CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: THE CONTACT CENTER

....fine line between **profit** and **pain**

smart phone

TAKING BACK CONTROL IN A CONSUMER-LED MARKET

The single biggest challenge facing companies has never been how to ATTRACT customers, but how to KEEP them. However, the speed and variety of choices now available to the consumer has compounded the challenge by orders of magnitude.

Businesses are responding to the demands of a highly-informed and discerning customer who, when faced with an overwhelming choice of similar providers, is making decisions based not only on economic value , but on the experience a company can offer.

Customer Service is now the single biggest differentiator in the market.

This means that companies are not just selling a product but selling a **product experience**.

Companies who fail to respond to the urgent need to deliver and evaluate product experience will continue to be dictated to by changing consumer habits and expectations.

The companies who are restoring the balance of power and emerging as brand leaders are those who are proactive in implementing the organizational structures necessary to deliver and evaluate great customer service.

As Customer Service is now fundamental to all departments of an organization, the call center can no longer be seen as just a support service. It must be prepared and equipped to meet the challenge of not only responding to, but leading consumer expectation, in its vital function as **Contact Center**, the critical frontline of customer interaction. In line with the ever-expanding qualities and knowledge required to fulfill their duties, and the responsibility inherent in performing these on public forums, the Contact Agent must now be valued and nurtured as a career professional.

THE CHANGING MARKETPLACE

With competition increasing rapidly, and the range of tools available to the consumer to quickly evaluate and compare similar products, customer service is quickly becoming the single most important factor in separating brand leaders from the rest of the pack.

Most companies are concentrating on building brand awareness and getting their sales message across, so that the consumer is overwhelmed with marketing messages and similar options. This puts the informed buyer firmly in the driving seat, and able to make his decisions based on any perceived value a provider can add.

Companies can no longer afford to compete solely on product quality and price.

In order to regain their role as innovators and restore the balance of power in the marketplace, they must also take into consideration the power of brand loyalty and peer advocacy, and be prepared to lead their customers through an attractive and pleasurable product experience, which runs seamlessly from the buying decision through the point of sale and beyond.

The brand leaders who are succeeding today -think Apple, Disney - are taking back control by offering enhanced customer experience, changing their focus from simply delivering a **product** to designing and delivering the entire **product experience**.

92% of companies view customer experience as one of their top priorities in the long term.
Source: Forrester Consulting

OVERALL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: THE REAL MEASURE OF SUCCESS:

Research published by McKinsey & Company in the *Harvard Business Review* [1] demonstrated how the traditional approach to evaluating customer service does not adequately reflect where companies are failing to meet the needs of customer expectations.

The current practice of evaluating customer satisfaction at isolated points along the way, does not accurately represent the customer's overall impression of the company, and may fail to pick up on customer dissatisfaction as a whole, thus distorting the true picture and masking the pressing need to overhaul the approach to measuring and optimizing customer service.

"What reduced (customer) satisfaction was something few companies manage - cumulative experience across multiple touchpoints and multiple channels over time."

The classic example is where Sales promise delivery within a week, but the product doesn't arrive within the agreed timeframe. The customer's resultant calls to the Customer Service and Delivery Departments may have been handled in an exemplary manner, and, of course, the customer was probably very satisfied with the Sales promise. However, the fact remains that the promise was not delivered on time. It was everybody's and yet nobody's responsibility!

Accountability for that failure must lie at the door of every department involved in delivering the product experience. Thus, the key to realizing great product

experience is an integrative approach to company organization, with greater interconnectedness between functions and a united approach to delivering the aims and philosophy of the brand. There must be more up, down and sideways distribution of information throughout the organization, and swift response to customer feedback.

The ability to deliver on product experience must be measurable and requires implementation at every point of contact between a business and the consumer. No department can operate in isolation without seeing the whole picture of how the company delivers great customer experience.

Sink or Swim: this re-organization is not an optional extra, but an urgent wake up call for many businesses to adapt or disappear without a trace. The survivors will be the companies who follow the example of the brand leaders and take action to implement an integrative, customer-centric approach.

Creation of a consistent and recognizable brand identity requires re-evaluation of the traditional tiered and isolated company structures - which allow departments, such as Design, Marketing, Delivery and Customer Service, to operate independently of each other- to become more integrated and flexible, with a greater need for information flow and systems which allow rapid reaction to customer feedback.

 The concept of customer service must be central to the company as a whole and permeate all decision-making and optimization.

THE CHALLENGES FACING CONTACT CENTERS IN DELIVERING AND PROCESSING PRODUCT EXPERIENCE

"The consumer's experiences with brands and categories are set to become even more intense and defining. That matters profoundly because such **experiences** drive **two-thirds** of the decisions customers make." McKinsey & Company. [2]

In the "The Coming Era of On-Demand Marketing" [4] the authors list the 4 key drivers of customer expectations to be:

1. Faster response times
2. State-of-the- art enquiries
3. Personalization
4. Ease of use

Each of these factors is expanding the role of the call center and elevating its importance as it strives to meet the increasing demands of customer expectation, while delivering and evaluating the product experience.

1. ANYWHERE, ANYTIME –THE MOVE TOWARDS MOBILE

With the rise of mobile devices and uninterrupted 24-hour online connection, more consumers are choosing to access contact centers on the move. They expect to be able to interact, receiving prompt response and fast resolution to their enquiries from any place throughout the day or night.

2. THE DEMAND FOR UP-TO-DATE KNOWLEDGE

Customers accustomed to the evolution of product experience and emerging software capabilities are requesting information at the cutting edge of what is possible. Answers to queries beginning with: "Can I do…?" from customers expecting an immediate reply (rather than be re-directed to another department or website) requires contact center personnel to be both highly-trained and well-briefed on the latest company developments

3. CUSTOMER IDENTIFICATION AND PERSONALIZATION

Calls are less private and no longer addressed anonymously or in isolation. Callers can now be identified by computer IP address or unique Facebook ID.

Consumers now expect to be identified as valued customers, and assume that the data collected concerning them will be used to offer them a tailor-made service.

A detailed record of the caller's profile and history of their previous interactions with the company is vital to providing that informed and personalized response.

With the acquisition of customer data and feedback now central to the delivery of prompt and effective product experience, it is no longer sufficient to log response times and successful resolution of complaints in isolation. It is vital to be able to process and analyze response performance, as a means to evaluating and improving upon the quality of service provided.

This requires highly-skilled and well-trained personnel, equipped with the software, operating procedures and shared information to ensure that all contact center agents have access to the tools they need to deliver a bespoke service to the customer, while consistently delivering the voice of the brand.

4. EASY ACCESS – SOCIAL CUSTOMER SERVICE –PLAYING FOR HIGHER STAKES

As if the consumer's expectations of faster response times, personalized service and informed response weren't enough, his desire to have easy access to customer care on an ever-growing range of social media platforms is presenting perhaps the greatest challenge facing contact centers today.

Between 2009 and 2014, the number of customers using Twitter for customer service has doubled from 11% to 22%.

Source: Forrester Consulting

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

-The Power of Social Proof

Companies have been quick to respond to the emergence of social media platforms as a means to build brand awareness, but less prepared for the need to up their game with regard to customer interaction in an age where the overall product experience is emerging as the most discernable factor in a highly-competitive market.

Overwhelmed by competing brand messaging, the consumer is losing faith in marketing hype, preferring to trust the opinions and recommendation of his peers. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter encourage him to share his opinions and justify his choice.

Social proof has become a driving factor in consumer decisions, and the role of social media in promoting or dismantling brand loyalty and brand advocacy cannot be ignored.

-Greater visibility: In the past, when customer service was delivered over the telephone or email, calls could be dealt with in relative anonymity and isolation. Each support ticket could be signed off and a line drawn underneath. Success could be measured in terms of the satisfactory completion of each interaction.

As more customers are choosing to interact with customer service through social media, the success or failure is no longer an isolated, anonymous event, but has the potential to make or break the success of a product or service.

60% of companies use social customer service as a competitive differentiator. Source: Forrester Consulting

-Higher stakes: playing out customer interactions on a public forum. On one hand, great service can be rewarded with kudos for the brand and even the potential to go viral. On the other, a less than adequate performance can be magnified in equal measure, resulting in disastrous damage to the reputation of the brand. It is an unfortunate fact of life that the customer is more likely to broadcast his disappointment at a bad experience than to record his positive experiences!

> "On Social,
> agents become brand ambassadors
> and therefore need to possess
> all the skills that come
> with a public-facing role."
>
> Joshua March, Conversocial [3]

With its rapidly-expanding role at the frontline of customer-company engagement, the Call Center can no longer be regarded as simply a secondary function providing support to a business. There is an urgent need for its role to be ramped up and recognized as the **Contact Center** – the vital hub, central to the delivery of the brand message.

In this role, it cannot afford to operate in isolation or to implement solutions or policy on the run. Just like every other department, it must be wholly integrated into company decision making and kept up-to-date in order to make informed and accurate responses to enquiries.

It must be equipped with the systems –training, software, standardized operating procedures – necessary to anticipate, and be prepared to respond to, customer enquiries *before* they happen, and **to proactively introduce great customer product experience.**

In line with delivering product experience as a commodity, must be the ability to quickly evaluate and improve performance quality, by responding rapidly to customer feedback in one direction and developing and refining company message in the other.

67% of companies believe customer service is the most pressing short-term priority for contact centers. *Source: Forrester Consulting*

The role of the contact center agent can no longer be taken for granted, and there is a pressing need for Contact Centers to retain and/or recruit the best staff.

The increased complexity of the skills sets required to respond to an ever-widening selection of media, together with enhanced exposure to public forums, mean that the contact center agent can no longer be regarded as an easily replaceable functionary, but must have greater accountability and a stake in the successful overall delivery of the product experience.

With their critical ability to enhance or damage brand reputation, the Contact Center Agent must be regarded as a highly-skilled professional, with the vital role of brand ambassador. In recognition of their vital role in the delivery of the product experience, the right incentives, remuneration and career progression opportunities must be implemented to ensure optimum performance and brand loyalty.

CONCLUSION

Increasing market competition and the need to implement and optimize overall consumer product experience, will determine whether businesses thrive or simply survive in a consumer-led environment. The role of customer service in general is more vital than ever, with the urgent requirement for Contact Centers to adapt to meet the challenges of delivering the company message at the interface with the consumer.

APPENDIX 1: REFERENCES

1. "The Truth about Customer Experience" McKinsey & Company, Harvard Business Review

2. "The Consumer Decision Journey." Davis Court *et al*. McKinsey Quarterly

3. "The Definitive Guide to Social Customer Service." 2015 edition, Joshua March, Conversocial

4. "The Coming Era of On-Demand Marketing." Peter Dahlstrom et al. McKinsey Quarterly

5. "Competing on Customer Journeys." David C. Adelman & Marc Singer, Harvard Business Review