What Planners and Marketers Share

Idea In Short

City planners and marketers look like they work in unrelated fields, but both spend their careers studying the same underlying problem: how people actually move, what captures their attention, and what nudges them toward a specific action. The professionals who succeed in either field learn to design for how people behave rather than how a plan assumes they will behave, and to treat every unexpected pattern, whether a worn dirt trail or an ignored campaign message, as data rather than a failure. Context determines whether a good idea works, attention is a genuinely limited resource in both a city and a message, and neither discipline is ever finished because the environment keeps shifting under the plan. Marketers who study how planners observe and adjust to real behavior can apply the same discipline to campaigns, audiences and channels.

At first glance, city planners and marketers do not seem to have much to discuss. One spends the day thinking about sidewalks, traffic patterns, zoning and public spaces. The other spends it thinking about audiences, campaigns, messaging and how to get someone to click a button. Zoom out, though, and the two jobs start looking remarkably similar. Both are trying to understand how people move, what catches their attention, and what encourages them to take a particular action. City planners shape physical journeys through neighborhoods and streets. Marketers shape journeys through messages, brands and buying decisions. Both quickly learn the same lesson: people do not always behave the way anyone expects them to.

Both obsess over where people go

City planners need to know where people are coming from, where they are headed, and how they prefer to get there. That requires studying everything from pedestrian traffic to commuting routes, since a street that looks fine on paper can fail completely once real foot traffic hits it. Marketers are equally interested in movement, even if their version carries a different name. The customer journey asks a nearly identical question: where are people

going, and where can a company meet them along the way.

Outdoor advertising makes the connection especially obvious. A billboard advertising agency cannot think only about whether an advertisement looks compelling. It also has to consider where that advertisement appears, who travels past it, how quickly they are moving, and whether they will have enough time to absorb the message before it disappears from view. McKinsey's research on the consumer decision journey found that companies who treat that journey as a managed product, rather than a series of isolated touchpoints, understand it far more completely than their competitors do.1 The same discipline that makes a transit map useful makes a customer journey map useful, since both only work when they reflect how people actually move rather than how a plan assumes they will.

Location, location, location

Context can make or break an idea in either field. A bike lane is useful only if it connects places cyclists actually want to reach. A public bench makes more sense along a busy walking route than beside an eight-lane highway. Marketing works the same way. Reaching a large audience is not automatically valuable if the message reaches them in the wrong place or at the wrong moment.

Great marketers think about context the way a planner thinks about a street: what is someone doing when they encounter this message, where are they headed, and what might they need next. Federal guidance on walkable urban thoroughfares describes this as a context sensitive approach, one that tailors a street's design to the surrounding neighborhood rather than applying a single standard everywhere.2 A message built without that same sensitivity to context tends to fail for the same reason a poorly placed crosswalk fails: it was designed for a generic person instead of the specific one who will actually encounter it.

Good design quietly changes behavior

The best-designed spaces often influence people without announcing what they are doing. Crosswalks show pedestrians where to cross, signs point visitors toward exits, and lighting makes one route feel more inviting than another. None of these cues force a decision. They simply make one choice easier than the alternatives.

Marketing uses similar cues. Visual hierarchy tells a reader what to look at first, packaging draws the eye toward certain information, and a clear call to action makes the next step obvious. Eye-tracking research on how people scan written content found that readers follow a predictable pattern, reading across the top of a page and then scanning down the left side, which means information placed outside that pattern is frequently missed entirely.3 Neither planners nor marketers can force people to behave exactly as intended, but both can make certain choices easier, clearer and more appealing than the alternatives.

Both have to design for actual humans, not imaginary ones

There is a real difference between how people are supposed to behave and what they actually do, and city planners see this constantly. One of the clearest examples is the desire path, the unofficial dirt trail that appears when enough pedestrians decide the carefully designed sidewalk takes too long to be worth using.

Marketers encounter their own version of desire paths regularly. Customers may use a product differently than expected or ignore a carefully crafted campaign message entirely, responding instead to a feature that was barely mentioned in the original pitch. Analytics, reviews, sales data and testing all reveal what people actually care about, often in ways a planning document never predicted. For both professions, the lesson stays the same: observation beats assumption. A team can produce a detailed plan for how people should behave, but eventually real humans get a vote, and the plan has to adjust to whatever they decide.

Everybody is competing for limited space

Cities have a finite amount of physical space. Roads, sidewalks, bike lanes, parks, businesses, housing, parking and public transportation all want a share of it, and no amount of clever design can create more square footage where none exists. Marketing has its own scarce resource in attention. An advertisement could technically contain six product benefits, three calls to action, a paragraph about the company, a QR (quick response) code and a catchy slogan, but that does not mean it should.

Attention scarcity is not an abstract concern. Research on the modern attention economy found that people are exposed to between 6,000 and 10,000 advertisements a day, a volume that makes most individual messages nearly invisible against the noise.4 Just as a

city becomes difficult to navigate when every square foot competes for attention, marketing becomes harder to understand when everything inside it is treated as equally important. Good planners prioritize. Good marketers do too. Sometimes the smartest design decision is deciding what to leave out entirely.

Neither job is ever really finished

Even the best plan eventually meets change. A new transit line can transform how people move through a neighborhood, and new housing can alter established traffic patterns overnight. Marketing environments shift just as quickly. Customer preferences change, new platforms emerge, and competitors adjust their strategies without warning.

That constant shifting means both professions depend on feedback loops rather than a single fixed plan. Make a decision, watch how people respond, learn something from the gap between expectation and reality, and adjust accordingly. Gartner's research on agile marketing found that teams using short, iterative work cycles to test and adapt reported meaningfully higher satisfaction with how their work gets managed than teams relying on traditional, fixed planning processes.5 Success in either field is not about predicting human behavior perfectly. It is about recognizing quickly when a prediction was wrong and having a process built to correct it.

The best plans start with people

City planners shape the journeys people take through physical spaces. Marketers shape journeys through information, choices and decisions. Both have to think about location, attention, behavior, design and what real people will actually do once a plan leaves the drawing board. So whether the decision involves where to build a crosswalk or where to place an advertisement, both fields eventually arrive at a remarkably similar question: what will someone do when they get here. Neither profession gets the luxury of a final answer, since the people they design for keep changing their minds. The ones who stay curious about that shift, rather than defensive about their original plan, tend to build the work that lasts.

- 1The New Consumer Decision Journey
- 2Context Sensitive Solutions In Designing Major Urban Thoroughfares For Walkable Communities

- 3F-Shaped Pattern Of Reading On The Web: Misunderstood, But Still Relevant (Even On Mobile)
- 4The Attention Economy: Standing Out Among The Noise
- 5Agile Marketing

Summary

Neither city planners nor marketers can force people to behave exactly as intended, and the best ones stop trying. Both professions succeed by observing what people actually do, adjusting when reality contradicts the plan, and treating that gap as useful information rather than a mistake to hide. Location and context turn a good idea into a working one, since a bike lane nobody rides and an ad nobody notices fail for the same underlying reason. Attention is the scarce resource behind both disciplines, which means prioritization matters as much as creativity. The question that ties both fields together is simple: what will someone actually do when they arrive, whether that arrival point is a street corner or a landing page. Professionals who keep asking that question, and keep watching the answer change, build plans and campaigns that hold up once real people interact with them.