

The Consumer Decision Journey

McKinsey Quarterly, June 2009 · D. Court, D. Elzinga, S. Mulder, O. J. Vetvik · Based on the purchase decisions of about 20,000 consumers across five industries and three continents.

Roughly two-thirds of the touchpoints that influence a buyer during active evaluation are consumer-driven — reviews, word of mouth, recollections of past experience. Only about one third are controlled by the company itself.

What the study changed

For decades marketing was planned around the funnel: a buyer starts with several brands in mind and narrows them down until one is left. The McKinsey team found that real behaviour rarely works that way. During the evaluation stage buyers often *add* options they had not considered at the start — a name a friend mentioned, a property a review surfaced. The journey is a loop, not a funnel.

Where the influence actually sits

The more uncomfortable finding for anyone holding a marketing budget: most of what sways a buyer at that stage is not owned by the brand. Money goes into paid media at the top of the journey, while the decision is made in channels the company does not control — public reviews, ratings, other people's accounts of their experience. The authors' conclusion is that marketers must move beyond push-style communication and learn to influence these consumer-driven touchpoints.

What this means for a hotel

A hotel is chosen exactly in this evaluation stage — on Booking, Google Maps, Tripadvisor, and increasingly in AI-generated shortlists. Advertising can create the idea of a trip; it rarely closes the booking. What closes it is the picture a future guest assembles from other guests' words. That picture can be managed — but only if someone is doing it deliberately.

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