CX in the New Operator World

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In the world of network operators and carriers, customer experience (CX) was, for a long time, thought of only in terms of the data going down the fibers: was it reliable and fast enough? But the world of CX is changing. In the same way that customers' use of data has evolved, there are now much higher expectations around CX. And CX really matters because it has never been easier than it is today for customers to move to another provider.

Defining CX around something as simplistic as reliability and performance is a huge mistake. It ignores that most customers still want to deal with a human being at different points in their journey, whether it's to discuss solutions or pricing, or to deal with an outage they are experiencing. These interactions matter, and of course everyone has personal preferences about how they take place. Some are happy to provision services online in the same way that some consumers will buy a new television without seeing the picture and experiencing the device in a store. At Arelion, we see many of our customers now relying on our online portal for day-to-day network management. Matters related to pricing, finance and faults are those for which customers are most likely to want to pick up the phone and speak with their account manager or service manager.

Operators seeking differentiation need to rise to the challenge, offering a better customer experience that removes friction from processes and gives customers much more visibility over the network. Self-service and automation are playing a big part in delivering this kind of experience. For example, queries relating to service delivery and fault management can become largely an online experience if the right user experience and transparency are available through customer portals. But what are some of the key changes taking place that are demanding this evolution from our industry?

Customer sensitivity to faults is rising

What customers need from us as carriers is changing, and the bar is being raised. Customers have always been rightly sensitive to any disturbance on the network. However, during times of crisis

and in the post-pandemic era, we see that patience runs exceptionally thin when it comes to network outages. While customers would always be concerned if there was an outage, today we see that customers are concerned with all categories of faults. For example, lower category or lower impact faults concern customers more today than they did 18 months ago, according to our own data. Customers who need reliable network access will not hesitate to rank a provider negatively if the service is down. They are also looking for faster support with incidents, network outages, issue escalations and customer requests.

Demand for greater transparency is growing

Many clients have extremely sensitive applications that are affected by every network event. As a result, customers want more information about what is happening on their connections and the wider network. They are no longer satisfied with general statements about the network being down; they want granular details. Real-time information is the new order of the day, supplied straight to customer dashboards in a way that allows them to analyze and understand events and the relationship with their applications quickly and in detail. But crucially, giving a good customer experience demands that such data is provided in a way that can easily be played with and analyzed—just churning our thousands of data points has nothing to do with CX.

A desire for more honesty

Giving customers information about what is happening on the network is about being more open and, in some cases, honest with customers. Ultimately, the truth will come out regardless of how a carrier tries to portray an outage to the world. The wider community will always be conducting its own analysis, so any sense of economy with the truth will invite closer scrutiny. We must be brave enough to say we have failed, recognize our weaknesses and be forward-thinking about preventing failures like this from happening again. It is certainly fair to say that in the past, as an industry, we did not have a great reputation for admitting the cause of faults, and we still see examples of companies releasing as little information as they think they can get away with. How we communicate failings with customers is becoming much more important. We must be transparent, always providing the facts on what is happening with plenty of detail.

For example, when we had a fault on the Arelion (then Telia Carrier) AS1299 network in 2016, quite rightly many customers aired their dissatisfaction. On social media, we were very honest about the issue, how it was remedied, and the actions taken to ensure it could not happen again. We lost a few customers because of that event, but most were accepting of our contrition and that openness is remembered. It is not common for carriers to respond like this in our industry, even today, and this needs to change.

Carriers benefit from raising the CX bar

This may seem like an obvious statement as carriers retain and win new customers through a great CX experience, but it's not the only benefit. Today, carriers have more real-time knowledge about their own networks than ever before, and the thing that is driving this is the revolution happening in customer provisioning, transparency, and the overall experience. Automation technology, Internet of Things monitoring, new routers, machine learning and artificial intelligence are just some of the technologies that are making it possible to deliver today's network and customer experiences. Each deployment of these technologies gives carriers new

insights into their networks and business operations, enabling features such as preemptive maintenance and automatic fault resolution. It has been the demand for more transparency from customers that has revealed the true value of this data to carriers and customers alike.

The human touch

Making sure the human touch is available to customers when they want it as part of their customer experience is not the only part of the human equation that matters. How carriers organize themselves internally to share experiences and information is hugely important and critical if you are to be responsive to the needs of customers. In the same way that customers want greater transparency over their data, service management needs this data, too. But dashboards bringing data from different systems together are not enough. Today's leading carriers integrate service management teams with network planning, network operations centers, maintenance, and technical teams. The connections between these teams are an essential component to delivering the best CX.

At Arelion, we collaborate very effectively throughout the organization and work closely with the Service Delivery team and other units within Operations to resolve problems and identify patterns that can inform other areas of the business. It's almost impossible to put a value on the benefits that we and our customers get from this human touch.

Trust in a great customer experience

Everything in this article can be boiled down to one word: trust. Trust that you can deliver, will be honest, and are responsive to customer needs. The technology, people and processes behind a great customer experience all feed into engendering trust. The old ways of hiding what is happening in the network or operating on a "need to know basis" when it comes to faults are being cast into obscurity. Acknowledging failings and admitting errors is a humbling experience, but one that will lead to personal growth as well as to a better network.

Trust earned through an excellent customer experience is the differentiator in today's carrier market, and the most likely measure on which a customer will make their buying decisions. This should come as no surprise. The reliance that customers have on connectivity to deliver their own services and products is more important than ever in the post-pandemic digital world. As an industry, we need to raise the bar on the CX that we deliver. There is a lot at stake for customers, and carriers that fail to raise their bar will soon find out that the same is true for them.