

BLOG WRITTEN BY JOHAN WAHLSTRÖM

Creating a Customer-Centric Business

Eton Bridge Partners are delighted to be partnering with Criticaleye for their CEO Retreat and one of the topics on the agenda is Connecting and Engaging with Customers.

Becoming and staying a customer-centric business is an obvious imperative for us in a successful executive search firm but it is equally important for our client businesses.

Louise Chaplin, Head of Board Practice at Eton Bridge Partners, and I, had a conversation about customer centricity and two interesting themes emerged:

- > the importance of a customer-centric culture across the organisation
- > the role of data in driving customer-centricity



Customer-centric thinking and culture across the organisation

Companies should consciously and constantly work on becoming and staying focused on the customer in everything they do. Every decision made by anyone in an organisation throughout the value-chain should be driven by an understanding of the impact of the decision on the customer and buyer/user of the product. Achieving this may involve frequently re-visiting the roles stakeholders and internal employees/collaborators/colleagues that touch the relevant value-chain play in impacting the customer. And companies need to ensure learning and development programs for managers and staff alike always reinforce customer focus.

Diversity of experience in the boardroom aids customer centricity

Successful boards now realise that they need board members from varying environments, experiences and industries. The composition of a board should reflect both current customers/consumers, as well as enhance the board's ability to spot emerging trends and translate that into new business strategies.

Diversity is not just about physical characteristics. Diverse background, expertise, education, and career, both locally and internationally, all bring unique ideas which might help bring about a more comprehensive understanding of the customer.

Sustainability and environment in the customer journey

It is clear that businesses need a strategy for sustainability and the environment in order to stay relevant to their customers. Now more than ever customers will consider such issues before making buying choices. Considerations such as locally sourced vs shipped from around the world, how much or how little packaging is used, or harmful vs eco-friendly raw materials and so on, really matter to consumers who now make conscious buying decisions based on these factors. It's not all about price and speed of delivery. Companies may often not need to look further away than their own employees to discover more about how sustainability and environmental concerns impact emerging consumer / customer preferences for their product. **Companies could consider mechanisms to engage their staff in developing an understanding of emerging customer sentiment around sustainability and the environment.**

Employee advocates and customer-centricity

The best advocate for your product or service is often your employees. Customer-centric organisations frequently employ unique tactics to engage staff in becoming conscious consumers of their products and leverage their experience into innovation or product improvements. Staff who are closest to the customer and themselves use, or relate to, the product should be invited to become an advocate for the user experience of the product.

Building a culture around transparency and openness where staff are encouraged to critique a company's product, is crucial to drive understanding of user and consumer sentiment and companies need to find ways to do this consciously and effectively.

But how do you achieve this? Programs that capture feedback and ideas from your own employees about your product, including ideas around packaging, your production line, the supply chain, and innovative ideas for new products should be encouraged. Companies could also consider gearing compensation and incentives to encourage engagement of product improvement ideas from employees.

There is also a case for revising hiring and appointments practices. Does the candidate have the right values, do they demonstrate customer centricity in how they have approached work in their past? Ensure to ask some customer-scenario based questions to learn more about their level of understanding of customer impact, empathy, proactivity and so on.



The role of data in driving customer centricity

At a time when data dictates and drives the activities and decisions of any organisation, it can be difficult to determine which data to focus on, and how to ensure that data is relevant, accurate, significant, and reported in a timely manner. There are also choices to be made about how to make data available and visible and to whom.

Sharing data across the organisation

Providing you have a customer-centric culture, and ensuring staff has a line of sight showing how their work has a direct impact on the customer is critical. Methods to achieve this will differ depending on the industry and type of business. For example, in a retail or consumer business, smart use of supply chain technology and retail checkout technology typically already generates sales, shipping and inventory movement-KPIs. However, it is surprisingly rare that these measures are shared more widely with staff. Key business KPIs often only get reviewed periodically by leadership at a management meeting or by specific teams in specific roles. We believe that giving wider visibility and access to relevant data and trends can help to bring the whole value chain to life for a wider proportion of staff. And it is even more powerful to provide visibility of key KPIs in real-time where possible.

Companies should review and decide what data to share, and with whom, to drive customer-centricity across the organisation.

Louise and I believe that employees in both customer-facing and non-customer-facing roles who can tangibly see the impact of what they do throughout the value chain all the way to the end-consumer, will be more engaged. That in turn can improve results, enable staff to be better equipped to help craft new ideas and solutions to enhance value and customer satisfaction and ultimately elevate engagement across the whole workforce.

Using alternative data sources

Businesses invest heavily in generating and managing internal data and in making it available for decision-makers. But what data is the most relevant in understanding your customers' reality? Unexpected and alternative data (from outside your company) is today often more relevant for spotting changes in the marketplace that impact customers' preferences and needs, now and in the future. Underlying trends or changes in customer/consumer behaviours, which aren't always apparent from internal data, may often be more obvious in open data sources if you know where to look.

Using the expertise of researchers who can mine, organise and manage data from alternative data sources, can provide useful information in anticipating industry-specific, geographical, or societal trends which might otherwise be missed and might even help spot changing consumer behaviours before they become significant. Now existing tools such as predictive analysis machine learning and artificial intelligence can handle quantities of data of a different scale vs recent history and are getting increasingly accessible, cost-effective and efficient.

Companies that have resources allocated to researching and discovering alternative data sources may be at an advantage and may set a new bar in staying ahead of new trends, potentially allowing them to innovate/adjust their product offering to meet emerging demand sooner than others.

Creating or becoming a more customer-centric organisation might involve a significant cultural shift – and boards and CEOs need to make sure decisions taken by them or at any layer in the organisation are based on the wants and needs of the customer and with a clear understanding of the impact on the customer. Being one step ahead may mean knowing what the customer wants before they know themselves, and this is only possible with adept use of data and customer-centric thinking at all stages of the value chain.



Understanding Eton Bridge Partners

Executive search, Interim management, and Consulting
across the breadth of corporate leadership.

As trusted partners, we ensure our clients attract the best talent in the market to achieve their business goals, and our candidates develop their careers with leading international organisations. Our unrivalled functional expertise means we are superbly placed to deliver the best individuals.

Our specialist practices work with our clients on permanent and interim roles across the breadth of corporate leadership – both in the UK and around the world.

We partner with a wide range of clients from start-ups, to SMEs, to global blue-chip organisations – listed, PE backed and privately owned – across all sectors within commerce and industry.

Our Interim and Search consultants work closely together to develop ideas and share knowledge. This ensures our network benefits from the combined forces of our expertise and experience.

EtonBridge^{Partners}

Johan Wahlström

Partner – Board Practice



Johan brings over 20 years' experience in supporting FTSE100/Fortune50 C-suite leaders with executive recruiting, talent management, and leadership assessment and in identifying and driving organisational optimisation initiatives in support of strategic business outcomes. He focuses on senior leadership appointments, C-suite leadership teams, and NEDs, and has a well-established national and international diverse network. Johan works across a variety of business sectors, functions, and geographies and supports our clients both with search and advisory services.