

CEM Implementation - Let Emotions and Human Touch Take the Lead

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When it comes to managing customer experience the majority of companies hire expensive consultants to receive advice on implementing an effective CEM methodology in their business environment. Interactions with customers are being analyzed, moments of truth identified, and critical incidences evaluated with complex statistical algorithms. Again, we try to "rationalize" our services and way of doing things with customers.

Isn't it so complicated?

Is this really the way we should start working on implementing customer experience management? Is this the right approach to getting closer to our customers as human beings, understanding them and exceeding their expectations? It sure is a valid approach to get budgets for projects approved, to give status reports on how measures for improvement are being implemented, but can we really be that rational and "technical" regarding customer experience?

Being on consultant assignments at the client site, I wonder many times how "putting ourselves in the customers' shoes" is something that we define in complex methodologies and process flows instead of keeping a simple view on what emotions customers experience when interacting with us. We forget our personal preferences as soon as we are affected as professionals. Personal experiences as customers are being shared and controversially discussed if we are affected in our private lives, but as soon as we pass the door to our workplace in the morning, we suddenly defend the company we work for (and its procedures and business rules) when dealing with critical incidents with customers. Many reasons are found and explained, why a complaint could not be resolved according to customer expectations, why an IVR system is necessary to optimize customer service costs (even if customers complain about talking to a system instead of a person when calling), and why a campaign was targeted to push sales volume instead of offering a personalized, needs-based product or service to the customer.

Back to basics

We need to go back to basics, understanding that our customers are persons with individual needs, concerns, expectations and preferences. Small details and signs of appreciation are much better valued than complex CEM methodologies that don't reach the customer where most important to drive his loyalty: his emotions and mood when dealing with us as product or service provider. The secret for delivering an effective, sustainable customer experience is to conclude each interaction with our customers with a simple and honest sign of just taking care.

Let me give you an example: a Thai restaurant in Madrid downtown has opened about a year ago, and attracted customers by its cuisine and design. If you want to have lunch, or you make a reservation or go earlier to be seated. The quality of food is not extraordinary, nor the waiter service they offer (standard menu, long waiting times to be served), but little details in their behavior is recognized by customers: they take care of your wardrobe when you get seated, women are being treated as ladies, a warm smile is never missing, and a pleasant surprise before leaving the restaurant, especially when taking the obligatory coffee or tea as end ceremony of the lunch break, is being offered. For instance, your tea is not served in a standard prepared, industrial tea bag, it is served as loose tea in a little tiny silk bag (a special product imported from the US to Spain), packaged in a curious box with the motto "great things in small packages". From a customer perspective, you immediately notice the difference in experiencing your presence in this restaurant with any other in the same area.

You just feel good about being there and spending your money, and live a positive experience: because you are the witness of a customer commitment lived by heart.

At this point I would like to connect - coming back to the exposure - to the implementation of CEM methodologies in companies. You don't have to waste thousands of dollars for analyzing and defining the experiences that you want to deliver to your customers in a sophisticated way. Customers give more importance to the HOW than the WHAT (this is being considered as self explanatory and obligatory), and the effect of being surprised in a positive way. So your focus as company should go into observing and listening to your customer in the most frequent interactions, taking this feedback seriously and integrating it into customer interaction policies that are really defined from a customer perspective (= customer centricity), keeping the emphasis on the small things.

What does this mean now precisely for companies where functions are still traditionally organized - how to manage internally to ensure a positive customer experience across marketing, sales, and service, and across interaction channels with customers?

Three simple steps to get on the track

Step 1: Identify the HOW in delivering a positive customer experience at the end of the interaction in question - this is what sticks. We make mistakes, this is natural and human, the crux is how we manage the mistake, and how we leave the customer at the end of a conversation.

Let's have a first look at marketing: brand advertising campaigns are generally posted to strengthen the emotional affection to the customer. Here the creativity of content and the final message are crucial to make the difference - surprise your customer, and he will remember the positive experience. BMW in Spain, about 2 years ago, launched a magnificent brand campaign with its X3 SUV and Bruce Lee as protagonists, and using the final motto "be water my friend". Customers and potential customers were thrilled with the creativity of the campaign, and trusted BMW in terms of innovation and trends.

Regarding the sales process, customer experience is driven by intelligent sales procedures, without giving the customer the feeling of being offered a product or service in a pushy manner, following sales objectives. In the mid term, I sell more if I leave the customer with appetite, not with a full stomach. A great example is the Swiss shoemaker MTB, where the customer trying the shoe is being asked to really feel comfortable walking around in the showroom for a couple of minutes, otherwise sales personnel does not recommend to buy the shoe - this is an excellent strategy because the customer experiences trustworthy advice.

Customer experience management in Customer Service is far more complicated than in marketing or sales. The reason is the nature of customer service: it's being contacted if things go wrong, starting with a "bad" experience to be converted into a positive one during the customer interaction. Here it is crucial to have the right communication and anti-stress skills to soften the dialogue with the customer. Even if a complaint or inquiry cannot be solved in the same instance, it can be communicated in a way that makes the customer feel taken seriously and empathically understanding his viewpoint. A controversial example, but one that I like to use, is Toyota's recent dealing with the re-call campaigns they had to conduct for certain models on global level. The president's vow in front of the press and open regret to all Toyota customers shows the seriousness of the issue and the commitment being giving to its resolution.

Step 2: Communicate 3 simple behavioral rules to your employees when delivering the product or service to the customer. If you want your employees to exceed customer expectations, and facilitate a unique and positive experience, help them by giving them simple and understandable instructions.

For marketing employees this could be for instance: don't promise something that we cannot keep in our real interactions with customers, stick to brand and company values, and make marketing investments according to the economic environment (in crisis times you should not spend huge amounts of budget in marketing costly TV campaigns...)

Sales staff should be encouraged to a mid- to long term management of sales procedures, ensuring listening, respect and a certain degree of understatement towards customers. Your customers will appreciate it, and buy earlier than you think (because they decide the moment, and are not "overwhelmed")

Your Customer Service team should openly ask for feedback: how does the customer feel about complaint handling? Are there any ideas for improvement? What can the company do to regain a relation of trust and respect? Customers will be positively surprised, they are used to receiving customer satisfaction calls with pre-defined questions for CSI measuring, but never asked openly and directly in the moment of interaction.

Step 3: Let your customer know that CEM is part of your business strategies, and that you are continuously working on it and open for pro-active feedback (customers have great ideas, we just have to ask them or listen to them in social networks)

The performance of marketing campaigns can be made transparent to the customer as well, not only internally in the marketing department.

Sales figures can be related to customer statements provided after the buying decision - in this case it can be used as marketing measure as well.

Customer Service can make performance measures public on the corporate website: why do customers complain, and how do we deal with it? How is our Customer Service rated by Customers?

As you see, it is easier to do the right things right than doing them wrong. We live in a world where transparency is being claimed by customers, where company failures are being spread through the Internet real-time, and where failure in business strategy and customer interactions is being shared between customers. As a company, we are obliged to take active action, and not to wait to comment on things once they have been produced. Customer Centricity and Customer Experience Management cannot be ignored by companies anymore, and should be understood as great opportunity for a healthy and organic strategic growth.