Customer experience - sale is a journey, not a destination

By Shailendra Singh

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Customers are the lifeblood of any business, and many organisations have become exceptionally good at creating excellent individual engagements and interactions with their customers. However, in today's socially connected, 'always-on' world, the customer experience is no longer about isolated incidents alone. A globalised world, enabled by the internet, has made 'differentiation based on product alone' exceedingly difficult. Retaining customers in this increasingly competitive market requires organisations to take a different route. The most successful organisations are those which are able to differentiate themselves by delighting their customers and creating a satisfying customer experience starting from the customer's market research up to the purchase to after sales and beyond.

Understand the customer journey

The first step towards ensuring that customers are offered a delightful experience is to understand their purchase journey, from start to finish. Organisations must conduct a full evaluation to identify and understand the customer journeys by harnessing the power of data-driven analytics. This includes understanding the most important areas of a customer journey and pinpoints the areas that can damage the customer experience. This is the starting point of transformation. Utilising the combination of operational, marketing, customer and competitive research data across functions at each customer touch point, can help organisations understand their performance as well as benchmark the same against competition. This in turn assists in understanding the journeys that have the biggest impact on customer satisfaction, and thus on the business and its bottom line.

Benchmark current performance

Once the most important journeys within the organisation have been identified, they must each be examined in detail in order to benchmark current performance.

Using tools such as market research, customer and employee focus groups and so on, combined with data analysis from the previous stage, organisations can now map each stage of the customer journey from start to finish. This exercise will not only assist in developing a better understanding, but will also highlight areas where the actual customer experience deviates from the ideal scenario. Once these have been identified, the company policies or processes that may be adversely influencing the customer experience would be revealed, which forms the basis for change and transformation.

Now create a new experience

Identifying the key customer journeys and highlighting the problems within them are just the first two steps in an on-going process. Now is the time to create new experiences. Since the root cause of poor customer experiences always lies within an organisation, the solutions also need to be derived from within.

However, in many organisations, different departments do not have the visibility into the entire customer experience journey. As a result, the creation of new experiences is often best achieved by breaking down the siloes and developing cross-functional processes that take into account different customer touch-points. This helps everyone in the organisation to understand processes form the customer's point of view, which is a critical step in improving the customer experience. Improving customer satisfaction with processes not only keeps customers happy, but also often translates into improved profitability, through greater efficiency and resulting revenue gains.

Sustaining customer delight

The final stage in the transformation process is to implement the changes that have been brought about through analysis and process redesign. The organisation and its processes need to be modified to support, thereby delivering improved customer journeys and experiences. In addition, internal performance metrics and incentives need to be adjusted around these enhanced processes.

Adopting the approach of delivering excellent customer journeys not only improves the customer experience, it also enables organisations to break down siloes for more effective, cross-functional innovation. This in turn requires a transformation in the company culture and mind-set, weaving cross-functional working methodology and accountability into the fabric of the organisation. Teams also need to be empowered to try to test new ideas to see what works well and what does not - after all, the idea is to create journeys, not destinations. Efforts should be driven by cross-functional, bottom-up ideas and practices in combination with top-down ownership and coordination to ensure the greatest chance of success.

The bottom line

Customers today demand not only speed, accuracy and consistency; they require an experience that goes beyond satisfaction and one that delights them. Revitalising organisational processes, culture and mind-set with the idea of optimising customer journeys is key to successful strategic transformation. This is a long-term process that may take many years to perfect, but the rewards outweigh the challenges. Successfully shifting toward a journey-centric approach improves customer satisfaction and employee engagement while reducing churn, lowering costs through optimised processes and improving revenue. In an increasingly globalised and competitive market with ever-more educated and connected customers, achieving a competitive advantage and differentiation is critical.

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