Customer Centric Is The New Competitive Advantage

For small business, there are some really great wins to be had based around the concept that the customer now has more influence over whether our businesses succeed or fail. As a small business, we are best placed to deliver that awesome customer experience.

I have just finished reading The Customer Experience Edge, one of the most important books I have read in the last 18 months, if not my entire career as a marketer. Why? Because it focuses on the thing I am most passionate about. The core differentiator that sets you apart for all your competitors, the customer experience. “According to research reports, it is predicted that more than 75% of products and services will be undifferentiated in 10 years.” The Customer Experience Edge pgxxxiv. I am seeing it every day with my clients. most are service and product driven rather than customer centric and are clearly undifferentiated. Very few have profiled their ideal customer and none have mapped out the customer touch points. Clearly there is a lot of work we need to do.

The way we engage as customers has changed. The way we communicate, shop, review and share. It is this change, fostered by an information and technology revolution, that has on one hand, turned traditional marketing and sales efforts on it’s head in and on the other, is bringing us back to a strategy that I base my marketing company on, having the customer at the centre of our business.

Business from the customer’s point of view is the new competitive advantage.

The Customer Experience Edge is so timely, as it discusses how technology, culture, strategy and execution are are now being harnessed to create customer centric companies that’s pure aim is to delight and “wow” customers interactions with them for life.

1. Total customer experience:

Think of how your customers/clients can engage with you or your service today. Web browsing, smart phone viewing, seeking recommendations via social media, in-store visit, email campaign, SMS, phone call, Facebook stream, advertising on shopping trolleys the list goes on. It is the sum of all these interactions that shapes your customers experience and most rate it as mediocre according to Bloomberg Business Week Research.

There is such a great opportunity to create a truly awesome customer experiences, but why then are they so rare? I believe it is because most businesses don’t spend the time identifying ideal customers and then mapping out their customer journey with a focus on identifying opportunities to delight them. I think most companies just let the experience happen. Is it really that hard to create a great customer experience? This is where as a small business we can really have an advantage.

We all remember those little extra efforts that people go to because they are so rare. The nice sample added in with your purchase, the card to say thanks for your referral, the colouring pencils and paper at your local cafe for your 6 year old to keep them entertained while you have a well deserved latte. We all notice these little opportunities to really understand us and how to make us feel looked after. These little efforts to endear us are just not very common.

Getting the focus right on your ideal customers and spending a lot of time identifying with them, talking with them and seeking their feedback is part of the key to finding how to gain a better experience.

It is no longer acceptable to just let the customer experience happen.

2. Technology

Technology is a very powerful and under-used resource for all businesses. Just like the ipad taking off as a new entertainment medium, businesses are seeking to leverage technology to improve their efficiency, marketing and their customer experience. It is how this technology is used and how it is integrated into a customer intimacy strategy that is the real opportunity for small business. Automated email campaigns I have used have back-fired because I have strayed from my ideal customers needs. Frankly one well constructed useful email is better than 15 random messages.

3. Listening

The best use of technology for a small business is in listening. Seeking out what is being said in forums on google, in all the mediums about your business, your competitors and what your customers want. Better still, is to use these technology tools to ask your customers what they want. There is a novel idea! Survey tools, polls, Facebook insights, can all give you incredible insights about how to improve your customer experience, service and product offering and uncover new leads.

Customers feel empowered to tell you exactly what they want and how they want it. They are looking for the right service or product for them, not just an “anybody”. It is hard to sometimes realign your thinking to this huge shift in focusing on the customer. However, it is this customer centricity that is a competitive advantage that is hard to beat.

4. Ignore at your peril

Ignoring the customer is starting to undo many companies. Not only does it make you vulnerable to the competition, but it could make your business extinct very quickly. Bad experiences spread like wildfire and “going viral” can turn a PR glitch into a global boycott these days.

The Customer Experience Edge talks of four keys to creating a great experience.
Table: Four Customer Experience Essentials

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer Experience Essential</th>
<th>What It Looks Like</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Living up to your promises. Example: Consistent on-time delivery, each and every time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>Offering choice, consistency, and timeliness. Example: Using multiple channels to engage with customers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>Listening and responding quickly. Example: Changing a process or policy when feedback reveals that it causes problems for customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Ensuring that offerings are personalized and meaningful. Example: Gaining insight into what really matters to individual customers at a particular point in time.</td>
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Reliability, convenience, responsiveness and relevance. At the core of all of these values is the customer. Keep close to them, understanding them and earning their trust.

Customers don’t need to listen to you; you need to listen to them and incorporate feedback into your customer experience.

6. Employees

If you look at MacInnis Marketings value proposition it is:

We put in place a system that assists you to make better marketing decisions, attracts a regular stream of ideal customers and creates a brand that your employees and customers will love.

Employees are a big part of that strategy. The lines between work and play has blurred. Employees are big influences of your brand and the culture does shape your value proposition and the customer experience. Employees play a vital part in sharing information and shaping the business. It is their commitment to that customer experience all the way through the customers lifecycle, that makes a business stand out from it’s competitors.

Giving employees a voice, a forum and the tools tools to communicate as well as the road map of what a great customer experience should look like is vital.

7. Leadership

If you don’t feel it I won’t. That passion for the customer has to begin with you the leader of your company. It is a commitment. To create a great culture and a great brand you have to have that burning desire to get it right for your customer. It is something that makes a great receptionist from an average one, that makes a taxi clean and comfortable experience rather than a terrifying one. When that commitment to create a customer experience is lived by the business leader, it has a far greater chance of it being felt by the end customer.

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Tools and Resources:

10 Examples of Shockingly Excellent Customer Service
Top 5 Customer Experience Links
Customer experience stats 2011
The customer experience
Customer experience blogs
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