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Back in 2009 I wrote an article about the intersection of CRM and social media. Basically, to summarise, I wrote about the customer driving their engagement with us as small businesses and the need to engage with them in the appropriate mediums that they choose to use. I also wanted to see some more aggregation of the listening touch-points we have via CRM/Social (SCRM), so we can get closer to our customers and use this information to be involved in their conversations.

Jump forward to 2012/13 and as Paul Greenberg states "that we are now at a point that the customers' expectations are so great and their demands so empowered that our SCRM business strategy needs to be built around collaboration and customer engagement, not traditional operational customer management." It is less about transaction and more about interaction.

The disconnect I still see, is while customers have become in control of how they interact with us, we still are yet to make leap to map our goals to that of the customer needs and concerns with the solutions our products or services provide. We don't make their agenda important. The end result is we are still in the large part transactional or commodity based businesses not partners or loved brands.

Examples of how we make the customer an intrinsic part of our business ecosystem Paul Greenberg lists as follows:

"It can mean anything from customers and the company collaborating on product development, to customer suggestions on how to improve a company process, to customers helping other customers solve customer service issues, to even doing what gamers do and modifying game play using tools for scenario creation which adds value to the game. Co-creation is the ability of the company and customer to create additional value for each other - what form it takes is not always THE BIG THING."

Co-creation is one example where we as small businesses can help the engagement with our customers.

Examples of co-creation is Amazon with reviews of books, Nike in the design of shoes. Solosso is a leader in co-creation for men's wear, making it possible for their customers to create high-quality custom dress shirts

that are perfect just for them, and do it for a reasonable price. Threadless is the same concept. At Threadless.com customers can send in their own t-shirt designs, which are subsequently voted on by the other custo

mers and visitors to the site. The winning design is then printed and sold as a newly created item/product. Again, consumers have a direct participation in and influence on the final outcome of the product development process. By the way, the winning design is rewarded with a cash prize as well as other benefits. Now this concept has moved into different product offerings including iphone case design. Keepcup does the same design concept online.

"The four types of co-creation

Club of experts: A very specific challenge is needing expertise and breakthrough ideas. Contributors are found through a selection process. Quality of input is what counts (e.g. Nokia) Crowd of people: Also known as Crowdsourcing. For any given challenge, there might be a person out there having a genial idea that should be given a podium. It's the Rule of the big numbers (e.g. Threadless) Coalition of parties: In complex situations parties team up to share ideas and investments. Technical breakthroughs and standards often happen when multiple parties collaborate (e.g. IBM) Community of kindred spirits: When developing something for the greater good, a group of people with similar interests and goals can come together and create (e.g. Linux)" My favorite by far at the moment is Ikea for Business. What a long awaited idea. I want to design my space, pick it and get it delivered! Hooray Ikea you are listening. Great case study examples too!

Chris Lawer for the P2P foundation puts why we should consider co-creation carefully as a small business,

"Co-Creation is therefore just a natural way for organisations to help their customers meet their goals in the lifetime of use of their products. But they can only do so if they embrace a different view of value and start building back from the customer's view of value, not the firm's."

How can you co-create with your customers? It can be a small step first. Even asking for feedback will spark some ideas. Ask your employees and brainstorm how you can co-create with your customers today.

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