Putting your customers (and your company) on the map

Map Your Customer Journey
REVEAL GROWTH AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

We've all been there. You're at a restaurant or buying something online and it's just not going well. The service is bad or the online functionality doesn't work or the product you want is no longer available. You're getting upset, and the more the bad experience drags on, the more frustrated you become. We've all been on the other side of it too. You found the best deal at a new online store or were amazed at how quickly a customer service rep solved your problem or became a fan for life when a manager bent over backwards to meet a tough deadline.

These same dynamics play out hundreds of times every minute of every day for brands all across the business spectrum. But not nearly enough of those businesses are maximizing the power of that data – and searching beneath the surface for the information that really matters – to build the brand, retain customers and drive growth.

This is so much more than simply relying on the reactive, low-tech process of waiting for feedback – positive or negative – to roll in and push incremental organizational change toward a nebulous definition of greatness. The real goal is proactively defining what "great" looks like to your customers at each stage of the customer lifecycle.

Work hard to find the "Great"
Go through the exercise step by step. Evaluate everything from how you're onboarding new customers to how you're making sure they're using the full functionality of the product or service to how well you're turning them into mavens and advocates. When you do, you'll have enough information to establish your high-water mark, and the power to constantly assess your business against that standard. You'll have the justification to systematically move toward excellence in a strategic, prioritized manner. The discipline to avoid random micro changes that have minimal impact. The freedom to flex resources across the lifecycle to capitalize on opportunities and fix what's broken.

When you've appraised your customer lifecycle with that level of strategic precision, you've created a blueprint with extraordinary muscle. You've mapped an entire Customer Journey. And when you have a strong map, finding your ideal destination gets a whole lot easier. If you're not sure the time and resource investment will be worth it, here's a quick dose of some marketplace reality that may be flying under the radar:

- Only 1 out of 26 unhappy customers complain. Esteban Kolsky and his team at thinkJar also found that 67 percent of customers mention bad experiences as a reason for churn, but only a fraction of them ever speak up. Companies hear relatively low negative chatter and convince themselves customers are happy and satisfied. Meanwhile, the company is hemorrhaging customers and nobody seems to know why.

- 13 percent of unsatisfied customers will tell 15 or more people about their unhappiness. On the flip side, Kolsky also found that 72 percent of customers will share a positive experience with six or more people.

- 6 out every 7 consumers are willing to pay up to 25% more for a better customer experience. A survey from RightNow and Harris Interactive also revealed that only 1 percent of consumers believe their expectations for a good experience are always met. And more research from ZenDesk found that almost a quarter (24 percent) of consumers continue to seek out vendors for two years or longer after a positive experience.

- 89 percent of customers are frustrated because they need to repeat their issues to multiple representatives. (Accenture)

Prioritizing your strategy

Diving into a lifecycle exploration takes courage and conviction. There's risk of information overload, analysis paralysis, and imbalance between planning and action. Prioritizing your strategy is key here, and Journey Maps can help organizations drive customer experience improvements in ways that make sense strategically, financially and realistically. Again, this is more than the plodding review of interactions you're having with a customer (touchpoint map). It's a much deeper dive. Neil Davey, managing editor at MyCustomer.com explains well the difference between Customer Journey Maps and customer touchpoint maps: "Whereas touchpoint maps detail all the interactions that a customer has with an organization, a customer journey map outlines the entire pathway to purchase, including all the important steps that may not involve the business at all. This is an important distinction as it allows companies to discover pivotal points in the customer's journey where they may presently have no presence but where they can add value in the future."

Answering some fundamental questions can filter through the sludge and clarify your prioritization process quickly:

- Which improvements will have the biggest impact?

- Which have the highest degree of complexity and take the shortest/longest time to accomplish?

- What are our biggest obstacles to improving a process point?

- Where are we weakest/strongest in our lifecycle performance?

- Where are the gaps between what customers say and how they behave toward our brand?

Typically, when organizations take the time to ask tough questions, put processes under the microscope and honestly evaluate what they find, the results can be game-changing. What once was a hidden complication becomes solvable. What once was a significant shortcoming becomes an obvious course correction. What once was an unrecognized pivot point for potential customers becomes a competitive advantage. The areas of improvement often fall in two key buckets:

Lack of organizational alignment

"Developing a cohesive customer journey that addresses the issues caused by organizational silos, disconnected systems and uncollaborative processes cannot be achieved by a siloed, disconnected and uncollaborative team," warns Gartner's Augie Ray. The journey mapping team should include representatives from every part of your organization that influences the customer experience. That means the obvious ones like sales, marketing, support and education, but also operations, logistics, legal and more. You can't fully understand the customer journey if you don't acknowledge every step along the way. Going into it, know that every department will likely overstate its influence. That's okay, just know too that you'll be able to see more from a holistic, 50,000-foot perch than you'll ever see in the daily trenches.

Not ready or willing to face the brutal truth

There's no doubt you and your senior leaders know your customers and your market. Just don't start believing you know everything there is to know or be unwilling to have your mind changed. A know-it-all mentality – and making assumptions about your customers – is the death knell combination for a brand. External research is key. So find it and embrace it. Moving from reactive customer support to proactive customer experience isn't easy. So take a candid assessment of your situation:

- Are your internal processes prepared to make this shift?

- Are your teams aligned to ensure they're providing the best customer experience your product or service can offer?

- Are your employees compensated in a manner that promotes achieving tangible customer outcomes vs. just acquiring net new logos?

Those are tough questions for many organizations to answer honestly. Turning the corner is hard. Often, the easier path seems like the best short-term approach. Maybe we'll just retitle some existing employees as "customer success managers." Maybe we'll just apply the cheaper/quicker band-aid even though the right fix is right in front of us. Those aren't the answers that will ultimately win the day.

From mapping the problem to solving it

Once you decide to avoid the temptations of the "easy way out," you can start tackling the rewarding work of steering your ship to new seas and aiming for the high bar you've set. Here's a blueprint for getting started:

Promote organizational alignment

Build a connected, collaborative, cross-functional team, with representatives from the groups that own sales/marketing, support, policies, operations, product development and other services that drive what the customer sees and experiences. David Kay suggests that a group of five to ten usually works best and he has a great article at https://www.tsia.com/blog/customer-experience-journey-mapping with more tips and tools. You can also check out our last ESG whitepaper highlighting tips to best align your Customer Success and Education Services resources to build a team with the knowledge, experience and authority to drive real change.

Come face-to-face with the truth

Uncover and activate the insights that have gone unknown, unrecognized or ignored. Gather external research that's relevant to our market. Interview customers, analyze data from your systems, and gather analytics on web traffic, product/service usage, social media feedback and more. It's important to assess the data and your customer's journey holistically, but keep in mind that tackling the output may seem like boiling the ocean. Don't get overwhelmed. Start by focusing on critical segments, products or verticals. Then apply the principles more broadly through the organization.

Beta test with customers to get real-time feedback and analyze key interaction points to determine where the customer experience may be fractured. It might be that hand-offs from one department to the next are spoiling potentially good interactions. It might be that missing what should be obvious hand-offs is doing the same. Be prepared for bad news. Do this part correctly, and you're sure to find some. That's actually a good thing and evidence that you're doing meaningful work and taking the right approach.

Move from reactive to proactive

Changing your core customer philosophy from reactive to proactive is the single highest mental hurdle your company is going to face. And it's also the one that bears the most fruit. Assess your processes and teams to ensure they're equipped to address customer needs proactively. Use scorecards to identify what's ready and what needs work. Assign colors (e.g. red, yellow, green) based on preparedness. It's critical to understand how much total time your organization is spending reaching out to customers proactively versus handling issues reactively. What is that percentage breakdown and what are the factors dictating that approach? What is the ideal ratio for your organization?

Put your company on the map

It's impossible to boil down such a complex process to a few hundred words. But the basic premise is simple (and undeniable): The Customer Journey mapping process will spotlight organizational gaps, help you figure out where you need help and reveal growth and retention strategies you could never have discovered any other way. Gartner predicts that by 2020 customers will manage 85 percent of their relationships with an enterprise without interacting with a human. Understanding that journey is more important than it's ever been. Give the process the respect it deserves. It's time and resource intensive and corners just can't be cut. But it's the best way to put your company on the map.