. Do you need to establish baseline awareness? Do you have untapped demand in organic search? Do you need to create more shareable assets to boost social discovery? Or should you work on broadening and mobilizing your influencer base?

**BEHAVIOR**

People engage with each other and with the world in one of three basic behavior modes: I call them exploratory, goal-directed and surgical. If you’re **exploratory**, you don’t have a specific goal: you’re open to a broad range of messages and influences. If you’re **goal-directed**, you know what you want to accomplish, but not necessarily how to get there. If you’re **surgical**, you know exactly what you want and how to get there—you’re just gathering ammo to make the final decision. In terms of someone engaging with your brand, that translates into something like this:

**Exploratory**: Is this the right brand for me?

**Goal-directed**: Can this brand’s product or service help me achieve my goal?

**Surgical**: Is this product or service right for me in terms of features, cost and quality?

To make the model work for your brand, map these basic behaviors to the main motivations that show up in your marketing personas, and see which ones are most likely to compel action. (For example, I recently did this exercise for a large, global confectioner, whose main motivations for purchase were Impulse, Seasonal, Task-driven and Loyalist.)

**EXPERIENCE**

This part of the model represents the entire ecosystem of owned experiences that help to pay off your audiences’ motivations and corresponding behavior modes. Here again, you’re looking at a default progression that you need to adapt to how your brand envisions the purchase cycle.

**Discover** This is close to what creative briefs usually call “surprise and delight”: an experience that grabs your attention, sets the agenda, draws you in, makes you want to learn more. It typically pays off
exploratory behavior, but can also help seal the deal in surgical mode, e.g. a really compelling demo or case study that blows you away with the product’s performance.

**Learn** This is where you lead your audience to understand how your product can help them accomplish their goals. Learning experiences typically pay off goal-directed behavior, but people don’t always know what they don’t know, so learning can be exploratory as well — especially if they’re learning about a complex, high-consideration product. (Um, should I get term life or whole life insurance? And what’s this “flexible premium” of which you speak?)

**Solve** Once your audience knows enough to understand that your product is a good general fit, you need to make it real for them. Can this product solve their specific problem or meet their specific needs? Depending on the product, that can happen through a wide variety of experiences, such as configurators, simulators, roadmapping tools, comparison tools, personalized customer references, or a live consultation. Solving-type experiences tend to pay off goal-directed and surgical behaviors. (Of course, if you’re selling candy bars, there’s not much to solve—adapt as needed for low-consideration products.)

**Believe** is the final leap of faith. What else can you do to make them believe they’re making the right decision, when they’ve already convinced themselves that the product is right for them? It could be as simple and concrete as a special offer, or something intangible like the brand’s perception as a good corporate citizen. Find those “tipping-point” factors and make them work for you.

**OUTCOME**

For every desired outcome, go back to the model and see if any of the stages can be optimized to deliver that outcome. In most marketing briefs I’ve seen, the primary objective (usually increased sales) is surrounded by a bunch of fuzzier secondary goals. If necessary, create a separate version of the model that optimizes for each goal so you can identify any glaring conflicts.

(One interesting side-note here: you could easily replace the outcome with something very personal like “get this girl/guy to marry me” and the rest of the model should still hold up. You’re exposed to people in the same three ways as brands, the basic human behavior modes still apply, and you still have to lead your “audience” through an arc of experiences, from discovery to belief.)

**Applying the model to your brand ecosystem**
These days, any self-respecting brand strategy must have an ecosystem map. Usually this involves big, friendly-looking bubbles and some basic linking strategy, but not a whole lot of actionable insights.

The way I think of optimizing a brand ecosystem is like figuring out crowd management at a big museum exhibit. Lots of different people with different profiles, needs and expectations. Asynchronous, often unpredictable flows of behavior. And a few well-defined things you want them to do or see, preferably in a certain order.

So all the venues in the ecosystem (traditional advertising, brand.com, owned social channels, curated conversations, raw social stream, shareable assets, eCRM, retail, etc.) have to work together to “catch” the different behaviors, route them to the most appropriate venue, deliver some value, then hand off to the next desired step. Ideally, those user flows should allow for progressive personalization, so that each experience becomes more relevant than the last, and it should continue to provide incremental value even for those users who don’t follow your intended paths.

One tool I developed recently for a client workshop might help generate some ideas on how to optimize your brand ecosystem, and build some shared understanding among your stakeholders.

The idea is to list out all your owned venues and analyze each one in terms of these four lenses:
Traffic source: how do people come to the venue? What’s the proportion of paid media, search, social discovery, and redirects from other owned venues?

Content type: Crafted, Curated or Social? What’s the most suitable mix of content for the venue?

Experience: which of the experiences defined in your model can be best delivered in the venue?

Behavior mode: which behavior mode(s) are people in when they come to the venue?

That exercise will likely help you identify some opportunities for optimization, by adapting better to things you can’t change (e.g. behavior mode for a venue), improving things you can change (experiences, linkages), or adding/removing venues to better deliver certain types of experiences.

If you’re in a workshop setting, an effective technique to decide best bets for optimization is to do a sort of silent auction: give each participant a fixed sum of virtual money to spend on experiences within venues. Just make sure you have a group of people who can collectively represent the concerns of usability (interaction designers, UX people, creatives), feasibility (developers, IT folks), and value (business stakeholders).

Hopefully some of this was useful. Please be aware I’m making this up as I go along, and my only claim is that various bits of this model have served me well on actual client-facing work. So please feel free to tear it down, or help me make it better.