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## Customer Experience Management Programs:

### *There's No Such Thing as One-Size-Fits-All*

By *Dennis Gershowitz, Principal, DG Associates, and Sam Klaidman, Principal Advisor, Middlesex Consulting Group*

Have you ever stopped to reflect upon how differently the companies and retailers you know react in certain customer service situations? The differences can be astounding. We've come to believe that much of the breakdown in this arena is the result of these entities attempting to "wear someone else's shoes."

Think about the many programs you have implemented throughout your career. Wouldn't you agree that the most successful ones came from using the generic template, but adding and modifying this with elements unique to your company and its customers' behaviors?

Let's carry this notion one step farther. In the business world, some programs, projects, or activities are "hard" and some are "soft." Running the company's accounts is a *hard* activity. It is owned by the finance department. Reports are well defined and issued on a schedule. On the account ledger, debits always appear on the left, with credits on the right. On the balance sheet, assets minus liabilities always equals equity. But, we are not going to talk about finance here. In this article, we'll discuss an all-encompassing topic that is key to the entire organization: how to build customers for life—in other words, customer experience management (CEM) strategy programs (and these activities are considered *soft*).

Who owns the customer experience?

- At Apple, it is Steve Jobs.
- At many companies, it is the chief customer officer.
- Frequently it can be the chief marketing officer or the vice president of marketing.
- Often it is the vice president of service.
- And in many cases, it is either no one or everyone. Sadly, "no one" and "everyone" can be indistinguishable in some organizations, unless the company culture is truly customer-centric and the voice of the customer is the first voice heard when making organizational decisions.

So who should own this initiative at your business? We believe there is no right or wrong answer to this question. It depends on your company's culture, size, industry, business model, finances, markets served, sophistication, and of course, all attributes of your customer base. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to CEM programs. In fact, two seemingly identical companies can easily adopt two totally different CEM programs, with ownership depending on the characteristics of the CEO/president and the company culture. But, purposeful leadership must guide whoever owns it.

As Bruce Temkin of Temkin Associates points out: Just about every large organization has vision and mission statements floating around, but these do not help in day-to-day decision making. These decisions and actions require goals and objectives and a clear purpose for their organization that is more compelling than just more profits...executed by a purposeful leadership.

All of these possible variations are what makes working in the CEM space interesting, and why businesses can learn from other businesses. However, every organization should create a unique program that is right for them at the moment, keeping in mind that it will need to evolve with time—often in an unpredictable way. The CEM program must be solid enough to:

- Initiate a transition.

- Be communicated about properly.
- Engage employees.
- Engage customers (most importantly).

So if every business is unique, then how do you get started? Before we answer this key question, we'd like to set up a strawman backgrounder, so that the discussion does not become general "consultant speak." So, let's discuss a B2B technology company with annual sales of less than \$1 billion. In this scenario, most often the CEM strategy owner is the VP of customer support, VP of service, or a similar title.

To begin, we recommend that all businesses commence upon the CEM journey with an initial assessment that ultimately will lead to a strategic CEM plan that the entire company will understand and get behind. The assessment should be conducted by a knowledgeable independent CEM thought leader and will have the ultimate goal of treating the customer experience as a competence.

The assessment will, at a minimum:

- Define the level of the business' CEM maturity, to scope out the magnitude of the required effort.
- Evaluate how customer-centric the company is by looking insightfully at the leadership team, managers, and the overall employee base. One outcome of this analysis is the identification of internal obstacles to success—either key individuals or entire departments. The "silos" are often able to be easily discerned.
- Examine existing programs (usually surveys) and determine how consistently the information is gathered, if it is the right information to be collected, and how well it is used for decision making at all levels.
- Eliminate any complex processes that stand in the way of getting the right information and feedback. This becomes the seamless process of looking at all customer interactions across all touchpoints to create value.
- Speak to customer-facing employees and get their opinions of how customers feel about your business.
- If possible, interview customers and get their feedback. One outcome of this process is to identify how well the company's message is being communicated back—closing the loop.
- At a high level, assess how customer loyalty and satisfaction impacts financial and operational results. CEM programs must be proven to be self-sustaining before skeptical executives will buy in.

When the assessment is validated—which requires open-minded communications between the assessor and the owner—the next step is the creation of "the plan." While any business can proceed without a plan, you should remember General Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous quote about the D-Day invasion:

*"The plan is nothing; planning is everything."*

Also remember what Cheshire Cat said to Alice (in Wonderland):

*"If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there."*

Thus it is important to start the planning process with a vision of the ultimate customer experience, and then determine how to ensure that each customer has that ultimate experience each time they interact with your company. Think about your branding. Does your customer's experience reflect your branding? This is critical, because the brand is a promise (and a promise is an expectation), and the CEM strategy helps make sure that this promise is met.

So, in closing, envision the economic strength brought to your business by loyal and devoted customers. Having a CEM strategy and enabling a "Wow!" customer experience will differentiate your business and move that loyalty needle far to the right.

Remember that a good CEM strategy will create a platform for managing the customer experience. With this, voice-of-the-customer feedback moves beyond just reporting to the next level of enabling actionable intelligence. The business is now operating at a 360-degree view of interactions—and managing those interactions.

Customers expect companies to fulfill their commitments and brand promises; to deliver relevant and "exceeds expectations" experiences. Your strategic effort should be focused on building relationships with your customers—treating them uniquely and importantly. So, you tell me: How important is CEM and a CEM strategy?

***About the Authors...***

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