Designing the Customer Experience

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True story: A couple used travel miles to book airline tickets for a long weekend in Florida. The plane lost an engine in flight, forcing an emergency landing. Rerouting took an entire day and, meanwhile, no information was posted at the originally scheduled arrival gate, where families and friends were waiting. The couple received no credit for the travel miles they'd spent.

News about bad customer experiences travels far and fast, hurting brands, costing sales and damaging the morale of employees who deal with the disgruntled. Little wonder that "user experience" has become a business mantra.

Surging Interest

"Technology has lowered barriers to entry, and firms are struggling to innovate as a means of differentiation," observes Randy Rossi, President of Bally Design Inc. "Designing the customer experience means understanding the value of your brand in a deeper way, not just at the product or service level."

"Prospects are getting their information from more sources than ever and markets are increasingly fragmented," adds David Abramowitz, a Subject Matter Expert with Sequent Learning Networks. "Social media has made one-to-one relationships a must."

 "Our culture is absolutely centered on the customer," says Sam Hensen, Vice President and General Manager, Connectors & Lateral Systems, with Simpson Strong-Tie, a manufacturer of structural building products for consumer and business markets. "We've found that seemingly small service issues can build enormous loyalty. If someone calls for a part at 3:00 p.m., we'll almost always deliver it to them the next day. We've located our service centers with that in mind."

Shaping Experiences

Where do you start if you want to delight? With research that goes wide and deep. Identify each step in the purchase path, from the prospect's first recognition of a need through the entire post-buy relationship. In addition, probe other users in the primary customer's ecosystem, since their experiences are likely to affect one another.

"The customer experience ripples down the supply chain," explains Rossi.   "If you sell a medical device to a radiology lab, is your customer the lab purchasing agent, the doctor, nurse technician or patient? The answer is 'all of the above.' And it's important that you understand the valued interactions and touchpoints of all of them to design the best experience. The wider you cast your net, the more you learn and the more you can differentiate."

There are many ways to structure your research—surveys, focus groups, feedback from customer advisory councils□but there's no substitute for direct observation. What clients actually do with a product or service may differ sharply from what they report, or they may be unable to articulate a deep need. While watching them at work, you may notice unused product features or workarounds they fail to mention in conversation. "You have to understand the emotions and pain points behind the words," says Abramowitz. "This type of research has long been second nature for B2C firms, but it's just as important for B2B marketing. With business markets, the value chain can get pretty long, and communicating what's learned in the field back to headquarters can be a challenge."

"Members of our technical sales staff are the first line of defense for customer voice," says Strong-Tie's Hensen. "We have hundreds of them throughout North America, regularly watching users on the job, then reporting back to both Product Management and R&D. Our product managers supplement that data with in-depth field interviews, concept studies and more formal market research."

Both Art and Science

Take what you learn and build an experience map that describes customer reactions at each step. "There's a lot of art to this," admits Rossi. "You should create narratives about hypothetical prospects, or personas, in order to find areas for innovation or improvement."

Rossi advises against trying to devise all-encompassing, perfect solutions. "There's usually more than one way to approach a problem, so make small bets that you can test individually. That makes course corrections easier."

Sometimes politics gets in the way, since designing better experiences takes cross-functional teamwork. If your business culture is silo-bound, it'll be tough to respond. Information may not get shared or departments may resist changing the way they operate based on the findings of others. "We've become a lot more collaborative in recent years," says Hensen. "We keep our cross-functional teams intact throughout the product life cycle, so everyone hears about customer needs and we come up with collective solutions."

Be sure to involve customers in your vetting process, gauging their reactions to concepts or early versions of a product. "As we get close to launch," says Hensen, "we often ask key customers to sign an NDA and invite them to install a prototype at construction sites."

Most importantly, realize that your work is never done. "There are no permanent solutions where customer experiences are concerned, because needs are always changing," says Abramowitz. "The important thing is to build a corporate culture that can absorb and respond to the newest trends and developments."

Key Insights
- Investigate as much of the customer ecosystem as possible.
- Observe customers in action to develop a nuanced understanding of their experiences and unfilled needs.
- Nurture a corporate culture that facilitates timely cross-functional response to what you learn.