



CONSUMER JOURNEYS

BENEFIT OF CONSUMER JOURNEYS

Investigation of the consumer journey is crucial for brands seeking to identify critical points in the purchase process influencing consumer decision making.



W5 ON CONSUMER JOURNEYS

Interest in consumer journey research has increased rapidly in recent years among those seeking to understand the complex purchase process in today's digital world. From connecting on social media to online shopping, consumers are experiencing increasing opportunities to interact with brands. The world of brick-and-mortar shopping has not disappeared, but it is increasingly integrated with the online shopping experience.

This white paper provides an overview of consumer journey research, focused on both qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well as its tactical and strategic use.



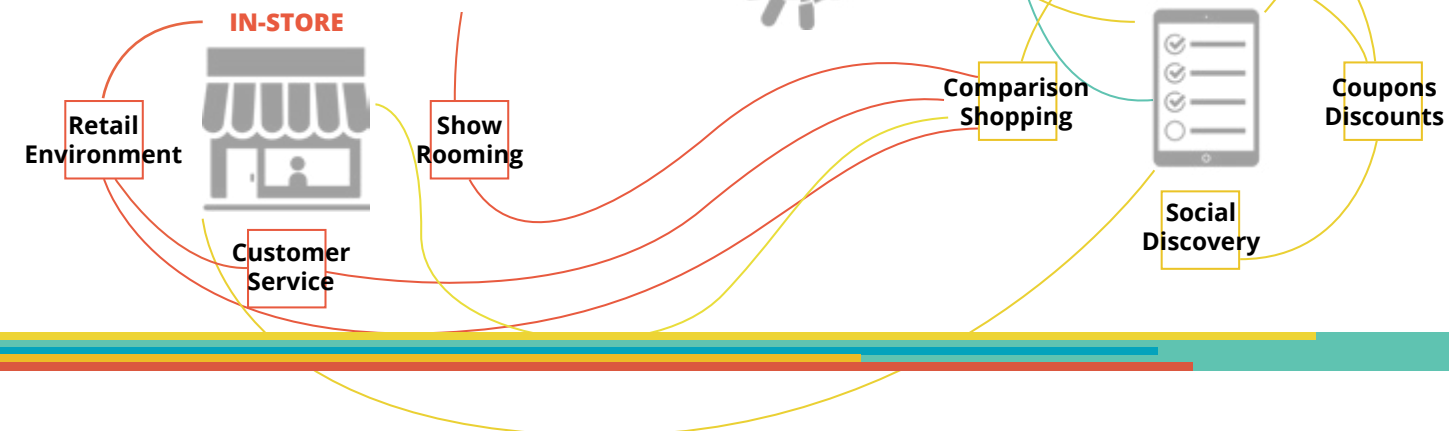
WHAT IS THE CONSUMER JOURNEY?

A consumer journey maps the process by which consumers think, learn, and decide to purchase a product or service.

Traditional consumer journeys charted decision making inside brick-and-mortar stores with an emphasis on understanding how the retail experience impacted the purchase process. This limited view of path to purchase solely explored consumer interactions with in-store touchpoints (e.g. shelving, staff interactions, signage, etc.) as well as the influence of brand perceptions on product consideration. The journey was commonly depicted as a simple, linear process where brands controlled their image and reputation through carefully crafted consumer messaging.

Today's consumer journey is no longer a linear process but splintered with multiple touchpoints across websites, mobile devices, traditional media channels, and retail locales. This rapid evolution requires re-evaluating the touchpoints consumers encounter when interacting with brands and how social conversations influence brand perception.

Focused yet holistic marketing research can help brands develop meaningful relationships with consumers among a complex myriad of touchpoints.





WHY IS MAPPING THE CONSUMER JOURNEY IMPORTANT?

An analysis of the consumer journey illuminates the touchpoints consumers encounter and highlights opportunities for increasing engagement to build lasting consumer relationships.

Shifts in the retail marketplace has sparked both an increase in the desire for personalization and a greater focus on the overall consumer experience. Consumers no longer simply receive product information directly from brands—they actively seek out and interact with messaging through a wider network of related touchpoints. As the consumer-brand dynamic continues to ebb and flow, it is critical to understand the complex network of touchpoints consumers encounter in their search for a desired product or service. Each touchpoint is a brand engagement opportunity influencing product affiliation and subsequent purchase.

A comprehensive consumer journey research engagement can answer questions about when, where, and how consumers consider brands, products, and services and prioritize strategies for engagement during influential journey touchpoints, as well as understanding the drivers and emotions behind each touchpoint and consumer action.

WHAT ARE THE STAGES OF THE CONSUMER JOURNEY?

While the exact steps of the consumer journey can vary widely depending on factors such as category or consumer segment, they can be simplified into three main stages:

PRE-SHOPPING

Need Spark

The need to purchase is sparked. Inspiration can come from multiple sources including replacing an item, social media, recommendation, or simply novelty-seeking.

Discovery

Consumers gather information across multiple media and in-person platforms. They are open-minded and seek information and inspiration.

Browse

Consumers browse items, brands, stores, media and in-person platforms.

Identify

Consumers seek a specific product, service, brand, or product.

RETAIL EXPERIENCES

Omnichannel

The retail experience is a dynamic relationship between multiple channels and influences.

Compare

Consumers seek options and alternatives, leveraging the Omnichannel. They are focused and seeking the potential best combination of product, price, and configuration.

Mindset

Environmental factors may influence browsing, research, and purchasing behaviors in the retail and online environment. How consumers perceive their experience and environment, the “consumer mindset,” can alter their interactions and experiences with touchpoints.

POST-PURCHASE

Consume

Consumers use and enjoy their purchase, often fostering a desire to connect with the brand post-purchase to enhance their experience.

Share

Consumers share their experience with others through word of mouth, product reviews, and posting on social media. They are eager to advocate and co-create.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS IN DESIGNING THE CONSUMER JOURNEY?

Consumer journey research itself is a dynamic process that can fit a range of research objectives, markets, and industries. The following steps represent a broad framework to design a customized consumer journey:

STEP 1: Identify Your Consumer



Understand key characteristics of the consumer and how they interact with brands.

STEP 2: Preliminary Research



Review existing marketplace data to identify emotions, frustrations, and points of interest along the consumer journey.

STEP 3: Hypothesis



Develop a general framework of a consumer journey based on preliminary research.

STEP 4: Understanding the Consumer Experience



Observe consumer interactions. Identify common emotions and need-states that motivate consumers to move from one step to another.

STEP 5: Mapping



Identify common touchpoints. Show general patterns of decision making. Outline these steps and the emotions, goals, or needs that represent them.

RETAIL CHANNELS AND CONSUMER JOURNEY RESEARCH

Consumer journey research can be conducted in multiple retail channels, both online and in brick-and-mortar locales. Most consumer journey research includes exploring retail spaces, as consumers interact with a multitude of resources and channels (apps, emails, texts, user reviews, store displays, advice from retail associates, etc.) when researching products or completing a purchase.

It is important to identify all the touchpoints that influence consumers' shopping experience and direct their path to purchase. Though conventional wisdom suggests if a person begins seeking a product in one place, such as a website, they will complete their purchase online, this is not always the case. Many consumers are first influenced by a trigger such as an advertisement or text message about a sale that piques interest in a product or service. The trigger sets off a chain reaction that could take the consumer online to do more research or to a retail location to view the product in person.

Because consumer journey steps can be fluid and transition between channels, it is increasingly important to explore both the online and brick-and-mortar experience, the "omnichannel."

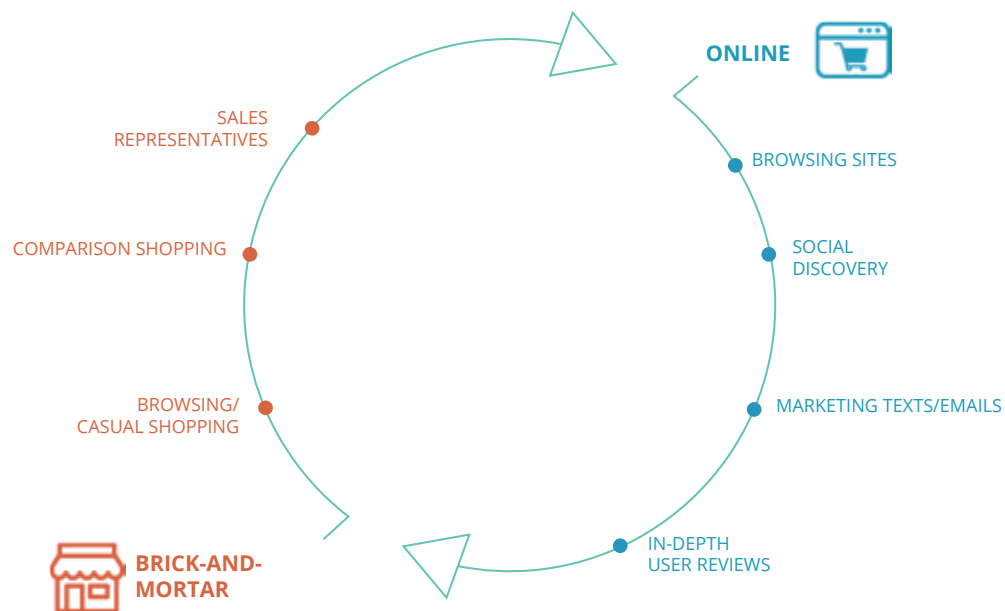


HOW IS CONSUMER JOURNEY RESEARCH ANALYZED?

W5 takes a holistic approach to consumer journey analysis to determine what consumers are feeling, thinking, and doing during each stage of the process.

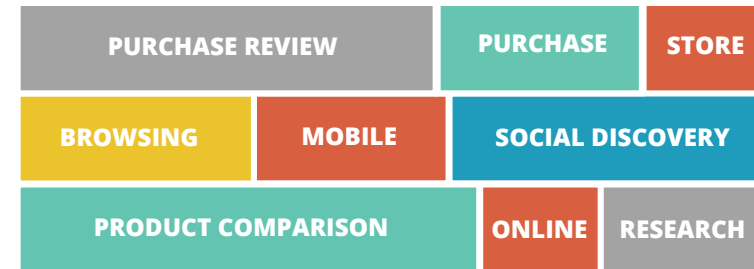
We investigate not only the purchase path for our clients' brand, product, or service but also consumers' shopping behaviors and interactions with competitors' offerings. Observing the consumer journey outside a brand's central ecosystem allows W5 consultants to conduct a comparative analysis of the marketplace, identifying overarching category trends and themes that shape consumer behaviors and their expectations.

The collection and analysis of information W5 gathers through our multi-phased research approach is driven by understanding the cultural, category, and brand trends that influence consumer behavior specific to the client's brand. Through our analysis we also illuminate any tension or pain points consumers face during their journey, resulting in decisions that lead them down a given path. Defining consumer tensions is critical to ease pain points leading to an actively engaged consumer who can eventually integrate into a brand's sphere of influence.



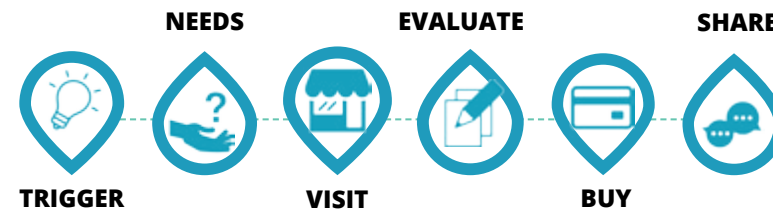
FIRST List and Sort

W5 lists all the activities, behaviors, and touchpoints when researching participants' path to purchase.



NEXT Organize

Review existing marketplace data to identify emotions, frustrations, and points of interest along the consumer journey



THEN Analyze

As a final step, W5 assesses what consumers are thinking, doing, and feeling within each step of the journey. This analysis helps identify opportunities to improve the customer experience at each touchpoint.



WHAT METHODOLOGIES HELP UNCOVER THE CONSUMER JOURNEY?

W5 uncovers the path to purchase by immersing ourselves in the world of the consumer. In-person and online qualitative methodologies help us explore the routines, feelings, and motivations that shape consumers' purchase decisions. W5 has years of experience implementing the following array of research methodologies to chart the consumer journey:

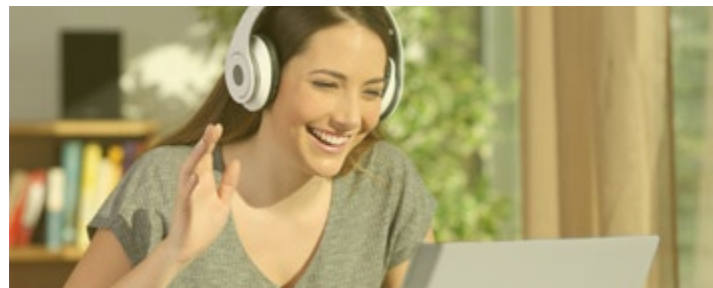
Shop-Along Ethnography



W5 consultants interact with consumers in stores or while browsing online and observe their experiences and reactions. W5 consultants often ask questions during interactions with employees, products, or digital touchpoints as well as observe how the consumer reacts to elements of retail or website engagement. A pre- and post-shopping interview allows consumers to reflect on their overall experience.

Great for in-person observation of the impact of retail, web, and customer service interactions on consumer behaviors. This methodology can be conducted in brick-and mortar stores, in homes, online environments, or anywhere consumers engage with brands or where products and services are purchased or used.

Online Journals and Discussions



Consumers share their experiences shopping for products and services in a personal online journal or as part of an online group discussion. Consumers log in at their convenience and answer a series of questions posed by a W5 moderator. This methodology is ideal for a variety of industries and products, including path to purchase for online transactions. There is also a mobile component (at right) that explores the role of mobile technology in the consumer journey.

This online tool is flexible and can accommodate a variety of consumer journey research applications, including retail ethnography and path to purchase for online brands. An added bonus is the ability to conduct in-depth research with a variety of consumers from different geographical regions and time zones.

Mobile Shop-Alongs



A mobile app allows consumers to answer questions, complete assigned shopping activities (e.g. taking pictures of a store visit or screen shots of websites visited), and comment on their shopping experience. W5 consultants design a series of questions, activities, and prompts that encourages consumers to detail what they are thinking, doing, and feeling during each phase of their journey, whether watching TV before their store visit, browsing websites on their mobile device, or examining their purchase in the car after exiting the store.

Great for exploring specific touchpoints influencing aspects of decision making during the consumer journey including product packaging, signage, website appeal, digital media, or customer service interactions. This research approach can be conducted in any retail or online environment via an internet-enabled smartphone.

Over-the-Shoulder Web Surfing



Over-the-Shoulder web surfing consists of observing consumers shopping on their preferred device to simulate a natural shopping session. This allows W5 consultants to see which websites and merchants may be already bookmarked, explore how consumers discover options and browse, and uncover payment preferences.

This activity is typically performed in conjunction with in-person discussions and provides added context to validate or expand on consumer responses. It is best performed in home as it allows consumers to select the device or devices they prefer or typically use.

VALIDATING CONSUMER JOURNEYS THROUGH QUANTITATIVE METRICS

While consumer journey research is best suited to qualitative exploration, quantitative research can play a valuable role in validating learning. A supplemental online survey can provide statistically reliable detail about the steps along the path to purchase, as well as assess overall consumer satisfaction at various touchpoints during the journey.

Leveraging quantitative insight in consumer journey mapping helps identify salient opportunities to enhance consumers' experience and prioritize issues in the order they should be addressed.

Quantitative analysis of consumer journey steps is best suited for those who:



Desire statistically significant rigor to validate strategic decision making



Have multiple target consumer segments for which they want to investigate and identify differences in the consumer journey



Seek to gauge and compare customer satisfaction with competitor brands along each step of the consumer journey to identify opportunities for differentiation and competitive advantage

Qualitative and Quantitative Research Complement a Consumer Journey

STEP 1: Initial Qualitative Research

Utilizing a series of qualitative methodologies this phase of the process holistically explores the consumer journey by establishing initial hypotheses of steps and relevant touchpoints in consumers' path to purchase.



OPTIONAL STEP 2: Quantitative Validation



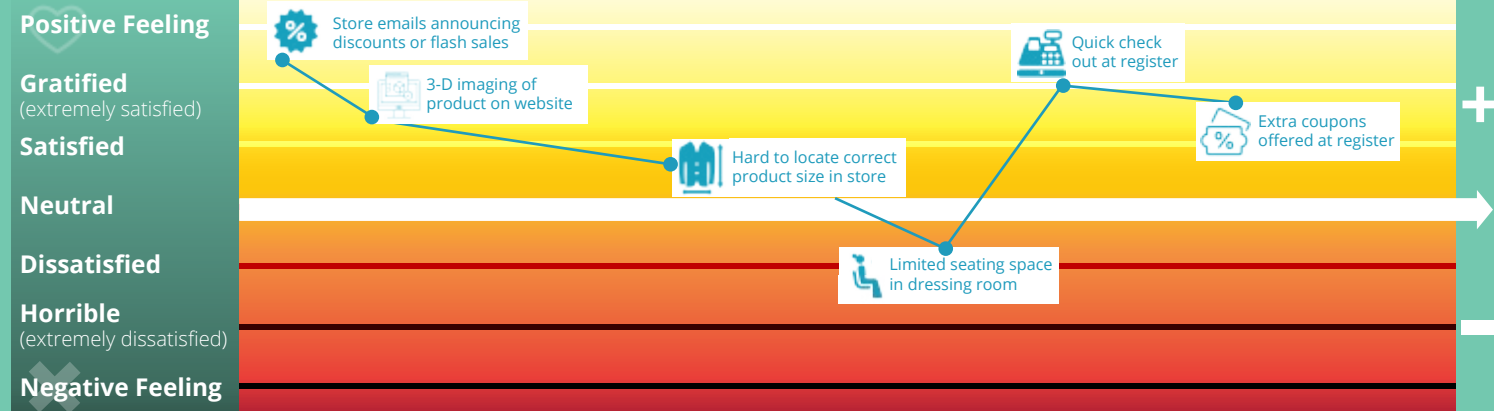
Next, utilizing marketplace insight gained in the qualitative research, W5 employs an online survey utilizing questions specific to each step along the journey. The questionnaire assesses the relevance of each hypothesized step among a broader, yet targeted, audience to determine which steps are essential, and to what degree influential, in the purchase process.

UNDERSTANDING QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Quantitative data can be incorporated into a customized journey map, creating a visual representation of findings, including individual steps and touchpoints.

There are several benefits to applying statistical support to consumer journey research, including verifying relevance and steps in consumers' path to purchase among a larger sample of the population and variances in consumer perceptions.

Satisfaction at Each Consumer Touchpoint



An advantage of employing statistical analysis is its ability to pinpoint opportunities to fine-tune the branded consumer journey experience. Identifying those touchpoints at which a brand excels and those identified as underperforming can provide a deeper understanding of consumers' engagement and their immediate preferences for that experience. This information creates a branded "ecosystem" where each touchpoint leads to further engagement with the brand itself.

HOW DOES MAPPING THE CONSUMER JOURNEY INFORM STRATEGY?

Visually engaging consumer journey maps can be incorporated into a final report or as a standalone deliverable to illuminate the journey in an easy-to-understand manner. Additional design driven deliverables, such as consumer journey factsheets and video highlight reels, help socialize research results, bringing consumers and their journey to life.

Research insights commonly trigger creative and interactive strategies by defining key steps in the purchase process by mapping out and pinpointing influences on emotional and rational decision making, and the subsequent behaviors of consumers throughout the purchase journey.

Understanding consumers' decision-making process offers an opportunity to develop messaging strategies that influence consumers more effectively.



Consumer journey research reveals multiple opportunities for creative and interactive strategy. For example:



A brand can learn they need to reduce barriers to purchase at a specific step in the consumer journey.



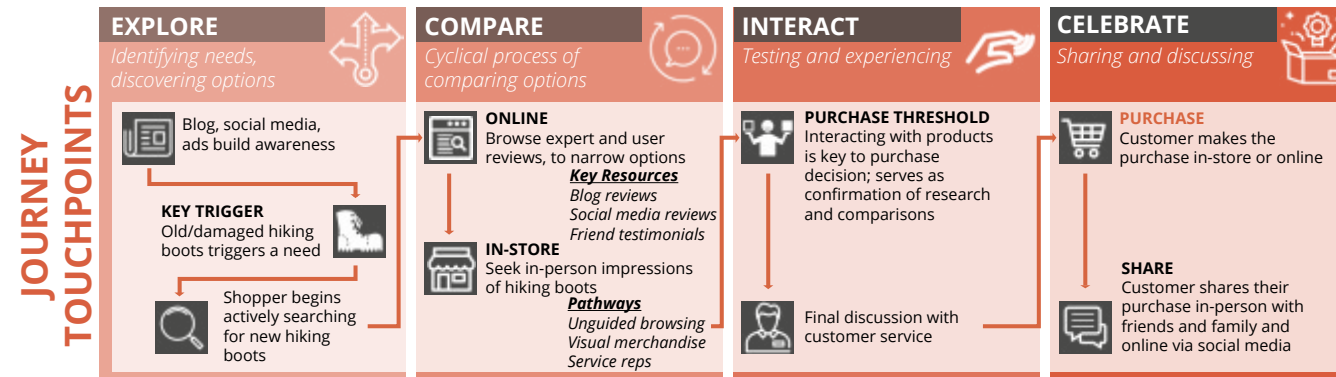
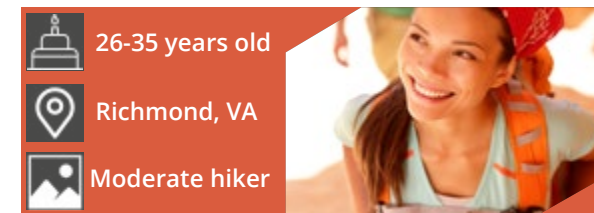
A brand may find consumers express a strong desire for the brand in the exploration stage, but consideration of alternatives may increase in the lead-up to purchase necessitating stronger engagement throughout the entire purchase process.



A brand might do well at point of purchase, but may improve strategies to increase brand awareness in earlier stages of the journey, leading to greater conversion.

"OUTDOOR TRADITIONALIST"

This shopper type is discerning in their adoption of new outdoor hiking gear. They are not early adopters, but prefer to wait for media validation and confirmation from early adopter friends before making a purchase. They define value as purchasing with confidence and the longevity of their outdoor gear.



CAN I USE CONSUMER JOURNEY RESEARCH IN MY INDUSTRY?

Consumer journey research is, first and foremost, about the consumer and their experiences which creates a wealth of opportunity across industries. W5 conducts consumer journey research for Fortune 500 and advertising agencies working within industries including, but not limited to:



Apparel and Accessories

National Retailer, Specialty, Big Box



Healthcare

Patients, Physicians, Healthcare Networks



Consumer Goods

Food and Beverage, Health and Beauty, Household Products



Information Technology

Wireless Carriers, Manufacturers, Retail Outlets



Financial Services

Banking, Investments



Insurance

Health, Automotive, Life



Food and Beverage

Dining, Casual Dining, QSR



Leisure/Entertainment

Hotels, Resorts, Airlines, Venues, Events

W5 customizes each consumer journey engagement, tailoring research design to fit the goals at hand.

At W5, recent consumer journey studies have resulted in understanding decision pathways for wireless phones, awareness and consideration in the home bath market, various purchase drivers in grocery stores, and key behaviors that define a nonprofit's donors. The following case study provides an overview of our customized research approach, from designing and applying an appropriate methodology to developing a takeaway deliverable outlining key solutions.



CASE STUDY

UNDERSTANDING THE OUTDOOR GEAR PATH TO PURCHASE

A premium apparel company partnered with W5 to understand how consumer segments shop for active and lifestyle accessories. Consumer journey research was conducted to identify opportunities and barriers to purchase in the retail and online environments.

Approach

W5 developed a dual-phase qualitative approach, consisting of Day-in-the-Life Diaries and Shop-Along Interviews, to explore two key segments' shopping behaviors for active and lifestyle accessories. Day-in-the-Life Diaries provided foundational information regarding each segment's daily behavior, media intake, and overall perceptions of the category. Shop-Along Interviews with the same cohort examined purchase triggers and barriers in-depth. W5 ethnographers conducted the Shop-Along Interviews in-store and online to explore segments' multi-channel behaviors before, during, and post-purchase.

Results

W5 identified cultural and environmental barriers to purchasing the client's brand both in-store and online. This information was used to refine the brand's communication strategies, online presence, and in-store displays to optimize appeal and engagement among each segment. W5 also developed a Consumer Journey Map detailing the main motivations, touchpoints, and barriers influencing the consumers' path to purchase. The map also highlighted opportunities to promote appealing product features shoppers were unaware of when browsing and selecting accessories.



W5 is a boutique custom marketing research firm. We focus on answering who, what, when, where, and why people relate to products, services, and brands. W5 conducts full-service marketing research and research strategy services for Fortune 500s and leading advertising agencies.

Want to know more?
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