Aligning Employees Around Delivering Best-in-Class Customer Experience

*Customer – employee interactions are the very backbone of the customer experience. Employees dedicated to serving the customer base deepen the overall company – client bond; indifferent employees providing poor service drive consumer and value loss, damaging the company in a way that is often irreversible. Companies need to align their employees around delivering the best possible customer experience possible...*
Forte Consultancy Group
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What?

Think of a rock band in which every member tries to please the crowd individually, as he or she best sees fit (with each trying to play a solo at the same time, for example). The output would probably be junk, a bunch of sounds overlapping each other with no discernible quality or value to the tune. Luckily, practiced bands know how to play in tune in an aligned manner, each stepping up to the forefront when needed, each contributing to the overall performance to deliver the best possible product as possible.

This concept of working in alignment is not much different in companies. Delivering best-in-class customer experience requires sales, marketing, customer care, and operations departments work in harmony across the multitude of channels they interact with customers through. Doing this is easier than said – whereas a band occupies the same place at the same time and is working around ensuring they deliver one song perfectly, a company has a range of employees in all parts of the company in all different channels trying to deliver all different types of things to a given customer.

Not surprisingly, prior studies have shown that employees play the key role in determining the overall satisfaction of customers. Varying based on industry and consumer segment, between 40% – 80% of customer satisfaction and loyalty is determined based on the employee relationship. At Royal Bank of Canada for example, studies show that the relationship customers have with the bank staff can skew their perception of the bank’s services by approximately 40%.

How?

While some companies excel around delivering best-in-class customer experience via their employees, others struggle mightily. We believe there are five specific root causes behind this failure:

1. Lack of Vision: Every company must have a coherent vision around the experience it wants to deliver to its customer base. This defined experience must be end-state specific (defining exactly the experience each customer should have throughout the customer lifecycle, and how he or she should feel about the experience), must be segment-specific (i.e. higher level of service for high-net worth customers), must be measurable (reflecting in employee job responsibilities and KPIs), and must be disseminated throughout the entire company and its employee base.

Such vision must come from the top down, and be integrated into the company’s culture and become “business as usual” over time. Without such a well-defined and coherent vision, some employees will place little to no importance on the service they provide customers.

2. Lack of Competence: A well-defined and coherent vision is just the start – delivering best-in-class customer experience requires competent employees be the driving force, translating the vision into tangible actions that satisfy the customer. While some employees will immediately embrace the vision and deliver on it, others won’t, with the reason being that they are not competent enough to do so.

To overcome this competency gap, companies need to identify possible skill deficiencies in their employee base as it relates to providing the desired customer experience, and develop programs to address these shortcomings. This transformation is at the heart of cultural change management programs, which

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Scheme 1. Five Specific Root Causes Regarding Customer Satisfaction
aims to ensure employees share the desired set of skills and capabilities such that the company can achieve its objectives.

3. Lack of Information: Without information as to the interaction history of a customer, employees can do little to deliver on the customer experience. We as customers all know what it’s like to contact a call center to follow up on a problem, only to have to repeat oneself all over again to the representative answering the phone. This information black hole traditionally happens for two reasons – first, the lack of an interaction history-recording CRM system, second, the lack of employees to do so.

Employees must be made responsible for recording every interaction they have with customers, no matter how minute in scale, across every interaction channel – be it the direct sales rep. capturing the reason a potential customer rejected an offer or the dealer who sold an add-on service to an existing customer. A company’s employees cannot fully deliver on the customer experience without knowing enough about each and every customer’s past interactions and experiences.

4. Lack of Motivation: While some employees lack the competencies to deliver on the customer experience, others simply don’t care enough to be bothered. Particularly among front-line employees there may be little motivation to better serve the customer besides those which are financial in nature – recognition and career advancement-related motivators tend to mean more to those in centralized / management functions.

One effective way of motivating individuals to deliver on the customer experience is for the delivery to be rewarded (or punished) via KPIs set into the employee’s annual performance review, basing a part of the bonuses, commissions, and raises on the overall effectiveness in delivering excellent service (measurable through call audits, observation, mystery shopping, etc.). Another way is to hold occasional contests around customer experience, pitting different employees and teams against each other in races to see who can deliver the experience in a better manner.

5. Lack of Integration: As in bands, each piece of the company must work together to ensure there is a seamless, consistent customer experience. What one employee does in the back office around processing a sales application directly affects the original sales representative who has to answer to the customer as to why an account has not been opened. When a call center agent fails to record an interaction with a customer in detail in the company’s CRM system around a problem that has not been resolved yet, it’s the next agent who answers the customer’s second call who is forced to apologize for not knowing about the situation.

All employees who touch the customer to any degree must deliver together on the promise around customer experience. As such, an effective way to do this is through the formation of a cross-departmental committee responsible for delivering collectively on the customer experience. With representatives representing and responsible for the various interactions around the customer lifecycle, the committee frequently reviews the experience to determine if there are deficiencies around it, to identify improvement opportunities and responsible parties.

Along these five dimensions, companies are at different points in terms of how well their employees function. Some have complete employee buy-in around the customer experience vision, some haven’t even formulated one. The maturity levels around these five dimensions are as follows (click picture to zoom):

Companies seeking to understand where they stand around these dimensions can use various tools (such as surveys, mystery shops, etc.) to do so. Once the assessment is completed, companies then need to create specific programs aimed at addressing the shortcomings, with a higher level of focus paid to problem areas. There may be significant variance between departments within the same company as to where their deficiencies lie, and thus, the focus also may change based on the employee groups.

What Next?

By overcoming these five problem areas, companies will have gone a long way towards ensuring that at the least, their employees are working in an optimal manner around delivering the best possible customer experience possible. Other factors may cause the customer to become dissatisfied (due to, for example, a large price increase in a service, or a product breakdown), but at the least, the employees providing service will do all they can to make up for it.
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<tr>
<th>Implementation Related Challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CE Vision in place and shared across the company. Buy-in from all levels is assured</td>
<td>Processes are defined &amp; best-in-class practices are visible to all employees to be inspired</td>
<td>Employees with right skill sets and systems</td>
<td>Employees are well motivated aligned with company CE priorities</td>
<td>All levels of employees across all channels are integrated for consistent CE</td>
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<tr>
<td>CE vision in place but not shared with / perceived by all the employees</td>
<td>Processes are defined but are not being followed, good examples are not visible</td>
<td>Skill sets and support tools are in place but not being utilized for better CE</td>
<td>Targets are in place but are not well set, benefits are not adequate to create strong motives</td>
<td>Strong integration along the organizational structure in theory, gaps in practice</td>
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<td>Defined CE vision is not detailed properly to govern actions, employees partially follow some guidelines</td>
<td>Some CE related processes are vaguely defined, customer voice somehow incorporated</td>
<td>KPIs, targets and soft/hard benefits are defined partially, usually on an aggregated bases</td>
<td>CE related main/support roles and responsibilities exist, workflows and control mechanisms are not in place</td>
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<td>There is no defined vision, personal understanding of CE exists at some level</td>
<td>Employees have individual understanding of ideal CE, acting solely to improve CE</td>
<td>Business requirement around skill sets and support tools are ill-defined, impossible to define specs</td>
<td>Some CE related responsibilities are missing, inconsistencies occur but collaboration is demanded</td>
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<td>Employees are unaware and insensitive of customer centrity, misbelieves exist</td>
<td>Employees do not know how to improve CE, voice of the customer can not be heard</td>
<td>CE is not a concern while resource allocation is made, there are no CE support tools or systems</td>
<td>Employee motives are not considered for CE related issues</td>
<td>A complete picture of the organization around CE does not exist. CE related pieces do not fit together</td>
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Scheme 2. Maturity Levels at Employee Barriers around Customer Experience (CE)