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Understanding the customer: theories, trends, and values for an effective communication strategy

PROF. MICHELE PALEOLOGO / PROF. MISHELL ORTA

Term	Summer 2026
Area of study	Marketing and Communication
Credits	6 ECTS
Dates	6 – 17 July 2026 (2 weeks)

Description

The course aims at introducing the students to the main theories and latest trends related to the field of consumer behavior — target market, needs, values — and then applies them to marketing and corporate communication decisions. The course is organized in two 22-hour weeks. Week 1 starts with an applied framework, going from Market to marketing plan, and finally to developing a product, so students first learn how to turn market signals into a strategic response. Week 2 develops the conceptual foundations of consumer behavior, introducing them to the psychological and sociological perspectives of consumer behavior, and uses them to test, critique, and refine the Week 1 strategy.

The course encourages students to reflect on consumer response to marketing actions — exposure, attention, perception, and decision making — and on practical customer research for a specified product category. Students learn qualitative research methods, surveys, focus groups, stakeholder analysis, and digital marketing, while also engaging with contemporary marketing realities such as AI-supported research, retail media, and ethical data and measurement practices.

Course contents

The course is organized into two connected modules, each corresponding to week 1 and two of the course:

Module 1 - Applied Strategy and Customer Understanding

- Market framing: category, context, trends, competition, and customer tensions.
- Customer research: exploratory methods, rapid research inputs, desk research, surveys, focus groups, qualitative interpretation, and AI-supported synthesis.
- Persona building and psychodemographic archetypes.
- Jobs to Be Done as a tool for understanding customer progress and strategic opportunity.
- Positioning and competitive advantage.
- Blue Ocean Strategy as a differentiation framework.
- Marketing plan development: target, value proposition, communication structure, channels, and tone of voice.
- Translation of strategy into a product, service, or communication response, including e-marketing touchpoints and digital communication logic.



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Module 2 - Consumer Psychology and Strategic Revision

- Consumer behavior: theoretical issues and case histories.
- Needs, wants, desires, and motivations.
- Learning, attitudes, and decision making.
- Consumer response to marketing actions: exposure, attention, and perception.
- Psychological relationship between persons, brands, products, and other stakeholders.
- Not only the customer: other stakeholders. Case histories.
Critical revision of Week 1 strategic assumptions through psychological theory.
- Final Exam and pitch

Method of teaching

The course uses interactive lessons, exercises, case study analysis, role playing, presentations, and group discussion. Short conceptual inputs are followed by application workshops so students can test frameworks immediately in relation to a shared project. A list of references will be indicated during the course.

The teaching approach is designed to make theory practical, visible, and usable in real marketing decisions.

Course requirements

- a. Students are expected to regularly attend sessions and to actively take part in debate;
- b. Before each class, students are expected to have read the compulsory readings (and are strongly advised to read the recommended readings);
- c. Students will have to take a mid-term individual exam.
- d. Students will be required to orally present a group work for the final exam according to the instructor's instructions;

Credits

6 ECTS

Grading

The grading structure rewards both the initial strategic draft and the quality of revision through theory. Detailed evaluation rubric for the assignment will be provided during the course.

Assignment Module 1 (group)	30%
Assignment Module 2 (group)	20%
Revision of Module 1 project (group)	10%
Final individual exam	40 %



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Course readings and materials

The lecturer's slides, readings and essays for exams and assignments will be available on Blackboard.

- Ariely, D. (2009). *Predictably irrational: The hidden forces that shape our decisions*. HarperCollins.
- Belk, R. W., Ger, G., & Askegaard, S. (2003). The fire of desire: A multisited inquiry into consumer passion. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 326–351. <https://doi.org/10.1086/378613>
- Belk, R. W., Scott, L., & Askegaard, S. (2012). *Research in consumer behaviour* (Vol. 14). Emerald Group Publishing.
- Johnson, E. J., Hassin, R., Baker, T., Bajger, A., & Treuer, G. (2012). Beyond nudges: Tools of a choice architecture. *Marketing Letters*, 23(2), 487–504. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-012-9186-1>
- Kalbach, J. (2020). *The jobs to be done playbook: Align your markets, organization, and strategy around customer needs*. O'Reilly Media
- Kim, W. C., & Mauborgne, R. (2015). *Blue ocean strategy, expanded edition: How to create uncontested market space and make the competition irrelevant*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Kimmel, A. J. (2018). *Psychological foundations of marketing*. In Routledge eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315436098>
- Krugman, H. E. (2008). *Consumer behaviour and advertising involvement*. Routledge.
- Lindstrom, M. (2016). *Small Data: the tiny clues that uncover huge trends*. <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250080684>
- Portigal, S. (2023). *Interviewing users: How to uncover compelling insights* (2nd ed.). Rosenfeld Media.
- Solomon, M. R., Bamossy, G., & Askegaard, S. (n.d.). *Understanding the customer*. Prentice Hall.
- Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: The gentle power of choice architecture*. Yale University Press.
- Wendel, S. (2013). *Designing for behavior change: Applying psychology and behavioral economics*. O'Reilly Media.
- Whalen, J. (2019). *Design for how people think: Using brain science to build better products*. O'Reilly Media.
- Wood, W., & Neal, D. T. (2009). The habitual consumer. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(4), 579–592. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2009.08.003>

Group assignments

In order to foster cooperative learning and an in-depth study of a particular topic of interest, students will be responsible for participating in group presentations. Each group will consist of 2/4 students, developing a project work for a specified product/company category.



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Final exam

The final exam will consist of a written test covering the topics of module 1 and 2.

Instructor bio - Module 1

With a career transitioning from market research and cultural analysis into Product design, **Prof. Mishell Orta**'s experience largely concerns Market Research, Strategic Design, Branding and Product Marketing consulting to leading in-house design teams. Over the last 10 years, she has worked across industries with companies ranging from startups to enterprise level, and built a career portfolio working across North America, Latam and EMEA in varying creative and strategic roles. She co-created the podcast The Insight Club (available on Spotify) where Marketing, Branding and CX professionals craft strategies to emergent market challenges. Currently works as a Strategic Design Manager for Dscovr, a tech-company working with top international brands on how to intercept consumer needs and turn them into successful solutions that can positively impact people's lives through innovative UX and Market research solutions. She also collaborates with the Design+ strategies research group of the Politecnico di Milano on how to support innovation and transformation processes in organisations.

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Instructor bio - Module 2

Prof. Michele Paleologo is a PhD Candidate in Psychology at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan and a Researcher at EngageMinds Hub, a multidisciplinary research center dedicated to studying and promoting active engagement in health behaviors and food consumption.

His work focuses on sustainability in consumption and production, with growing expertise in action research and stakeholder engagement through qualitative and quantitative approaches to improve collaboration between science and citizens.

At the Faculties of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences and Psychology, he teaches courses on Soft Skills, Qualitative Research, and Stakeholder Engagement.

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Course Schedule

Lesson	Date and Time (CET)	Topic	Reading/Course Material
Module 1	Monday 6 th 15.00 – 18.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course Introduction• Market, Product and Marketing Plan• Strategic logic and case studies• Presentation of Assignment 1	Collection On Advertising Course outline and instructor slides



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	<p>Tuesday 7th 09.00 – 12.00 14.00 – 17.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market framing: category, trends, culture, and customer tensions • Digital tools to understand customers: from field research to AI-supported synthesis • Customer personas and psychodemographic archetypes; exploratory insight mapping • Marketing plan development: campaign structure, channels, tone of voice, and value communication 	<p>Article What I learned about Competition Mapping</p> <p>Article Marketing's 3 Types of Value</p> <p>Article Society drives how we build products, create brands, and design experiences</p>
	<p>Wednesday 08th 09.00-12.00 14.00-17.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field trip and Assignment 2 brief 	
	<p>Thursday 9th 09.00 – 13.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer understanding: how people 'hire' products for a job (<i>buying decisions vs addressing needs, thinking style vs role in the process</i>) • Strategic market analysis and positioning; Blue Ocean Strategy 	<p>Podcast: The ultimate guide to JTBD Bob Moesta</p>
	<p>Friday 10th 09.00 – 12.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Week 1 project workshop and Draft Strategy Pack presentation • Pitch Day: Final Module 1 group work presentation 	<p>What Is Blue Ocean Strategy — and Where Does It Go Wrong?</p>
Module 2	<p>Monday 13th 14.00 – 17.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to module 2 • Introduction to the Consumer Psychology: Homo oeconomicus VS homo psychologicus • The process of consumption: a framework • Historical evolution of the Consumer Psychology: <i>one discipline, many approaches</i> • <i>Exercise</i> 	
	<p>Tuesday 14th 09.00 – 12.00 14.00 – 17.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs VS wants VS desire: let's clear our ideas (<i>theories and case histories</i>) • Motivations: positive VS negative, internal VS external (<i>theories, case histories and research hints: the motivational approach</i>); • Information seeking, processing, building (<i>theories and case histories</i>) • <i>Exercise</i> 	
	<p>Wednesday 15th 9.00 – 12.00 14.00 – 17.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social identities and group identities (<i>theories, case histories and research hints: exercising with the focus group</i>) • Consumer Drivers: personality, attitudes and values (<i>theories and case histories</i>) 	



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		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Exercise</i>	
	<p>Thursday 16th 9:00-12.00</p> <p>14:00-16.00</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning and decision making: are we always rational decision makers? (<i>rational VS irrational models, the choice paradox, simplicity VS variety, automatic VS reflective cognitive system, heuristic and frame effect, prospect theory, nudges</i>)• Behavioural change theories• <i>Exercise</i>	
	<p>Friday 17th 9:30-12:30</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Revision of Final group work presentation (Async)• Final examination (in presence)	