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Ascending the CX Ladder

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These truths we hold to be self-evident: communications service providers (CSPs) are constantly looking for ways to improve operational support systems and business support systems for clients. Customers increasingly demand a seamless experience that quickly results in the service or product they want. If the customer experience is not described as exactly 'enjoyable,' it must be described as 'smooth,' or churn will result.

With the focus on providing the best efficiency options to customers, it's not a great surprise that the human connection can be buried under the relentless drift of technical tools and touchpoints. The tools and touchpoints are not going away, nor should they. What must be remembered is that the human connection—although often expressed with a technical component—must not go away either.

Making the complex simple

The best services products are simple and good—what software developer ITX calls frictionless. Connect with a car service with upfront pricing and accessible tracking rather than receiving a runaround (or drive-around) with a relentlessly clicking meter sending the fare sky-high. Get a detailed overview of the hiking boots you're interested in, click, and have them delivered to your door without exorbitant delivery charges and wait times (maybe in two days if you pay an annual fee for that service). Send your friend half the cost for lunch through an app on your phone. Rent a vacation home after viewing in-depth visuals and reading customer reviews in plain sight.

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The challenge for CSPs is to allow the companies that provide all the above a robust digital infrastructure so that their customers (who are CSPs' customers too, albeit another degree or two of separation away) keep coming back for more because their experience has been good: clean, quick, and relatively cost-effective. CSPs must consistently make the complex feel simple.

And as customers get more savvy (as we know they are, as online purchasing soars, as life conducted by the app shatters each year's previous record high) the complexity only increases. There are so many variables at play that the challenges are—in a word—daunting.

Elements of CX strategy

The one variable, though, that is within every telecom's ability to improve is customer service. The management of the relationship lifecycle is easy to undervalue. It doesn't necessarily bring the hype and excitement of a new service or product; it is often rooted in very traditional (dare we say plodding) processes that need patience, diligence, and repetitive attention to detail. Not the sexiest song on the playlist. And yet, a strong CX strategy is often the difference between whether a CSP is thriving or diving. The trend in CX strategy has been—and will continue to be—an API-led approach and a strong Customer Data Platform allowing for uber flexibility in the short term; and continuous orchestration of the customer journey across all interactions and among all internal teams. Visibility and accessibility are key. So are simplicity, smart analytics, proactive help, and self-service ordering.

Climbing the loyalty ladder

Product Momentum, a podcast hosted by ITX EVP of Innovation Sean Flaherty and Director of Product Innovation Paul Gebel, offers valuable insight on the heart of the customer experience, whether you are a Tier 1, 2 or 3 CSP, or a 5-star, 4-star or fast-food restaurant. The rungs on the loyalty ladder lead to the goal for which all businesses should strive: brand advocacy (over paying customers). Each rung on the ladder represents a 'micro' interaction between your company and a potential or existing customer. The ladder consists of three sections: trust, loyalty, and

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advocacy. Many of us are conditioned to use the three terms interchangeably, but each one is not a mirror image of the other.

There is an important distinction between trust and loyalty: the threshold of trust is a customer deciding to buy from you, but it does not automatically imply loyalty. This is a common mistake too many make. Once the trust has been made explicit through a purchase, you must continue up the rungs of the ladder to loyalty. Advancing to the loyalty threshold is vital because it signifies that your customer has decided that they will indeed use your product or service again in the future.

If you continue to strengthen this loyalty through positive experiences for your customer, they will convert into the gold standard, no longer simply a trusting or loyal customer but a brand advocate. An advocate will not only buy again from you, but they will also be inspired to tell others to do so as well. And short of you possessing a monopoly on a service or product, a business does not grow without advocates. Advocates are never produced without strong CX. It is a formula that has existed since time immemorial: Good Product or Service x Good Customer Experience = Advocacy = Business Growth.

Obviously, the closer you get to advocacy, the stronger your customer relationship. The rungs lower on the ladder are, understandably, more slippery. As you're building trust early in the relationship cycle, the slip factor is very high (Vegas might not take odds at this point). At the loyalty level there is less grease on every rung. At the advocacy level you have a firm grip. However, a ladder is a ladder and totally ignoring safety protocols can lead to a fall. Another paradox arises: although your loyal customers and your brand advocates need less attention because of the strength of your relationship, you must protect your blue-chip assets strongly. Do not lose sight of this fact. Just because you have more leeway certainly does not mean you should use it.

The tools that allow you to build trust, enable loyalty, and earn advocacy include each of the following: AI, Chat, Notifications, Visibility, Customer Impersonate, Automation, and Self-service into your knowledge base for reporting and analytics that allow your B2B and B2C customers to make the most advantageous decisions for their individualized situation.

A robust unified platform will bolster CX at every touchpoint and will boost client acquisition; stimulate growth through cross-selling as customers directly experience the streamlined efficiency the platform provides; maximize optimization by reducing cost-to-serve ratios; and increase retention due to reduced customer churn.

The CSP opportunity

The ability to deliver a positive customer experience is a potent differentiator. The way consumers have obtained information, entertainment, navigated medical visits, interacted with employers and clients, educated their children and themselves, and stayed in contact with friends and loved ones has significantly changed in the pasttwo years. The frequency of use and

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comfort level that customers have established with their digital communication technology has zoomed (literally and figuratively) to heights that most industry experts had estimated would not be seen for some years to come. But they are here, now. They will remain and only continue to grow. Herein lies great opportunity for CSPs.

Making a conscious decision to enhance your CX delivery is one over which you can exercise a significant modicum of control. But this potential is still not being tapped. A 2019 report by EY Global indicated that telcos' Net Promoter Score continued to lag, and in an even more pronounced fashion when lined up directly against both retail and manufacturing. In fact, 54 percent of telecom consumer respondents said they would seek out new providers if their online journey proved too difficult. Approximately 75 percent of respondents said they prefer more human interaction on digital sales platforms, while 75 percent also answered that they would be more likely to make a telecom purchase if live chat or video chat were available.

A devoted approach to customer-centricity

A genuine customer-centric culture infuses every branch of an organization. There are numerous tools, metrics, and approaches to utilize in the effort, but they should be directed toward areas that make up the bedrock of a solid CX plan. These include easy access to information; reduced waiting times; quick response time; personalized interactions; expanded services and products; rapid delivery of any ordered services; avoidance of redundancies for customers; and 24/7 customer support through chatbots and other AI. CX-centric organizations provide an omnichannel experience because customers have various preferences on how they interact with companies.

The truly CX-centric cultures are prepared by offering multiple touchpoints with comparable high-quality customer experiences across each. Offering an option just to say it is offered without injecting the same level of customer care for each choice, however, may do more damage than not providing the option at all. It is also vital that if a customer changes to a second channel, they should not be penalized by having to start from the beginning of the process or by having to navigate other redundancies. Finally, and perhaps obviously, the genuine customer-centric companies invest significant resources in employee training for both new and experienced employees. This builds strong institutional intelligence. Ultimately, a devoted approach to customer-centricity will yield more revenue than the endless attempts to promote sales without the organizational undercarriage that supports every aspect of your business.

A unified platform is vital to your architecture. It enhances your service and product delivery process, your accounting system, your feedback loop, and more. If you have not developed a continuous innovation strategy that circulates through all your divisions, and if every division is not aware of it— devoting real effort to maintaining it and contributing to it—you are, ultimately, neglecting your customers.

The benefits of elevating your CX align precisely with what nearly all organizations seek: more sales, increased customer satisfaction, stronger customer loyalty, less churn, and the building of

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brand ambassadors within your customer base that will translate to positive reviews and recommendations.

Your CX toolbox and strategy are only as good as the execution. Strategy must be succinct and agile for quick wins in building trust, and continuous to generate loyalty and earn advocacy. The focus encompasses the entire customer relationship lifecycle, the journey mapped from the first rung on up, and includes the full team, as well unflinching details on the positive and negative aspects of existing experience. It is through this rigorous process that the path to your definition of success comes clearly into view.

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