Opinion.

Properly joined up:
collaborating for the customer.

The customer experience movement, despite its best efforts, has until recently struggled to make a real difference to customers. Fundamentally this has been down to an inability to tackle the root causes of customer problems - what happens inside the organisation.

OEE Consulting's Chris Hallmark discusses the critical element of collaboration in improving customers' experiences.

The pain of multichannel

I had a surprising new experience yesterday - my train operator helped me with a problem. I know what you're thinking, that given the recent public problems in certain parts of the country's rail network, any praise of train operators is pretty unusual. But that wasn't the reason that it stood out for me. What was so pleasantly surprising was that they helped me out digitally. Now we are finally getting somewhere with service in the twenty-first century.

Mobile applications have been slowly taking over our world since the beginning of the decade, but until recently my experience of them has been highly polarised. If you want to buy, book, or research something, then the experience can be near perfect. However, when your needs don't 'follow the rules' set by the organisation - you're on your own. Woe betide any customer that has an issue or even a complaint. Many digital applications still singularly lack any kind of 'customer service' options, leaving you to resort to other channels to deal with the query, fix the issue or do something more complex than the 'straight through' offering. This is often painful, drawn out, and time consuming - leaving you fairly cynical about any multichannel aspirations that organisations might have.

Over time, this experience has become commonplace and unsurprising. Invariably, my heart sinks when I realise I need to go multichannel.

Finally, though, here was a service company helping me with a problem through their app. It was clunky and a bit painful but it worked, and 24 hours later I have a refund with only a few minutes of my life wasted. This is such a vast improvement on previous experiences that I have taken to writing about it - progress indeed. Someone, somewhere, had taken the time to think about my entire customer journey and included 'what goes wrong and how to fix it' in their project.

Confronting the real issues

The 'easy wins' of improving the customer interface exhausted, it is necessary to confront the real reason why customers are constantly frustrated - their real-life journeys don't work end-to-end across the poorly-designed processes, technology and people structures that struggle to serve them. The channels aren't joined up. No-one thinks about what happens when things go wrong and designs a solution, or even designs the problem out in the first place. Most great customer experiences are achieved in spite of, not because of, the way the business is set up to serve them.

Things are finally changing. The customer journey movement and the digital movement have found a sweet spot where their objectives and, more importantly, their budgets are aligned.

> *Organisations are starting to listen to customer feedback in a new way, not looking for superficial fixes but trying to understand the real root causes of poor journeys.*

These root causes often fall into the 'hard to fix' bucket - operational capability, disjointed technology, conflicting organisational objectives, corporate culture. But tackling these issues is proving to be transformational in the real sense, not just by creating a catalyst for change but by creating hope and excitement within the organisation and actually making things better for customers.

Owner driven collaboration

The secret to this revolution is collaboration. I am constantly amazed, as a management consultant working with clients from across the service sector, how poorly organisations work cross-functionally. Conflicting objectives, lack of end-to-end ownership, siloed decision-making and simply not seeing the big picture from an end-to-end and customer-focused point of view, are the root causes of poor customer journeys. The solution on the surface is simple: make the customer's journey visible and important to everyone. Then the hard work of making it flow begins.

At the heart of the solution are groups from across the organisation, working together to properly join things up; customer-facing staff working with operations, compliance, product design, risk, technology and all of the other functions needed to make things work end-to-end and across all the channels. The power of these cross-functional teams cannot be understated. The challenge for the organisation is to enable them to be successful by giving them the tools and skills they need and removing the barriers to collaboration - the conflicting objectives and local self-interest. In my experience, given a free rein almost everyone instinctively wants to work together to make things better for the customer.

Ironically, the key to rapid and effective collaboration lies with an individual - or at least a role. Quite simply, a customer journey that crosses functional boundaries within an organisation cannot work seamlessly unless someone is responsible for the design, management and improvement of it end-to-end. Without ownership, even a well-meaning project to reengineer a journey will ultimately be betrayed by the conflicting demands of ongoing business change.

The key here lies in choosing the right individual. Journey ownership rarely implies hierarchical management; a journey owner is inevitably going to require exceptional stakeholder management skills to constantly navigate the political waters of the different parts of the organisation that deliver the customer's service. Real authority, visibility, and customer-focus are the key attributes of an effective journey owner.

Ultimately, then, a great customer experience is about culture. It's not so much about happy smiling customer service agents or well-designed apps, although they can't hurt – it's about everyone feeling that they have freedom and are surrounded by a team of supportive colleagues whose main purpose is to fix things for the customer. Give these people insight into the customer's real journey, and someone to drive the change, and watch them fly.

Chris Hallmark is a Director at OEE Consulting, the UK's leading specialist in business design, operations improvement, customer experience, and strategy implementation.

He developed his knowledge of operations working for specialist materials multinational Morgan Crucible plc. His roles included manufacturing, quality and account management as well as business unit leadership. He was a global Six Sigma champion for the group.

Chris moved into consulting in 1999, initially specialising in business process re-engineering for companies with field service teams. He joined OEE Consulting in 2003 and has worked with clients including Atos, Lloyds Banking Group, the Financial Conduct Authority, John Lewis Partnership, Siemens and Royal Mail.

Chris has pioneered OEE Consulting's market-leading approach to customer journey design and the integration of digital into OEE's business proposition.

Contact us to discuss how OEE Consulting can support your business.

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