BE EMPOWERED BY THE CLOUD

PART ONE:
IMPROVE YOUR CUSTOMER'S JOURNEY AS IT HAPPENS

ACXIOM

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THE CLOUD AS THE GREAT ENABLER

The cloud is often described as the "great enabler," opening up and supporting exciting new opportunities for businesses. Which is all well and good, but what does it mean for marketers in a real sense?

Your business is probably already pretty comfortable with cloud technology. In fact, half of enterprise workloads already run in the public cloud.

However, for marketing departments the cloud can still be something of a gray area – and not only when it's raining (sorry!). We hear a lot about the general benefits of the cloud in terms of speed, efficiency, and flexibility, but tangible use cases often remain a mystery.

At Acxiom we believe in a cloud-first approach, so we've put together this series of guides to help you get your head firmly in the cloud (see what we did there?) and understand how your marketing team really can be empowered.

In each guide we'll focus on one specific power of the cloud. One thing cloud technology lets you do that you realistically couldn't do before. One "silver lining," if you will (ok so that's the last cloud pun, we promise).

This first guide looks at cloud analytics and how it enables something every marketer wants to do – improve the customer journey as it's actually taking place.
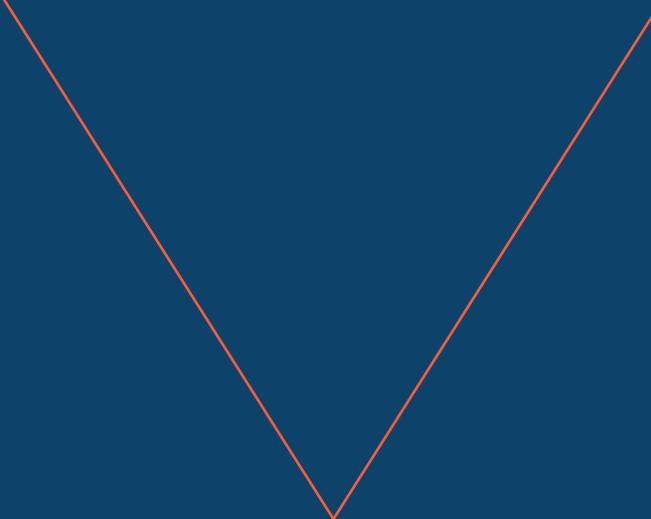
IMPROVING CX
IN REAL TIME

Measurement and analytics have generally been used to understand marketing performance after the fact, with insights used to improve future campaigns.

But the cloud changes all that.

With cloud-based analytics you can place decision making along the customer journey – at any point where new information is available – to steer that journey in the moment. You can use analytics to decide what should happen next for each person, and ensure they have an exceptional experience.

You're probably already considering cloud-based data management and analytics. After all, new technologies are being built in the cloud, for the cloud, so that's ultimately where you need to be.

The cloud's ability to close the loop between analytics and improvement, meaning you can take wasted spend off the table to reinvest in more effective tactics, may be just the incentive you need to finally make the jump.

The cloud's power to adjust marketing on the fly and improve the customer journey as it happens, stems from three key capabilities – speed, connectivity, and scalability.

1_

Optimize in real time
(yes *real* real time)

The first benefit of the cloud that allows you to improve the customer journey while it is in progress is simple. Pure speed.

The term "real time" has been bandied around for years with somewhat questionable accuracy. Now, with the cloud enabling decisioning at the speed of data flow, you really can use real-time analytics to find out what the best next step should be.

That might be determining what creative to serve, what product to recommend, or what discount to offer, to give the consumer what they want or need.

In the past, campaign reporting was all about hindsight, with insights taking weeks if not months to get back into the workflow. It was implicitly accepted that some customers would have to live with a poor experience to enable a (slight) improvement for those lucky enough to be included in future campaign cycles. Improvements were made in shallow steps, with drawn out plateaus in between.

Now, thanks to the cloud, there's no need for your current customers to sacrifice their experience for the sake of future audiences. The rapid data flow made possible by the cloud means insights can be generated in the moment, while they are still useful and relevant, bringing foresight into the equation. Because you can continually monitor performance and adjust tactics in real time, the improvement curve is continuous and far steeper than before.

The speed of data transfer in the cloud enables analytics at all stages of the process, whether that's at the beginning for planning, mid-stream for optimization, or at the end to inform the next campaign. Cloud analytics enables you to instantly understand who the customer is and what they need at any point in their journey and interact with them in a way they will really value.

Sounding good so far?

OTHER CLOUD ANALYTICS USE CASES

Optimizing the customer journey in real time is only one of many marketing use cases for cloud-based analytics. Others include:

Multi-touch attribution
Measure and assign credit to all touchpoints that influence your customers along their conversion path.

Data portraits
Understand your audiences and gain a detailed view of the demographic and lifestyle elements that best define them.

Community insights
Discover what your customers look like compared to the surrounding community and where the opportunities are.

2_

Connect like you've
never connected before

Speed alone won't deliver everything you need to improve the customer journey as it happens. It also needs to be combined with advanced connectivity. The cloud's name might imply it's a nebulous thing, but it is essentially just the ability to connect data sets and tools in a way that's never been possible before.

While it's tempting to think one tech partner could provide everything you need for marketing success in a single platform, that is never going to be the case. Data will always exist in different places, and shiny new tools will continually emerge. The cloud lets you seamlessly connect all the parts and pieces of your ever-changing marketing universe and make them work together.

The most exciting aspect of this cloud connectivity is the ability to put measurement and analytics right at the heart of your optimization process. Action doesn't stop with the output from a report; it can be taken automatically from directly within that report. Insights generated from real-time analysis can flow right back into the platforms that are actually delivering the marketing signal, to inform the next step of the customer journey.

"From its new vantage point in the cloud, marketing measurement can finally fulfill its promise. There is an opportunity to put measurement at the center of an optimization process that allows marketers to get continuously better, faster, smarter throughout a campaign."

Scot Richardson,
Director of Data Science Strategy
and Visualization at Acxiom

The cloud makes it far simpler for you to connect to the emerging artificial intelligence (AI) or machine learning (ML) technologies that enable this in-the-moment decisioning at the individual level.

It's not possible or scalable to look at each customer's path manually, but AI and ML technologies can take data signals and decide what should happen next based on analytical models of what has happened before. This process automatically drives tweaks and adjustments to continually make the journey better for the customer in small ways.

Making the most of cloud connectivity and these new technologies may need a shift in mindset. The machines are ready and raring to determine the next interaction on the journey. But letting decisoning be driven by analytics (and not by a campaign planner using if-then statements) is a big step for marketing teams. It can be hard to let go and allow the customer journey to take its own shape through data and analytics.

Fortunately, the cloud also enables different ways to architect the workflow and experience. Decisions for the entire process don't all need to be made centrally and at the same time; they can be distributed. This means your team can make some decisions, while turning others over to the machines, which eases the transition to automation.

And it's not just about AI and ML. The cloud allows you to connect to pretty much any tech in a secure and privacy conscious way. Most emerging technologies are only available in the cloud, so if you want to stay ahead of the curve it's where you need to be. With an "app store" of tools to point your data at, you can mix and match to find out what works for your business without a huge investment in software.

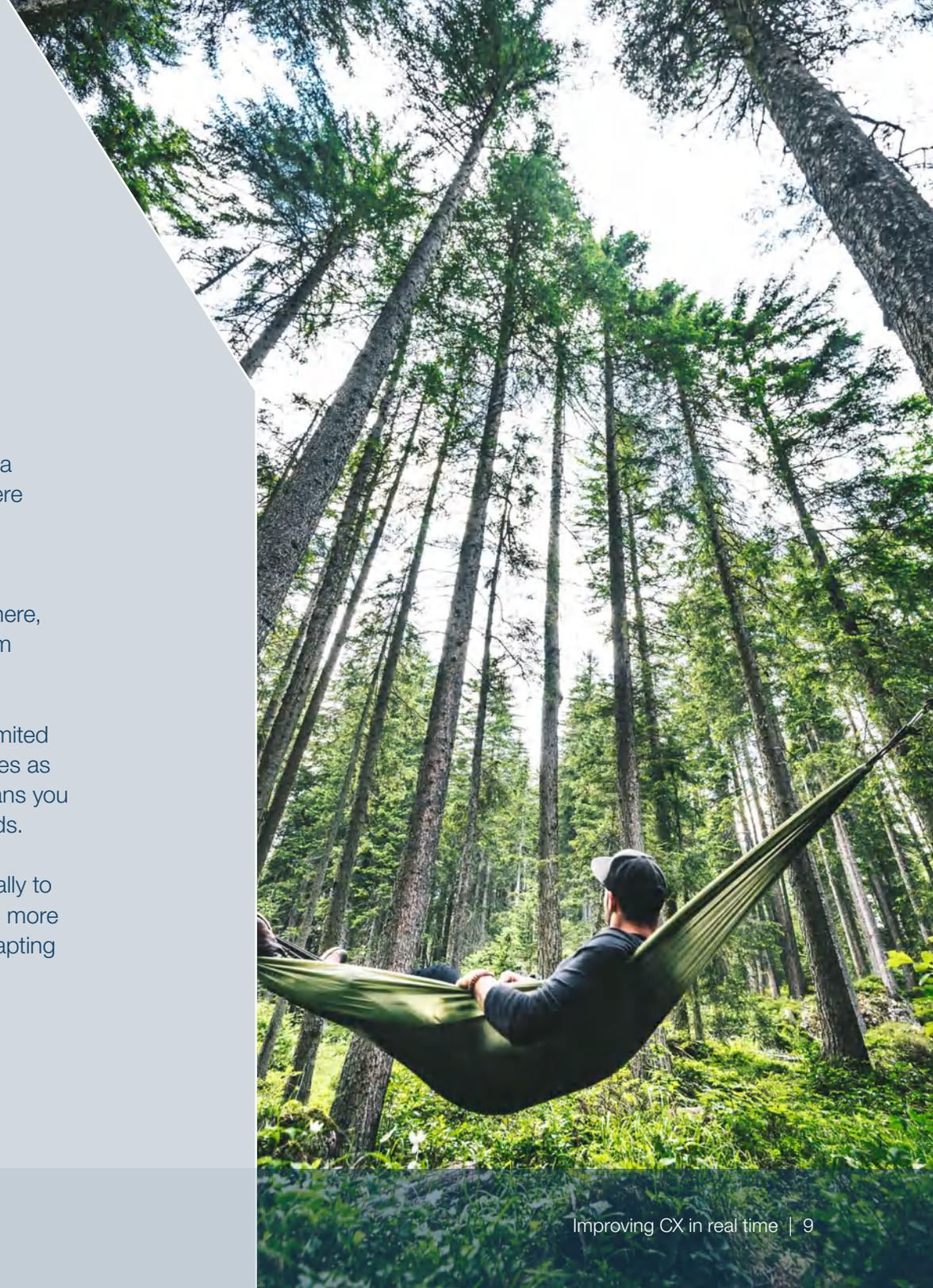Which takes us neatly onto the cloud's next capability – scalability.

3_

Start small and grow as tall as you like

It may be that, like many other marketers, you want to use data and analytics within the customer journey but don't know where to begin. Luckily the cloud makes getting started simple.

With the cloud there's no limit to how small you can start. You can simply pick a use case or a single report and start from there, without having to make a big upfront investment or a long-term commitment to a particular technology.

But equally there's no limit to how tall you can grow. With unlimited scalability you can just pay for what you use, adding capabilities as you need them and removing them when you don't. That means you always have the right environment to suit your immediate needs.

The cloud also delivers the ability to auto-scale, both horizontally to cope with increased volumes of data, and vertically to bring in more resources to process and analyze that data. Automatically adapting capacity to your needs helps to manage costs while ensuring reliability as complexity increases.

Depending on the provider, cloud technology also allows a degree of flexibility in the analytics management process. You might want a fully managed service, or you may want to collaborate with your provider and learn from them for a period before taking control yourself with a completely self-service model. A hybrid approach allows you to be as involved as you like, while still benefiting from the knowledge and expertise of your analytics provider.

It is also relatively simple to move cloud environments between providers, assuming of course the cloud analytics solution you use is built on an industry-standard platform. This means you have the flexibility to choose your own path and aren't bound by the roadmap of one analytics service provider.

You've no doubt heard how the cloud enables democratization of data. But in itself this doesn't achieve better results. The cloud also democratizes access to the toolset you need to put that data to work effectively.

In the cloud you can access a range of solutions and choose those best suited to your end user. You may want tools for the select few that want to get right into the raw data and build custom optimizations, or you may want to find solutions for the citizen data scientists who just want access to intelligence. With a huge variety of tools available, you can find and connect familiar solutions with pre-built integrations to access data, generate insight, and take action.

DOES IT MATTER WHICH CLOUD I USE?

In essence it doesn't matter which cloud service provider you use. Most tech providers operate in multi-cloud environments, with different clouds suited to different use cases.

At Acxiom, for instance, we use Google Cloud Platform for Intelligence Hub, our analytics environment, but we also use Amazon Web Services for some of our identity and data management products.

Cloud-to-cloud communication is relatively easy and data is all encrypted in transit so it's simple and secure to move data between clouds.

ROADMAP TO CUSTOMER JOURNEY IMPROVEMENT:

Using cloud analytics to improve the customer journey as it happens can be a gradual process, but you do need to start somewhere. Use this five-step roadmap to set your team on the right path.

1 Make a commitment.
Improving the customer journey as it happens, rather than relying on hindsight, requires buy-in across your team. We recommend finding an executive sponsor within marketing, and then building a cohort of cross-functional stakeholders with clearly defined roles in the project.

2 Start small.
Choose a single use case or report to explore and start from there. You could begin with a simple customer insights analysis that helps you understand customer preferences and allows you to prioritize touchpoints along their journey.

3 Let go just a little.
Decide which decisions you're happy for the machines to make – then let them make those decisions. You can start by letting AI-based, cloud-native analytics perform next-best-action decisions based on customer journey data and consumer insights.

4 Mix and match.
Explore a variety of tools and technologies to find the combination that works for you. Just as no customer journey is the same, the right mix of analytic tools and services is unique for each business. Test and learn to see what meets your needs.

5 Expand and grow.
Add new decisioning points, reports, or use cases and scale up (or down) as necessary. For example, if analytics show a drop-off point in the customer journey you can use native integrations with a customer data platform (CDP) or advertising partner to introduce new touchpoints on the path to conversion.

READY TO GET STARTED?

If you're ready to improve your customer's journey as it happens, it's time to check out Acxiom's **Intelligence Hub**, a data analytics environment built on the Google Cloud platform. Its full-stack analytic capabilities allow you to better understand marketing impact in the moment and predict likely behaviors so you can adjust campaigns to deliver an exceptional customer experience as well as better outcomes.

Take me to Intelligence Hub

ABOUT ACXIOM

Acxiom partners with the world's leading brands to create customer intelligence, enabling data-driven marketing experiences that generate value for people and for brands. The experts in identity, the ethical use of data, cloud-first customer data management, and analytics solutions, Acxiom makes the complex marketing ecosystem work, applying customer intelligence wherever brands and customers meet.

Acxiom's Customer Intelligence Cloud (CIC) brings it all together, combining data, technology, and expert services so brands can acquire the customers they'd love to have, grow trusted and valued customer relationships, and retain their best customers for today and tomorrow. CIC is a connected suite that includes identity solutions, data and audience insights, and analytics, integrated with leading marketing platforms and technology partners, and supported by award-winning services.

By helping brands genuinely understand people, Acxiom enables experiences so relevant and respectful, people are willing to explore new brands and stay loyal to those they love. For more than 50 years, Acxiom has turned the complexity of customer data into the simplicity of customer understanding, delivering better experiences for people and growth for brands.

With locations in the US, UK, China, Poland, and Germany, Acxiom is a registered trademark of Acxiom LLC and is part of The Interpublic Group of Companies, Inc. (IPG). For more information on Acxiom and their Customer Intelligence Cloud, visit Acxiom.com.

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