

Did the Customer Really Convert?

A Theological Reflection on Digital Marketing

Austin McCraw notes the use of the word 'conversion' in both marketing and theological language, and asks whether there is a connection. At first sight, it appears that theologians would reject such an idea. But Austin suggests that for marketers, conversion is more than turning an enquiry into a sale. It is about a change of heart.

'What is a conversion?'

Ask this to a digital marketer today, and you are likely to hear about some key performance indicator - 'last month, our website saw a 30% increase in conversions' or 'our Sales team has a 5% lead-to-conversion rate,' and so on. Today, there is an industry of agencies and consultants trading in the art known as 'conversion rate optimisation' (CRO).¹ Digital marketing has become a 'science' of studying customers' online activity, tracking clicks and eye-paths,

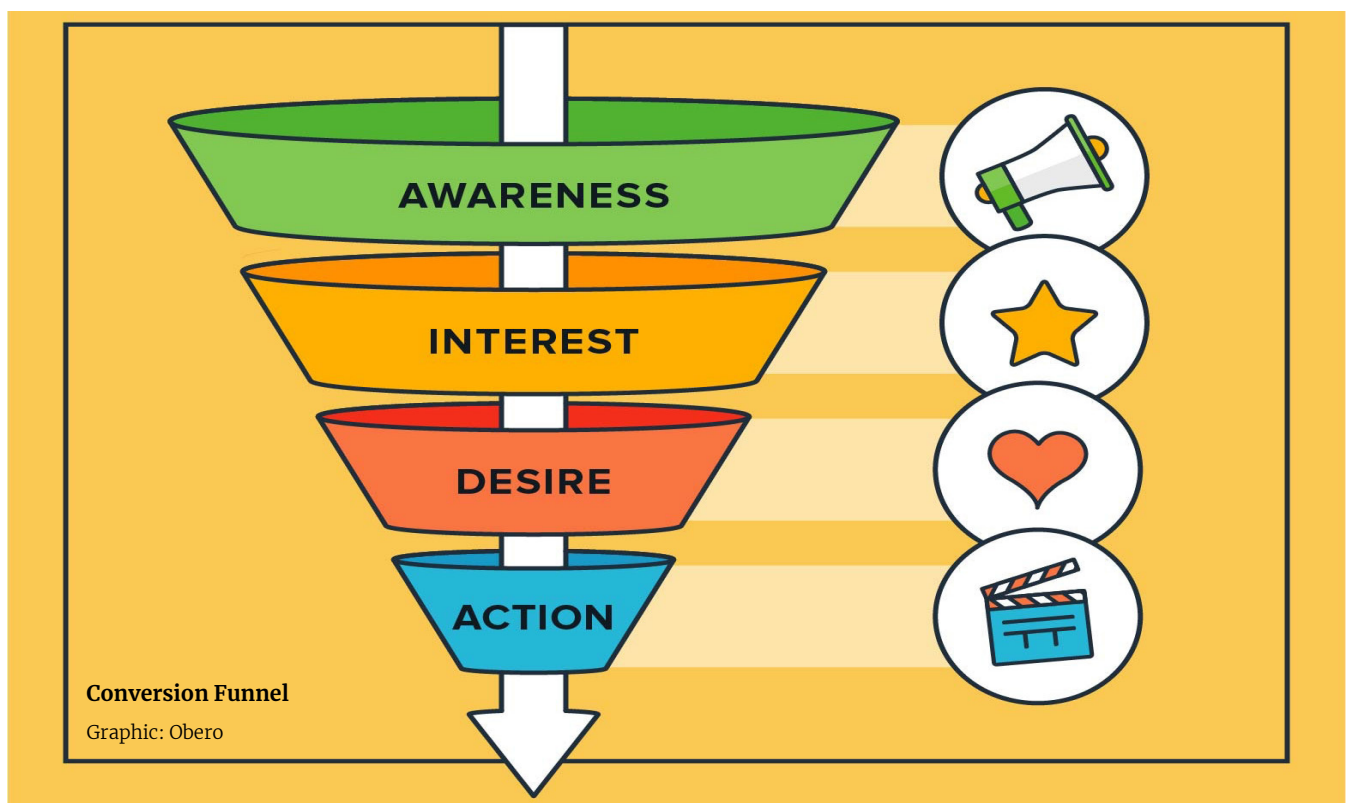
constructing customer 'theories' from behavioural data, and turning these 'hypotheses' into experiments aimed at 'converting' prospects to customers.

Science. Theory. Hypothesis. Conversion. These are all words that digital marketers have embraced in recent decades.² Of the four, I find the use of the term 'conversion' intriguing, for it often has a religious connotation. A person 'converts' typically when they enter a new religion; they 'de-convert' when they disassociate with a

religion.³ Theologically, there are often notions of deep spiritual transformation associated with the word 'conversion.'

So, why have marketers chosen 'conversion rate' to describe the basic objective of their efforts? Why not something more straightforward like 'completion rate' or 'purchase rate?'

One might respond to this question by pointing out marketers do not really mean conversion in a religious sense, but rather in a simply physical sense



– ‘conversion’ as in water converts to ice, or matter converts to energy, centimeters can be converted to inches, and so on. Applied in this way to a customer, conversion could merely mean the transition from non-customer to customer, or the conversion of a website visit into a website transaction.⁴

The problem with this response is it abstracts the marketer’s use of ‘conversion’ from their day-to-day focus of influencing decisions. Marketers are doing more than just describing events that occur when a visitor arrives on a website. The presumption of CRO is that marketing messages can be optimised to increase ‘conversions.’ As Andrew Kling states, CRO is ‘the art and science of persuading your site visitors to take actions that benefit you, by making a purchase, offering a donation, or committing to some positive future action.’⁵ Or as Khalid Saleh and Ayat Shukairy state, CRO ‘analyses the behaviour of consumers, focuses on what motivates a particular market segment to react in a certain way to marketing elements, and advises companies on how to adjust their marketing and sales mix in response.’⁶ Or more simply, as Tim Ash summarises, CRO is ‘persuading [customers] to take desired actions.’⁷ Thus, when marketers speak of ‘conversion,’ they are referring to more than an outward change in behavior; they are referring to inward change involving the customer’s motivations and desires.

Accordingly, marketers often recognise that ‘conversion’ is something that occurs not on a webpage page or an advertisement, but somewhere within the customer. The marketer recognises, whether implicitly or explicitly, that conversion at a fundamental level involves a change in the state of the customer’s being. Benji Rabham illustrates this point:

A conversion is nothing more than a transition from one state of being to another. You can convert from one

religion to another. You can convert from one career to another. You can convert a cold call into a hot lead. You can convert a lead into a sale. It’s a change from one thing to another. Although the most obvious examples of conversion may revolve around religion or politics, it is no different in the world of business and online conversion.⁸

Here, Rabham not only affirms the nature of conversion as a change in being, but also makes the immediate connection between conversion in a marketing sense and conversion in a religious sense. Likewise, Flint McGlaughlin makes a more explicit appeal to the ontological basis of conversion: ‘The customer’s doing is grounded in the customer’s being. [Marketers] must work backward from behaviour to identity. We ‘listen’ to customer data in order to ‘hear’ customer insights.’⁹ Like Rabham, McGlaughlin goes on to connect ‘conversion’ in a marketing sense to ‘conversion’ in a broader religious sense:

For marketing is more fundamental, and thus, more universal. Wherever free will exists, marketing necessarily exists. Marketing is messaging an offer. Politicians, scientists, and pulpiteers all engage in messaging. In each case, they are asking for a ‘yes’—to their candidacy, their theory, or their gospel.¹⁰

What we see in these marketing descriptions of ‘conversion’ is an attempt to make a comparison between the seemingly ordinary experience of becoming a customer and the experience of a religious convert. The implication here is that ‘conversion’ is a common natural phenomenon experienced in all kinds of relational spheres – including e-commerce. Conversions may vary in degrees of intensity, but the fundamental marketing claim here is that what happens when one purchases

a pair of shoes online is not altogether different from what happens when one responds to the Christian gospel.

But can the comparison really be made? Is there really more continuity than discontinuity between the marketing and theological use of ‘conversion’? Is this not simply an overreach by marketers?

To be fair, this may be an impossible question to answer, for history reveals a wide variety of the theological uses of the term conversion.¹¹ In the early Church for instance, conversion was often associated with Christians’ social and political affiliations. From Augustine

to Luther, conversion was often seen as the entrance into monastic orders. From the Reformation onwards, conversion often correlated with baptism and repentance. In the last few centuries, conversion has often been understood as a particular evangelical religious experience. This is clearly an oversimplification of

the rich history of the term; my point is simply that there will likely be various theological reasons for accepting or resisting the marketer’s use of the term conversion.

However, despite this diversity, it may still be possible to construct a basic theological view of conversion from several broadly shared assumptions. First, conversion in the theological sense is seen as a ‘turning’ away from sin toward God. Most simply, it at least includes a change in one’s posture (*epistrepho*) or mind (*metanoia*), with the person of Jesus Christ being the new focal point. Second, conversion in the theological sense presumes an inward transformation at the centre of the convert’s being. Conversion is more than a decision or an event; it is a new ontological reality, a new mode of existence that affects the whole of one’s life. Third, conversion in the theological sense is seen fundamentally as the work

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Conversion
 Caravaggio -
 Conversion of St Paul
 1610
 Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

of God. God is the initiator and sustainer of conversion. The degree to which the convert cooperates with the divine work of conversion is debated, but most theological accounts of conversion see the work of the Spirit as instrumental in awakening and transforming the convert.

Based upon these three broadly accepted principles, it would seem that there may be good reason for the theologian to resist the marketing use of ‘conversion.’ In some ways, it seems to minimise the true uniqueness of the conversion event. For instance, at a basic level, conversion in the marketing sense is ‘content agnostic’ – any kind of action can be deemed a conversion by the digital marketer. One can be a convert to the newest smartphone as much as one might be a convert to Christianity. There is a flattening here that I suspect the theologian would want to push back against. The depth of transformation required for one to turn to Christ would probably be seen as demanding much more than tweaked headlines and repositioned calls-to-action.

Herein potentially lies the most fundamental difference between these two concepts of conversion: conversion in the theological sense is seen as the work of the Spirit; conversion in the

marketing sense is seen as the work of the digital marketer. The practice of CRO, as we have seen above, is the practice of actively influencing a prospect’s desires so that they take a particular action, it is a work of persuasion. However, to motivate a turn to Christ, in the theological sense, is seen as beyond the natural capacity of fallen human nature and demands some kind of spiritual intervention. To frame conversion as a work of humans seems to diminish the uniquely divine work required in reversing the irresistible downward pull of sin.

However, despite these immediate objections, there seems to be at least one possible point of continuity between a theological understanding of conversion and a marketing sense of conversion – the view that conversion is an ontological event. Conversion in both the theological and the marketing uses of the word is more than just an account of actions, behaviour, and decisions. Conversion is understood as a matter of motivation and desire – it is a word used to describe a change which occurs under the surface, at the centre of a person’s being. For one to truly ‘convert’ in both uses of the word, one must experience a kind of reordering of perception, desire and will. The insight shared by

both theologians and marketers is that decision is predicated upon delight – one must want that which one does for one to be truly converted. The marketer may be more optimistic than the theologian about the influence one can have on another’s motivations, but conversion, in both uses of the word, first requires the work of ‘an advocate’ to influence someone in a way that impacts them inwardly.¹²

Further, when pressed, the theologian might admit there is even greater space for continuity between the two uses of the term conversion. For instance, to say that the theological understanding of conversion demands a focus on Christ potentially obscures the many value judgements the convert makes in turning to Christ. One often converts to Christianity because Christ gives some combination of forgiveness, love, truth, beauty, joy, peace, meaning, and many other benefits. Underneath it all, to be converted to Christianity is to find in Christ the greatest possible value for one’s life, or to use marketing language, theological conversion is when one finds a greater ‘value proposition’ in Christ than in any other competing claim in heaven or on earth.


Herein lies the point of contact, for marketers trade all day long on

the notion of ‘differentiated value’. Conversion in the marketing sense, and arguably in the theological sense, is simply an event where the convert finds more net value in one action over a myriad of other actions. Thus, if we introduce the notion of value as essential to conversion – even Christian conversion – it can create possibly more shared space here between marketing and theology.

Further, to see conversion as simply a divine act unmediated through anything natural or ordinary is to overlook a rich theological history that affirms the ‘non-competitive agency’ of the Spirit in and through creation.¹³ Essentially, a sophisticated account of the Spirit’s work in the life of a convert is open to all the ways that human and non-human entities are empowered to participate with the Spirit. Or to put it another way, there is not a zero-sum game between divine agency and human agency in the theological understanding of

conversion. Theologians can explore the experience of conversion without necessarily slipping into a kind of neo-Pelagianism, where divine grace is ultimately minimised.¹⁴ Thus, one is not required to see conversion strictly as either a divine endeavor or a human endeavour. There is space for thinking of human persuasion as an art inspired by the Spirit. I suspect the theologian would gladly apply this to things like preaching and evangelism, but would be reticent to apply it to something like marketing.¹⁵ However, this may be more an issue with the theologian’s view of marketing than the marketer’s view of conversion. If CRO is the practice of expressing value in order to inspire an action, then are we not in some broad sense all ‘marketers’? And theologically, who can dictate where the Spirit comes and goes in and through all our seemingly mundane activities?

In all, what I am suggesting is simply that there may be more continuity

between the marketing and theological uses of the term ‘conversion’ than first meets the eye. I am not trying to say that conversion is the same in both instances; neither are they of equal importance. What I am suggesting is only another point of contact, an intriguing overlap, between the secular and the sacred, one which seems to have arisen from an unexpected place – the field of Marketing. For whatever reason, marketers have chosen the word ‘conversion’ to represent the focus of their work. This seems to at least indicate a longing for more personal and spiritual significance. It could mean much more. We could dismiss the digital marketer’s use of ‘conversion’ as naïve or even profane, or we could see it as an opportunity to enter into a meaningful engagement with a community that is thinking very much about how people undergo and experience real change. 

1. For an introduction to CRO, see Benji Rabhan, *Convert Every Click: Make More Money Online with Holistic Conversion Rate Optimization* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013).
2. Scientific terminology started entering the marketing lexicon in the early 20th century with the influence of Claude Hopkins. It has grown much more in recent decades with the practice of A/B split and multivariate testing. Claude Hopkins, *Scientific Advertising*, 1923, <http://www.scientific-advertising.co.uk/>; Colin McFarland, *Experiment! Website Conversion Rate Optimization with A/B and Multivariate Testing* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2013).
3. The study of religious conversion is an expansive field. I have chosen in this article to focus primarily on religious conversion in a strictly Christian theological sense. For those interested in a broader contemporary psychological perspective on religious conversion, see Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Charles E Farhadian, Lewis R Rambo, and Oxford University Press, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
4. Some marketer analysts do attempt to define conversion in this way. For instance, one analyst states, ‘Conversion rate is simply defined as the percentage of visitors on your website who complete a desired goal. A conversion can be anything from clicking a CTA button, filling up a form, to making a purchase.’ However, as developed in the article, this view overlooks CRO as the practice of attempting not just to describe the behaviour, but actually understand and influence it. Shubhi Ahluwalia, ‘Conversion Rate Optimization Solutions for Revenue Growth,’ January 19, 2022, <https://vwo.com/blog/conversion-marketing/>.
5. Andrew B King, *Website Optimization*, 2008, 111.
6. Khalid Saleh and Ayat Shukairy, *Conversion Optimization: The Art and Science of Converting Prospects to Customers* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly, 2011), 2.
7. Tim Ash, Rich Page, and Maura Ginty, *Landing Page Optimization: The Definitive Guide to Testing and Tuning for Conversions*, Second edition (Indianapolis, Indiana: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2012), 8.
8. Rabhan, *Convert Every Click*, 6.
9. Flint McGlaughlin, *The Marketer as Philosopher: 40 Brief Reflections on the Power of Your Value Proposition* (MECLABS Press, 2014), 21.
10. McGlaughlin, 85.
11. See David William Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion* (New York (N.Y.): Oxford University Press, 2020).
12. ‘The advocate’ is an interesting term that appears in both pneumatological discussions to describe the role of the Spirit (*paraklétos*) in the life of the convert, as well as psychological discussions about the role of ‘the other’ in conversion. See Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.
13. See Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).
14. Something Simeon Zahl has referred to as the ‘practically recognizable’ activities of the Spirit in the life of the Christian. Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 69.
15. A further overlap here worth exploring would be web evangelism, specifically as church services and evangelistic efforts have trended to shift to online.



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