

Three Ways to Improve Customer Experience

By: Tim Young

Let's begin the way most every discussion of the customer experience begins: with a personal anecdote.

I've been a customer of a large US cableco (who shall remain nameless for the sake of neutrality and the fact that they, more than likely, will be reading this article) for the better part of a decade—ever since I moved into the geographical area the company serves, and through several interstate and intra-city moves.



I've never been a particularly lucrative subscriber, I'll admit. We joined the ranks of the cord-cutters seven years ago, and that decision has gotten easier and easier to live with over time. But we're consistent and loyal. Sure, we're internet-only and resist the constant barrage of bundle "upgrade" offers, but we pay on time, every time and rarely call to complain. I can't think of the last time we triggered a truck roll, and I've been able to muddle through any self-installation that's been thrown at me.

But there have been so many missed opportunities. So, so many.

Most recently, the promotional pricing we were under expired, and we were faced with a bill that was about 60 percent higher than what we'd been paying. So I girded my loins to spend a couple of hours on the phone playing the semiannual escalation game until I got the bill dropped to a reasonable level.

But this time my usual tactics came to no avail. I was told by everyone I spoke to that the best I could do was five bucks off my new total. And my old service was a remnant of my former subscription. There'd been a merger (which narrows down the name of my cableco a lot, but I'm still trying for anonymity here) and the new company apparently felt a lot less generous about promotional pricing for existing customers.

I walked away, called my local telco, verified they had fiber in my neighborhood, priced a plan that beat the cablecos offer for speed and value, and called the cableco back to cancel my service.

Only then did I get the proper escalation. I got an offer that, while still not as good as my previous plan, made enough sense financially to keep me from churning.

I'd need a new modem (though I just got a new modem with almost the same specs maybe a year ago, but that model wasn't supported by the new company) that would be shipped to me after I repeatedly stated that I had no desire to come to a retail location to pick it up.

A week goes by. Maybe two. No modem. A new bill arrives. Nothing has changed in our pricing.

Deep sigh.

I call the cableco back. First they say there's no record of my previous call, then a longish hold, then an apologetic admission that the previous call was noted, but that my order of a new modem and a service change had been cancelled by the CSR I spoke to in the last call.

The slow, rhythmic thumping they may heard on that call was my head making contact with my kitchen wall a dozen times while I searched for nice words to say.

They straightened it out, placated me with a one-time bill credit, and overnighted me the new

modem (after first asking me several times if I was sure I didn't want to pick it up at a retail location).

They kept me. They're still getting my money. But I'm still a big churn risk. If the fiber-packing telco on my street sends the right offer, I'm gone. Why? Because it isn't just a problem with the call centers. My service is inconsistent. I regularly have trouble with my internet speeds, which tend to average 40-50 percent of what is advertised. I'm never proactively notified of outages and, as I said before, no one seems to have gotten the hint that I'm not interested in bundles, especially for home phone service.

Look: it's not fair. A friend — as the old saying goes — is made through many acts, but lost by only one. That goes double for customer relationships. But given the emphasis placed on CEM for years now, I have a hard time seeing how those results have filtered down to anyone at my CSP who actually interacts with subscribers like me.

Yet there are solutions out there. We know what many of them are, and a number of CSPs are seeing positive results from these efforts. So forgive me if any of these are rudimentary, but fresh off some frustrating interactions, here are five ways that customer experience (CX) can be improved in the integrated communications and entertainment (ICE) industry.

1 - Deliver consistently

One challenge of delivering a high-quality customer experience is the fact that it's not just one experience. Most CSPs offer multiple services across multiple devices and communicate through multiple channels. This is why an omnichannel approach is so important.

We know that, but most CSPs still have a long way to go to fully execute on omnichannel engagement. [A report from the CMO Council last fall](#), based on perspectives from 250 telco and brand marketers, found that only 4 percent of telcos believe they are providing subscribers with a consistent, personalized, relevant experience across all channels. That's actually better than the non-telco brands that were represented in the study, as only 1 percent of the marketers from that category said they have a handle on omnichannel.

What's more, fifty-six percent of telco marketers believe that non-telco companies are better than telcos at delivering omnichannel. But nearly half of non-telco brands believe CSPs are well-positioned to play a leadership role in omnichannel, providing a framework for all other brands to follow.

"Less than 10 percent of telco marketers believe they are highly advanced and rapidly evolving when it comes to being more data-driven, customer-responsive and digitally adaptive," noted Donovan Neale-May, Executive Director, CMO Council. "More than 25 percent list functional integration; cultural, technical and operational hurdles; and resistance to change as obstacles to evolving to a true OCM model."

These results suggest a bit of tech dysmorphia running rampant through CSPs. They see themselves as unprepared to deliver the very omnichannel experiences, while other brands look to the CSPs to lead them to consistent omnichannel glory.

And a wide variety of vendors have solutions geared toward omnichannel engagement, including SAP (in partnership with IBM), Infosys, and Oracle.

"Telecom and media consumption is becoming increasingly customizable and is therefore more complicated," said Matthias Goehler, senior vice president, Industries, SAP Hybris, [in a statement](#). "SAP is committed to meeting industry business needs by supporting new business models, industry regulations and standards. The telecommunications and media accelerator helps companies achieve and realize their goals all while getting to market as quickly as possible."

2 - Automate or perish

That consistency may require the occasional removal of the human element, so often the weak link

is in meeting customer expectations.

That's no slight against humans. Some of my favorite people are humans. But process automation can help make customer interactions more consistent, more helpful, and more fruitful.

Glen Post, CEO of CenturyLink, [touted the results the company was seeing](#) from automation in a quarterly earnings call. "We are simplifying and automating products, processes, and systems," he said. "We are increasing digitization of end-to-end service delivery platforms, allowing more efficient customer-friendly interactions. And we're improving our managed service delivery and service model to enable us to better meet our customers' needs."

Automation can also help figure out ways to make interactions with customers more profitable, in a very direct way. [In a recent entry on Adobe's blog](#), Jamie Brighton talked about the benefits of auto-allocation tools that A/B test multiple messages and automatically reroute traffic to the best-performing experience in real time. At any given time, 20 percent of the traffic is A/B tested while the remaining 80 percent is routed to the optimized message.

The example he used was Swisscom, where they found that when they used a silver iPhone as the default image on their product details page, their conversions increased by 37 percent over the gray iPhone they had been using. Will that one small change redefine their business? No. But it is an example of insightful feedback, analyzed in real time and used to make a smart business decision.

3 - Leverage AI...intelligently

One example of automation that is currently being heralded as the solution to an improved customer experience is AI, and it's finding its way into every aspect of CSP operations.

For example, T-Mobile (USA) [announced last month](#) that it was working with Tupl to automate a key portion of its customer interaction using Tupl's Automated Customer Care Resolution (ACCR) tool. The tool provides CSRs with detailed, easy-to-interpret cause reports and technical resolutions, allowing them to quickly and efficiently serve customers. Tupl claims the tool is 100 times faster and 4 times more accurate than legacy resolution methodologies, and that it can provide automation levels up to 90 percent.

"At T-Mobile, we're obsessed with the customer experience," said Brian King, T-Mobile's SVP of Technology Service Delivery & Operations, in a statement, "and Tupl's tool has enabled us to respond to our customers much faster on technical issues. Solutions like this help make T-Mobile #1 in customer satisfaction in US wireless."

SK Telecom, meanwhile, [announced recently](#) that it is moving its AI network operating system, "TANGO," into the field. The system is designed to detect traffic patterns, potential faults, and a wide array of other data and optimize the network accordingly. In addition, the system is designed to find network anomalies and alert specialized managers to the problem, recommending corrective action whenever possible. In addition to using the system internally, [SK Telecom has entered partnerships](#) with carriers such as Bharti Airtel to deploy the technology.

These are just two examples of AI's powerful potential. AI can also be used to plan networks, identify churn risk, handle direct customer inquiries, and more. There's a risk that these technologies could be overused—notice that both of the examples I used above involve hand-off to humans at some point in the process—but there's no doubt that AI can solve its share of problems.

These three examples are just the beginning. We could as easily make a list of five or twelve or 20,000. But the main takeaway is that the time for implementing some strategy--any strategy--is now. I am sick of being a churn risk. It would be nice to find a CSP that acted like my boring money was worth earning.