



Digital Article / Customer Strategy

Do You Know What Your Customers' Aspirations Are?

To serve your customers, you need to understand where they're trying to go.
by B. Joseph Pine II

Published on HBR.org / February 6, 2026 / Reprint [H092FR](#)



MILATAS/Getty Images

In his new book [The Transformation Economy: Guiding Customers to Achieve Their Aspirations](#), B. Joseph Pine II argues that there is a new offering companies can provide: change. In this adapted excerpt, he explores four types of aspirations people have and how companies can tap into them when creating their products, services, or experiences.

Companies the world over have an opportunity to help their customers achieve their aspirations. As my colleagues and I previously discussed in the [*Harvard Business Review*](#):

Even though we're all filled with hopes, aims, and ambitions, significant change is incredibly hard to accomplish on our own. Enterprises should recognize the economic opportunity offered by the transformation business, in which they partner with consumers to improve some fundamental aspect of their lives—to achieve a “new you.”

Offering transformations means understanding the *why* behind what people buy from you—and then bringing together the resources to make that outcome happen.

To do so, you must first understand that aspirations have two primary dimensions: quality and scale.

Quality. All transformations are about identity change—a shift in how you think of yourself—where aspirations can range from differences in *kind* to differences in *degree*. Changes in *kind* transform your identity in core ways, such as your essence, values, and purpose. They're about how you exist in the world. Changes in *degree*, on the other hand, shift noncore, more peripheral aspects of identity. These include attitudes, behaviors, actions, aptitudes, capabilities, skills, and other ways of acting in the world.

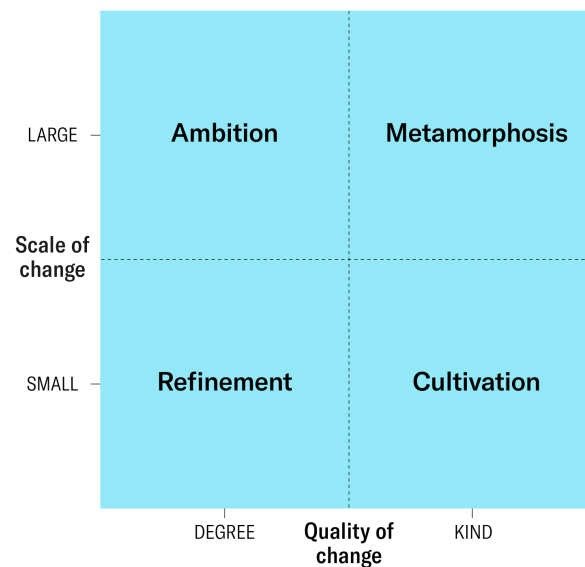
Scale. Aspirations for change can range in scale from large to small. Large-scale aspirations affect us greatly, endeavoring to shift the trajectories of our lives. But individuals also long for smaller-scale shifts: think of incremental steps to improve your health and well-

being, financial stability, or education. They may not change your life trajectory, but they make a difference nonetheless.

These two dimensions, then, yield four different types of customer aspirations your business can assist in:

Types of Aspirations

Aspirations have two primary dimensions, quality of change and scale of change, which yield four types of customer aspirations your business can assist with.



Source: B. Joseph Pine II, *The Transformation Economy* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2026)



See more HBR charts in [Data & Visuals](#) on HBR.org.

Metamorphosis: Large Change in Kind

When the transformation is deep, highly personal, and substantial, involving profound change, the aspiration is best called one of metamorphosis. Aspirations of this type refer to a longing for identity

change—from nonparent to parent, med student to surgeon, and the like.

People in this category approach change in two different ways. The first is with their eyes open to the transformation desired. Because of this, their conception of self may precede their actual transformation. In guiding them through this level of change, you must aid them in dealing with the ramifications of the transformation, including in letting go of aspects now misaligned with their new self. The key is to collaborate with customers to discover what these aspects are, as they may not know themselves. Then you can guide them through the series of experiences it takes to shed the old and become the new.

In other cases, the change in the conception of self comes after the actual transformation. Companies must ensure that the change holds as applied to their life. For example, ChoiceCenter Leadership University offers an Essential EQ Leadership Development training program. The program involves in-person time focused on discovery and breakthrough, but once at home, the guidance doesn't stop. ChoiceCenter then provides a one-hundred-day "Living EQ Leadership," where an individual's life becomes the classroom. Each week involves a cadence of coaching and remote meetings, and a stretch assignment for the following week, so individuals can apply what they've learned in real-world situations.

Cultivation: Small Change in Kind

Cultivation aspirations don't involve wholesale, comprehensive changes, but nonetheless are differences in kind. They include such economic actions as joining a fitness center or becoming a vegan to cultivate a healthier lifestyle ("I am a healthy person"), shifting savings from a bank to a wealth management firm to cultivate financial well-being ("I am financially set"), or becoming a member of a museum

to build an appreciation for modern art (“I am an art devotee”). Such cultivations can embed themselves into someone’s core identity deeply enough that they become major changes over time. They can deeply affect values (“Financial stewardship is important to me”), beliefs (“Everyone should eat healthy,”) and essence (“I am a professional athlete”).

Organizations should consider how they can assist in these pursuits, helping aspirants nourish their enrichment (and not be mere dilettantes). For instance, apps help people cultivate good and healthy habits, and prove highly effective at sustaining them. Often in concert with devices, they excel at tracking against baselines, showing an individual’s progress. They also provide access to all manner of know-how, lessons, physical coaches, and mental health counselors, and even to other aspirants that bring accountability, during the transformation and the follow-through. Consider Noom, Fooducate, or Lasta to cultivate healthy eating habits; Mint, Goodbudget, or EveryDollar to cultivate beneficial financial habits; Quizlet, Memrise, or Wisdom Quotes to cultivate effective learning habits; Aura, Calm, or Headspace to cultivate valuable mindfulness habits; and Hallow, PrayerMate, and Abide to cultivate virtuous prayer habits. Many are used in combination with tracking devices, such as Fitbit, Apple Watch, or Oura, to cultivate sustainable fitness habits. And apps such as Habitica, Habitify, and Productive focus on cultivating habits in and of themselves!

Ambition: Large Change in Degree

Many changes are in degree, not of kind, denoting aspirations for transformation in noncore, more peripheral facets of a person. In other words, someone has an existing element of self and decides they want to improve, boost, or enhance it. When large in scale, such aspirations are ones of ambition.

For example, your ambition may be to greatly improve at tennis, and so you take lessons, practice, play, and practice some more until you reach the level of your ambition. Maybe you're a programmer and recognize the explosion of generative AI, and so you enroll in courses and earn certificates to prepare for and then take advantage of the career possibilities. Or maybe you've always enjoyed dabbling with filmmaking and decide you want to get better at it—not to become an auteur but an accomplished amateur—so you see more movies to study technique, take classes on the subject, and experiment with longer and more involved filming.

Organizations looking to offer transformations in ambition must ensure people maintain their expansive gains, continuing their work once the aspiration is met (although often on a less-frequent basis for maintenance). Consider the example of GOLFTEC, which provides golf lessons, club fittings, and swing optimization, for instance. Better than the idiosyncrasies of any individual coach, GOLFTEC compares your swing with the pros' on video, and provides lessons on how to make changes that let you hit the ball more like they do, closing the gap over time. The company excels with at-home and on-range exercises that make the lessons pay off.

Refinement: Small Change in Degree

Refinement transformations involve honing, polishing, sharpening, upgrading, or otherwise improving some element of someone's current identity. Someone who enjoys gardening, for instance, starts to read magazines, talks with others who garden, and watches videos to learn more. Such small-scale changes in degree could apply to anything a person can enjoy, relish, care for, delight in, or even love—wine, coffee, Italian food, cigars, running, reading, and more.

Organizations offering such transformations must not only offer opportunity for learning but also ensure aspirants retain their level of improvement. Consider turning an offering into an ongoing membership or a relationship that continues long after the initial encounter. Given the typical academy or workshop model for such transformations, companies can add on “continuing ed” programs specifically for those who’ve graduated from earlier ones. Home Depot offers how-to projects and instructions on their website, as well as free in-person workshops that give individuals the opportunity to expand their do-it-yourself (DIY) skills in areas from tool basics to kitchen remodeling.

...

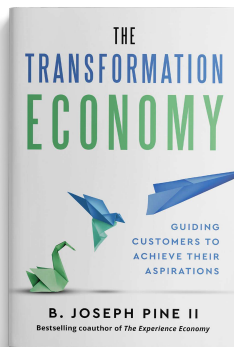
Now that you understand the four types of aspirations, ask yourself:

- Which types of aspirations resonate most with my company?
- For which types aspirations can I see creating transformations?
- How do our current offerings fit into these ideas?
- What variety of customers do we sell to today—and who might we sell to tomorrow?

In thinking about these four types of aspirations—metamorphosis, cultivation, ambition, and refinement—recognize that gray areas and overlaps exist between them, depending on the aspirant, their identity, their starting point, and their aspiration. Customers may also seek multiple, related aspirations at the same time. These are all considerations you need to take into account as you design and guide your transformation offerings. You need not limit yourself to one type of aspiration; refinement and ambition—focused on changes in degree—go particularly well together, as do cultivation and metamorphosis, focused on changes in kind.

And if you can accomplish metamorphosis, you can likely easily guide the other types. Columbia Theological Seminary, for example, gives a metamorphic master's of divinity degree for those going into the ministry. Using largely the same capabilities and people, it also offers transformations for those not enrolled in their degree programs, such as achieving refinement through certification programs for lay pastors, ambition through continuing education programs, and cultivation through lectures, workshops, and pilgrimages.

Whatever the type of aspiration, there is no greater economic value you can create than to guide customers in achieving them—to help people become who they want to become. As goods, services, and even experiences become more commoditized, transformations yield premium pricing and long-term loyalty because they result in lasting value for customers who become more and more of who they are meant to be.



This article is adapted from *The Transformation Economy: Guiding Customers to Achieve Their Aspirations* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2026) by B. Joseph Pine II.

[Buy it here](#)

This article was originally published online on February 6, 2026.



B. Joseph Pine II is co-founder of Strategic Horizons LLP and the author of many books, including *The Experience Economy*, with James H. Gilmore, and *Infinite Possibility*, with Kim C. Korn. His most recent book is *The Transformation Economy: Guiding Customers to Achieve Their Aspirations*.

X @joepine