



The Art of Engaging the Customer: Proactive Steps to Delivering a Superior Customer Experience

By Linda G. Shea and Warren Frankel

Delivering an optimal customer experience goes beyond the dimension of merely providing good customer service. Companies who succeed in this area will be those that have effectively aligned their people, processes, and product/service offerings with the needs and expectations of their customers.

Today, best-in-class companies are increasingly recognized more for the overall experience they provide than for the individual products or services they sell. Companies such as Wachovia Bank, LL Bean, Ace Hardware, and Ritz Carlton are winning both accolades and customers by offering an experience which is as highly valued by customers as it is difficult for competitors to duplicate. These customer experience leaders are gaining market share and improving the value of their brands.

When ongoing cost-cutting measures, ineffective policies or lack of planning come into play, the result is an impaired customer experience. The ultimate outcome can be long-term, expensive to correct and, in some cases, catastrophic – as these examples illustrate:

- **Dell Computer** built on a foundation of providing superior customer experience, lost its way in recent years – resulting in a decline in market share leadership to Hewlett Packard. Consequently, Dell has spent an estimated \$100 million on measures geared to reviving the service experience.
- **Home Depot** made an equally serious error. After phenomenal growth under the leadership of Bob Nardelli, it cut out the heart of what was driving its success: superior service provided by motivated employees. The result: a decline in the company's ACSI (American Customer Satisfaction Index) ranking from 75 to 67 – the lowest in the entire retail sector – while archrival Lowe's ranking increased 3 points from 75 to 78.
- **JetBlue's** embarrassing blunder was front-page news. Having cultivated a well-earned reputation for a superior customer experience at comparatively low cost, a single ice storm, for which the company was seemingly unprepared, wreaked havoc on its stock price (6% drop in one day), flight reservations (1,000 flights cancelled in one day), and forward-looking earnings potential.

Delivering on the Brand Promise: Knowing Which Questions to Ask:

Maximizing the customer's experience is equally as important as introducing unique products and services in today's marketplace. But how well do organizations understand the relationship between customers' expectations and experiences to the brand promises they make? To understand this dynamic, questions management should be asking across the organization are:

1. How well do our employees deliver on our brand promise?
2. What are our customer's expectations of and experiences with our organization?
3. What is the gap between our brand promise and the customer experience/customer expectations?
4. How consistent is the delivery of our brand promise across all channels of customer interaction?
5. What are we doing to deliver a differentiated experience from that of our competition, and/or in comparison to other non-competitive organizations?
6. How is all of this information utilized by our organization to close the gap between the promise and the experience to ultimately enhance the overall customer experience?

If thorough answers to these six questions about the company's service strategy aren't available, it's time to start gathering them.

Managing Multiple Channels of Interaction: An Ongoing Challenge:

Traditionally, most customer interactions were conducted either in person or through call center agents. However, to cut costs, companies have increasingly turned to outsourcing live customer interactions to near-term or offshore locations, or have opted to implement technology-driven self-service solutions. While such business decisions are not inherently bad, a focus on shorter-term savings without regard for resulting compromises to longer-term retention and advocacy strategies is arguably a mistake.

There's little doubt that customers will have an increasing number of options beyond traditional and emerging contact centers, which companies will need to support. It is also critical to realize that customers who use different channels tend to have different profiles which directly affect their needs and expectations. Further, as the number of channels required to interact with and support customers grows, so does the risk that the customer experience will be eroded through inconsistent management of these multiple "touchpoints". Disconnects between a call center experience and a self-service experience are not acceptable when the stakes are so high. Simply put, channels of interaction must be managed to produce the promised experience consistently every time.

The role of customer preference in choosing the channels of interaction most convenient for them further complicates the task of customer experience management. For example, customers may make several “visits” to a provider in a single week – from ordering online to calling a toll-free number to making an in-person stop at the local retail outlet. Customers expect to be recognized regardless of which “outlet” they visit. Accomplishing this necessitates the sharing of their shopping and service histories collected from point of interaction (POI) and customer relationship management (CRM) or other data collection systems across all channels of interaction in order to deliver a consistent - and superior – experience through each.

Creating a Differentiated Customer Experience: Consistently delivering an optimal experience demands the ability to “look around the corner” - anticipating what the customer’s needs may be months from now - and meeting or exceeding those expectations before they are ever voiced by the customer.

The following tips can help organizations deliver an exceptional customer experience:

- Think of customer feedback as a way to identify the gap between the brand promise and how that promise is delivered through the customer experience.
- Identify the aspects of greatest importance to customers and prioritize those aspects in need of improvement or reinforcement.
- Provide employees with clear direction on what is valued and expected by customers, enabling them to fully understand and deliver on the brand promise.
- Recognize and reward employees for exhibiting the behaviors that are in line with the delivery of the brand promise.
- Track customer feedback over time to gauge progress and to allow for course correction.

Finally, it is important to realize that customer needs and expectations are ever evolving. Closing the gap between the brand promise and the customer experience is a journey, not a destination.

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