2013

On Customer Experience
Benefits. Best Practices. Truths.

MIKE WITTENSTEIN

GETS TO THE HEART

On Customer Experience

There's certainly nothing new about focusing on the customer experience to differentiate a business. Over the past decades, brands have rocketed to iconic status by doing just that. Think Apple, Virgin, Starbucks, and Disney.

The difference today is that empowered consumers (B2C) and buyers (B2B) are demanding more. Not just in lower price, but in better service as well. According to a 2010 American Express study, Americans are willing to spend 9% more with companies that provide excellent service. The same study showed that 91% of customers believe that customer service is important, but only 24% actually feel they get the service they deserve. It's no wonder that brands with better customer experiences are outperforming their competitors.

The Benefits

Great experiences create value for customers and cost the business less to deliver. Apple, for example, greets store visitors with a real person who brings the right people, products, and resources to the customers. Customer satisfaction soars, employee frustration plummets, and sales go up as results.

Here are some outcomes you can expect by listening to your customers early and intently:

• Reduced churn among customers and employees

• More predictable revenues

• Less advertising expense

• Lower new customer acquisition costs

• Noticeably better internal alignment

• More unsolicited referrals

• Greater brand awareness

For all these reasons, companies that deliver better experiences operate more profitably than others in their category.

Great experiences don't just happen and PowerPoint presentations alone can't make them a reality! They occur when all functions of the operation align with one another to achieve the outcomes your customers seek.

Good customer experience design starts with understanding what your customers care about most. Understanding which promises are most important to your customers, then aligning your organization to make and keep them, is the leader's most important role. When what the customers want most is what the business does best, the 'rising tide effect' kicks in and everyone benefits.

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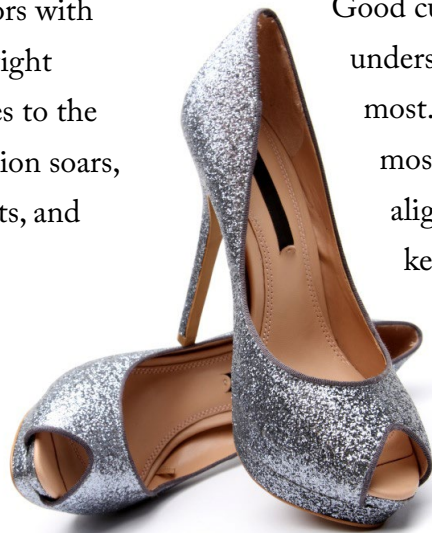
Which Industries Benefit Most?

Service brands with branded locations, high transaction volumes, multiple channels, and/or many interactions between customers and employees are the biggest users of customer experience design. Retailers (any business with a cash register, really), healthcare facilities, entertainment companies, hospitality providers (including hotels, restaurants, and travel providers), and professional services firms are the fast-adopting users.

Customer Experience can also benefit repetitive-transaction businesses where customers don't think much about their service provider – until there's a problem; like utilities, telecom or wireless, and insurance.

Is Customer Experience Design For You?

Your company could probably benefit from Customer Experience Design if you answer YES to three or more of these questions:

• Is my industry being commoditized? Do I fear having to compete on price?

• Does my business involve a large degree of customer service in any or all the channels (in-store, phone, web, mobile, face-to-face)?

• Have competitors introduced positive changes that my customers are noticing?

• Am I in a highly competitive space?

• Are new product or service introductions quickly matched by the competition?

• Has finding best-fit employees and suppliers become more difficult?

• Am I spending too much time winning back customers?

• Are my customers, prospects, or employees confused about how my brand's promises are different from any of your competitors?

• Does getting everyone on the same page feel more difficult now?

• Are my processes dictating my customer's experience?

• Do different departments and functional areas within my business often seem unsynchronized-resulting in disappointed customers?

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Best Practice

Working on just the customer-facing parts of the experience without working on the business processes that make the experience happen consistently better and more profitably isn't sustainable. That's why experience design should be used twice. Once to design the experience, then again to get the experience to 'fit' the people in the company who will deliver the customer's experience. These guidelines can help lead to the best approach.

The best customer experience designs find the right promises to make and the practical and profitable ways to keep them. Customer experience design achieves results that other methodologies can't because it:

- Successfully ties the brand to the business

- Shows how front line staff, supported by operations, can profitably deliver a superior experience

- Details what's important in experience delivery without removing the magic of surprise and great service

Good Experience Design Begins And Ends With Story. The organizations that win at word of mouth, owe thanks to their customers. They translate great experiences into stories which, in turn, create the desire for others to have the same experience. This simple formula works well because it uses design as a bridge-building tool to connect the emotions of people with the practical and rational delivery abilities of a business.

First, Listen To Customers. The focus needs to be on customers. Listen intently to learn what points of differentiation will be most meaningful from their point of view. A great variety of research tools from traditional interviews to modern techniques like anthropology-inspired observation and facial profiling help identify just which experience encounters have the potential to create raving fans. Often this step also involves examining the behavior and 'hot buttons' of competitors' customers.

Then, Listen To Employees. Dig deeply into the attitudes and behaviors of employees, particularly those in customer-facing positions. The objective is to understand how clearly they recognize and respond to the little touches and clues that can truly differentiate the brand. Insights gained from this step help assure that the final experience design will be readily adopted.

Know The Business Goals And Constraints. Describe the company's 'Reason for Being' clearly and succinctly. It should describe what outcome of value the company produces, for whom, and how it delivers. Document the principles by which the company will operate. In other words, write down those unwritten rules of the road that keep things aligned and people on the same page. Depict the connections between roles and their accountabilities to each other.

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Make Your First Story An Experience. Bring the brand to life with a story. The story can be words, pictures, animation, live-action, or video—or any combination. It's job is to give everyone in the business to see how their lives and the lives of customers will be affected by the change. It's a dynamic, visual, and emotional look at the future. Such a story will connect with employees, help them believe in it, and focus their attention on the desired outcomes.

Sweat The Details. Capture the present design in enough detail to connect the customer touch points with the behind-the-scenes operations that support them. Together with leaders and customer-facing teams, consider which of these touch points are the most important (cause the greatest effect, are the most memorable, define the brand, are the most story-worthy), while maintaining focus on what is operationally effective. From these discussions and additional research, evolve a design for future customer encounters and a detailed plan for achieving that design. (This is the magic and the value we offer. Of course, we're not going to detail it here. Our ability to do this so well is why we get hired ;-)

Design for Adoption Not Just Implementation. Success at implementation is generally measured by checking to see if the physical aspects of a new customer experience are installed properly. Success at adoption, a higher order goal of much greater value, is measured by throughput. In other words, is everyone, employees and customers alike, operating in the new experience happily and productively? Achieving adoption is important because achieving it sooner saves the business money, resources, and time. Hint: keep your existing resources intact. Do not displace key vendors such as architects, agencies, web/mobile developers, and others whose value comes from knowing you so well. Design for implementation is a crucial step. Don't skip it.

The Truth

Nothing is more critical to your company's success than the ability to deliver superior customer experiences—time after time. Those experiences don't just happen. They come about when enlightened companies, seeking a sustainable competitive advantage, decide that they will engineer every facet of their business to align with their customers' reasons for buying. When customers turn into enthusiastic advocates, the companies that serve them enter the ranks of some of the world's most enviable brands.

Enhancing customers' experiences at every touchpoint creates loyal, enthusiastic endorsers. Formulating a singular customer experience design for customers and employees ensures a natural alignment to deliver what brands promise. We can help you define and tell the brand story in a way that makes a memorable, positive impression then earns a clear, sustainable, competitive advantage.

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→ Mike's experience spans two decades, more than 25 countries, and over 350 companies. Mike was IBM's eVisionary and launched their first customer experience practice.

Languages

English, International English, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian

Education

MBA - Thunderbird
BA - University of Florida
2 Years Abroad - Brazil, Russia

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Customer Experience Design, Service Design, Strategy, Speaking, Facilitation

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Mike travels globally from Atlanta

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Professional member of the Retail Design Institute

Mike has been a catalyst for customer experience design and strategy around the world. He completely understands how to bridge the gap between data gathering and new experiences.

For over 20 years, he has been helping businesses navigate big changes with results that show on the bottom line. But, the focus isn't on the balance sheet. The focus is shifted to the human element, which ultimately creates value for the customer, the employees and the shareholders.

Mike discovered how to hit that 'triple bottom line' as IBM's eVisionary where he launched their first Customer Experience Practice. Since then, he has developed a commercial-grade toolset that reliably replicates breakthrough results. Mike's firm, Storyminers, helps clients learn and apply the tools.

Mike's storytelling style is collaborative, engaging, and practical. He supports vivid real-world examples with behind-the-scenes details so that people can put what they learn to use right away.

Sometimes, timing, geography, or project economics dictate a Webinar. Mike really knows how to connect with people whether they are in the same room or on the other side of the planet.

→ Global Speaker → Practicing Customer Experience Designer → Consultant