Customer Experience

Beyond Better Sameness

Creating a Profitable and Influential Signature Experience

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CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: BEYOND BETTER SAMENESS

We’re more than ten years into the “Experience Economy” and, over that time, there’s been an explosion of focus on creating and improving customer experiences. Even in the midst of our recently challenging economic environment, it’s hard to find a company that isn’t either actively involved in or planning some form of experience-related investments. Now, as the economy strengthens, we’re observing an increasing level of interest in getting closer to customers.

Customers’ experiences have always been important. Every viable company has had to provide acceptable product and service experiences in order to retain customers, reduce the cost associated with repeated service interactions, and avoid lost revenues associated with negative word of mouth. But despite the growing attention to customer experience, with a few exceptions, customers are no happier with their experiences today than they were 10 years ago. According the national reporting body for the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), customer satisfaction “continues on the path it has been on for quite some time now: in the aggregate, it is going nowhere!”

The unfortunate realization is that the majority of customer experience efforts produce little more than better sameness. Better sameness is doing what you’ve always done—and what pretty much all your competitors do—a little bit better, a little faster, and possibly a little cheaper. It’s providing incrementally friendlier customer service, incrementally faster response times, a more appealing retail environment, a more streamlined web catalog and ordering processes, or other elements of the experience that a company can measure.

The problem is that customers don’t usually notice and aren’t particularly influenced by these incremental differences. This is why...

“Better Sameness” is one of the main reasons it is so very easy to make ineffective and uneconomic customer experience investments.
Moving beyond better sameness requires a fundamentally different way of thinking about the nature and design of influential experiences. To create a competitively relevant improvement, you need to do something that actually grabs the customer’s attention and positively influences how they feel and what they do. Moving beyond better sameness starts with recognizing the shortcomings of the most common approaches to understanding and designing experiences.

**THE CULPRITS: COMMON CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE APPROACHES REINFORCE BETTER SAMENESS**

Many of the most common approaches employed by companies tend to reinforce better sameness:

- **Customer Satisfaction Measurement:** Most companies ask customers for subjective evaluations of the company’s or product’s performance on the assumption that these expressed attitudes drive behavior, such as repeat purchases or positive word of mouth. Unfortunately, decades of research into the correlation between these evaluations and subsequent behavior show the link is relatively weak. Satisfaction is not an emotional state that powerfully drives behavior. Most customers who switch say they’re satisfied.

- **Voice of the Customer Insight:** Listening to customers is critical for gaining insight into their lives, their goals, their needs, as well as their frustrations, feelings, and behaviors. However, as Henry Ford said, “If I asked customers what they wanted, we’d just have ended up with faster horses.” What customers say they want is not a reflection of the deeper goals and subconscious factors that influence their behavior. As a result, the voice of the customer tends to be inconsistent with factors that ultimately drive their behavior, leading companies to invest in the wrong things.

- **Touch Point Mapping and Service Level Improvements:** Touch point mapping is a company-centric activity. Customers’ experiences do not just happen at your company’s touch points. Customers follow an end-to-end set of activities that make sense to them given the goals and needs they’re trying to address. You can’t understand and meaningfully improve the customers’ experience by just looking at and incrementally improving service levels at your touch points. In fact, most of the opportunities to innovate the experience don’t occur at existing touch points. They occur with unmet needs or inciting events that occur outside of those defined contacts. As customers go about their busy lives, they often do not pay attention to or act on incremental service improvements at the existing touch points.

- **Training and Motivating Front-line Service Employees:** Having engaged, well trained, and highly motivated service employees is important. However, a lack of training and motivation is rarely the real issue behind a poor experience. The experience customers have with any organization is the product of behavior that emerges from a complex organizational system. The root of that behavior is a leadership, management, measurement, and cultural environment that reinforces “unwritten rules” inconsistent with employees doing the right thing for customers. Focusing on training and motivating employees without surfacing and addressing these unwritten rules is like hacking at the leaves rather than striking at the root of the problem.

**THE REMEDY: AN OUTCOMES-DRIVEN... SIGNATURE EXPERIENCE... EMPATHICALLY DELIVERED**

This white paper covers three core components required to move beyond better sameness. Highly influential experiences must...

- Focus on influencing specific customer behaviors that drive business results...  
  “Outcomes Driven”

- Create a meaningful, memorable, and differentiated experience...  
  “Signature Experience”

- And deliver it in a way that builds a strong emotional bond with customers.  
  “Empathically Delivered”
COMPONENT 1

FOCUS EXPERIENCE DESIGN ON WELL-DEFINED BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES

The fortunes of any enterprise are behaviorally determined. Ultimately, an organization’s success is dependent on its ability to positively and profitably influence what people do. This includes a broad range of customer behavior: the products or services people choose, what they’re willing to pay, the channels through which they choose to access service, and the positive or negative stories that influence other customers.

EXPERIENCES INFLUENCE CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR

Loyal customers that provide a reliable source of current and future revenue.

Profitable customers who spend more in a diverse range of occasions.

Engaged customers who respond positively to new product and service offerings.

Advocates who provide positive referrals to prospective customers and other stakeholders.

Creative customers that play an increasingly active role in shaping demand and co-creating products and services.

In practice, however, we’ve found there are usually a small number of critical behaviors that drive nonlinear improvements in results. The first step is to define and prioritize the small set of specific behavioral outcomes essential for driving your desired business results.
A SMALL NUMBER OF BEHAVIORS DRIVE NONLINEAR RETURNS

For Example:

- **Automotive Service**
  - Visit frequency
  - Customer referrals

- **Restaurant Chain**
  - The second occasion
  - Ordering wine with meal

- **Financial Advisory**
  - Goal statement
  - Completed plan

- **Business News**
  - Second time renewals
  - Online visit frequency

- **Insurance Company**
  - Life customers that buy auto
  - Auto renewal rates

For example, we had the chance to work with a leading business news organization whose customer experience extends across print, online, and mobile devices. Across this diverse landscape, the one behavioral outcome that dominates the economics of their business turned out to be **second-time renewals**. They have a lot of customers that subscribe once, renew once, and then opt out at the second renewal point. A small improvement in second-time renewals drives a nonlinear performance gain for the business. Not surprisingly, customer experience improvements that impact second-time renewals have the highest return on investment.

We’ve seen a similar effect in almost every other situation we’ve faced: the highest impact customer experience investments were those that had a direct impact on these most valuable behavioral outcomes. Unfortunately, this approach is not typical. One reason that it’s so easy to make unprofitable customer experience investments is that the most common approaches are backwards. They start by identifying potential improvements across a broad range of existing touch points, based on an assessment of the state of the current experience. Then they determine what business results they might expect to get from these planned improvements (moving from left to right in the illustration below). While these results may be justified in a business case, they often do not produce outcomes beyond better sameness.

**OUTCOMES BASED EXPERIENCE DESIGN MODEL**
A better alternative approach starts with the desired business outcomes, often defined in terms of revenue growth, profitability, or some other business performance metrics, and then works from right to left, to get at what customers must do differently to generate those business outcomes. That is, only after identifying the behaviors that have the greatest impact on the desired business outcomes, the design work can determine which experiences will have the most profound influence on those behaviors.

The following Customer Innovations client examples illustrate the design of experience interventions focused on the specific behavioral outcomes most critical to increases in business performance.

**Automotive Services Chain**

- Developed a comprehensive set of experience design interventions focused on intentionally *DECREASING* revenue per visit by 10% in order to enable an *INCREASE* in visit frequency by 40% and a resulting *INCREASE* in same store sales of 12%.
- Design interventions included: the development of new visit occasions, the expansion of referrals to other providers, friends and family discounts / pricing, as well as changes in manager and employee training and incentive structures.

**Small Group Health Insurance**

- Conducted in-depth research with small business clients and insurance brokers in order to develop specific interventions that would *INCREASE* client case renewal and *INCREASE* share of business with high-producing brokers. These interventions generated a $100 million increase in revenue within one year.
- Design interventions included: radical simplification of renewal packages from 50+ pages of complex alternatives to 4 pages simplified choices, targeted process and timing changes in the renewal experience, and the development of a new “renewal specialist” role to supplement the existing account structure.

**Business Services Provider**

- Worked with the provider of complex outsourcing and technology-based services to identify levers for *INCREASING* service revenue penetration with existing customers and *REDUCING* the risk of client defection.
- Interventions included changes in strategic account management structure and processes and the adoption of a more client-collaborative account planning approach. It also included implementing a closed-loop client feedback and issue management process that integrated action planning and results management. Within 6 months of adoption, these changes contributed to an additional $80 million *INCREASE* in revenue with the provider’s largest client.

More information on designing experiences to address specific behavioral outcomes can be found in Customer Innovations’ white paper titled, “An Introduction to Design for Behavior.”
COMPONENT 2

CREATE A MEANINGFUL, MEMORABLE, AND DIFFERENTIATED SIGNATURE EXPERIENCE

The most influential experiences create meaningful distinctions in what people remember, the stories they tell, the conclusions they draw, the decisions and resolutions they make, and the meaning they derive from it all. The most powerful influential experiences are designed around a compelling story and a series of high-contrast “signature elements” that catch people by surprise.

Not all differences are created equal. When it comes to customer experience, it’s worth distinguishing between differences in degree and differences in kind:

• Most differences in product and service quality can be described as differences in degree. A difference in degree is something everyone does but some do better than others. In general, people have a hard time noticing and measuring differences in degree. If your response time is 35 seconds and your competitor’s is 55 seconds, it may not register for customers, even though investing in increases in these service levels may be very expensive. Improving differences in degree are often expensive investments in better sameness.

• On the other hand, people have a very easy time perceiving differences in kind. A difference in kind is something you get from one provider that you don’t get from another; it’s fundamentally different and may even catch you by surprise. Virtually every example of companies that are recognized as customer experience leaders (e.g., Amazon, Zappos, Container Store, Starbucks, Chick-fil-A, etc.) have at least a small set of things that register as differences in kind, not just a large number of differences in degree. The good news is that creating a small set of differences in kind doesn’t necessarily cost as much as ramping up a large number of differences in degree. The bad news is that it takes a special kind of courage, often in short supply, for a company to break away from the pack (which turns out to be good news for their competitors).
Moving beyond better sameness demands doing something that isn’t just a difference in degree; it demands doing something that’s a difference in kind. A signature experience almost always represents a difference in kind, which helps to make it both meaningful and memorable.

**MEMORABILITY AND MEANINGFULNESS**

These characteristics turn out to be important—they form the logic behind creating signature experiences—because they are at the heart of how people actually have experiences. Every second of the day our senses take in millions of bits of rich sensory detail about our experiences: the sights, sounds, textures, smells, and tastes of everyday life. We have only a limited capacity, however, to attend to all that information.

Our conscious stream of the thought relies on *short-term memory*. This short-term memory provides capacity for holding a small amount of rich sensory information in an active, readily available state for a short period of time. The duration of short-term memory is about 20 seconds and experiments demonstrate its capacity ranges from about five to nine elements—words, digits, letters, or simple image representations.

Experiences like a concert, a fine meal, a glass of wine, a movie, browsing through a store, or walking along the street are very complex, rich, and multidimensional. While it’s possible to hold some of that rich detail in short-term memory, it’s not easily transferred to *long-term memory*. As a result, the morning after a concert, you may remember only a few of the songs that were played, a few salient features about the way they were played, and the sense of what you liked or disliked about them. As you recall that concert, you start to form a story about that experience based on these salient elements.

We generally pay attention to those elements of our experience that seem most important; the elements that capture our attention because they were particularly high-contrast or they caught us by surprise in some way. Beyond the relatively small amount of information we’re able to pay conscious attention to, we do something called *gist processing*. Gist processing enables us to get a sense for what is unfolding around us without having to focus attention on all the details. It operates through subconscious pattern matching. We get the gist of what’s happening because it roughly matches experiences we’ve had in the past.

Research has provided many interesting examples of *selective attention and inattentional blindness*:

- In one of the most well known demonstrations of selective attention, participants watch a video of people passing a basketball to each other and are asked to count the number of passes. As the participants are busy counting passes, fewer than 50% of the participants notice that a person dressed in a gorilla suit walks right through the middle of the action, stops, turns, looks at the camera, and does a little dance before turning and walking off the scene.

- Another well-known example is the “door study.” In this experiment, pedestrians are stopped on the street by a researcher who asks them for directions. While the pedestrian is talking to the experimenter, two men carrying a door walk between the two. Hiding behind the door is another experimenter who changes places with the first experimenter. The second experimenter then continues the conversation with the pedestrian. The two experimenters are purposely different in height, weight, coloring, dress, etc. Shockingly, only about half of the pedestrians realized that they were now talking to someone completely different than the person they were talking to at the beginning of the conversation.

In both examples, subjects were surprisingly unaware of very significant elements of their experience. From the standpoint of evolutionary psychology, this makes sense. Over history, our survival has been based on recognizing and paying keen attention to only those elements of our environment that seem most important, while filtering out and not getting distracted by large amounts extraneous detail.

These limits of human attention hold serious implications for the design of influential experiences. Another easy way to waste time and money in these efforts is by designing experience elements that customers just filter out, because the experience elements are neither central to the goals they are trying to accomplish nor occur on the
attentional pathway customers are following to accomplish those goals. A signature experience needs to be designed to support how people do gist processing and create a small number of high-contrast elements that capture the customers’ attention and reinforce a meaningful, differentiated story.

TELLING AN SIGNATURE STORY

“Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.” – Robert McKee

‘A brand is a metaphorical story that connects with something very deep; a fundamental human appreciation of mythology. Companies that manifest this sensibility invoke something very powerful.’

– Scott Bedbury, ex-CMO, Nike and Starbucks

As many have noted, we make sense of the world around us through the stories we tell—the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we hear from and tell to others. If you think about the defining moments in your life, you’ll see that the stories you tell yourself about those moments have a powerful influence on your identity and the way you see the world. Across human history, we’ve also shared meaning and knowledge with each other in the form of stories. This includes the legends and parables shared within and across generations, as well as the stories we share about more immediate events.

What are the stories your customers tell about their experience with you and your business? What do they think you really stand for? What are the most memorable aspects of their experience? What surprises them? What frustrates them? How do you make them feel? The nature and quality of these stories has a profound impact on the success of your business.

Stories that create or reflect signature experiences rely on four interrelated components:

• **Message**: What does the brand, product, or service experience stand for? What does it mean?
• **Conflict**: What does the experience stand against? What tension does it help people overcome?
• **Characters**: What roles do people play and what characters bring the experience to life?
• **Signature Elements**: What parts of the experience are unique and create anchors for telling the story?

**FOUR COMPONENTS OF A SIGNATURE STORY**

**Message**

Great stories have a strong premise; an ideological center that provides meaning.

**Conflict**

There is no story without conflict! Meaningful stories involve a struggle to attain, defend or regain harmony.

**Characters**

You need a hero & villain with opposing agendas. Most stories also include supporters, benefactors, and beneficiaries.

**Signature Differences**

You need a small set of signature experience elements that reinforce a storyline about what makes you unique and compelling.
MESSAGE

A simple, purposeful message is at the core of many of the experiences people find intuitively understandable and compelling. It serves as the ideological core and organizing theme for differentiating the experience. It is not necessarily the same as an advertising tagline. However, it is helpful to be able to express it in a few words—ideally, three to five. For example, although Southwest has the following statement on their website.

“Here at Southwest, we like to do things a bit differently than “the other guys”. We pride ourselves on making it both simple and fun to fly wherever it is that life takes you, with low fares to 70+ destinations nationwide. Whether you’re on the ground or in the air, we’re always working hard to ensure that your travel experience is top-notch. So the next time you head out on a journey, whether for business or to have a little fun, we hope it’s on one of our red-bellied jets.”

This translates to the following, simpler message: Cheap, Simple, and Fun.

CONFLICT

Stories make little sense without conflict. This is the biggest gap for most organizations. They attempt to express what they stand for, what their products or services stand for, but it makes no sense without clearly communicating what they stand against. To be meaningful and memorable, stories need to create this contrast. People will find it easier to understand who you are when it’s clear who you’re not. Heroes are boring without villains. Triumphs don’t make sense without understanding the challenges that made those triumphs meaningful. Stories without tension, uncertainty, or risk aren’t worth listening to. The conflict built into the message clarifies the things that make the experience differentiated and worth engaging in.

It becomes especially important, therefore, to choose your enemies wisely. For example, just about every insurance company out there portrays the enemy in their story to be the uncertain outcomes they protect you against. As a result, the message from those companies boils down to pretty much the same thing, with only minor variations on how effectively they communicate that same old story. Progressive Insurance, on the other hand, has gotten a lot of mileage out of telling a different story, a story that contrasts the standard risk protection with the provision of competitive quotes that enable customers to feel they’ve made a more educated decision.

CHARACTERS

Characters bring the story to life. The most effective stories have characters that are authentic and intuitively understandable. These characters make the experience more concrete, which is particularly important if the product or service you provide is complex and abstract. For example, if you’re in the insurance business, what you sell is abstract, a policy that represents the transfer of risk in exchange for a premium. Abstraction raises the stakes on identifying both the characters in your story as well as the role they play.

The strongest brand stories have great characters, characters who fulfill many roles: heroes, adversaries, supporters, benefactors, beneficiaries. In many situations, the company and/or its representatives are the heroes; the customers’ situation or the alternatives provided by competitors are the adversary; and customers are the beneficiaries.
Apple has done an outstanding job of creating characters that bring their experience to life. This includes their advertising, with the Mac vs. PC campaign that casts the Mac character as a laid back, self-possessed hero and the PC character as a relatively innocent, but inept, adversary. In various instances, these ads also show customers in beneficiary roles, ultimately making the right choice.

It also includes the creation of the “genius” role in the Apple store. The Genius hero helps customers overcome whatever is standing in their way, whether it be a lack of knowledge or a technical issue. The Genius character is a particular type of hero that is very different than what you’d find with most other technical support personnel, that unintentionally treat the customer like an innocent adversary.

Many distinctive service experiences, like that of the Four Seasons, cast their frontline employees as the heroes that overcome the ordinary and predictable in order to provide the guest the most comforting and personalized experience.

Compare this to many less effective service experiences, where frontline employees often end up playing the role of victims; caught between the demands of the customer and the constraints and frustrations imposed on them by their company. In fact, in many situations like this, frontline associates do untold damage to the brand by making their employer the adversary (e.g., “I understand and I’d like to help but it’s against our policy”).

**Signature Elements**

Signature elements of the experience are the specific differences in kind that bring the story to life, reinforce the message, overcome the conflict, and engage the characters. In most cases, you don’t need a lot of these elements—and they don’t even need to create distinctive value. They just need to be consistent with the story and make you, YOU!

These signature experience elements improve the transmission rate and fidelity of the story as it gets passed from company to customer and from customer to customer. For example, if you asked a hundred people on the street what makes the Apple Store experience different, there’s a good chance that you’ll hear a lot of the same things from people—the Genius Bar, a place to play with technology, crowded but with lots of associates, limited product quantities, making appointments for service, and (occasionally) long lines.

**Apple Store Signature Experience Elements**
If you ask a hundred people what makes the *Starbucks* experience unique, you’d get something similar: baristas, signature drink designs, a characteristic ordering process, unique cup sizing, personalizing your order, commitment to sustainability, etc.

**STARBUCKS SIGNATURE EXPERIENCE ELEMENTS**

One of my recent favorites is UK’s *MetroBank*. Beyond courteous service (which is a difference in degree), they frame their core message and expressed conflict of “No stupid bank rules” with a set of signature elements, including being open 7 days a week, long hours, free coin counters, 10 minute account openings and free dog biscuits.

Developing a set of signature experience elements that tell the story is not inherently difficult. However, we’ve found that the biggest barrier for most organizations is having the will to be different, the will to do something that makes them actually stand apart from their peers in their comfortable competitive set.

Do you provide a signature experience? If you asked 100 customers what makes their experience with you unique and compelling, how consistent would their answers be?
COMPONENT 3

DELIVER EMPATHICALLY – BUILDING A STRONG EMOTIONAL BOND WITH CUSTOMERS

After having the chance to work with the leaders of many dozens of companies, we’ve noticed a distinguishing feature of organizations that have a seemingly natural ability to engage customers in a positive experience. It starts with how leaders and people throughout the organization think about and talk about their customers.

CUSTOMER: PERSON OR OBJECT?

A distinguishing characteristic of organizations that sustain success with customers is their ability to engage with customers as people. This seems like it should be easy. However, even casual conversations with leaders in many businesses reveal that their organization is focused on customers not as people, but as objects. Objectifying people generally involves intentionally or unintentionally treating them as a means to an end, without any deep, visceral understanding of their lives, feelings, priorities or preferences. As a result, organizational behavior toward customers tends to be, at best, reactive and, at worst, self-serving and manipulative.

There are several indicators of businesses that objectify customers. People in leadership positions don’t spend much time in open dialogue with customers about what they need and what’s working and not working about their experience. There is often a much higher level of focus on products, technology, and delivery processes with insights about customers that tend to be surface-level generalizations. Conversations about customers tend to be abstract and removed rather than concrete and personal. People on the front line may be following the process but, at best, merely “pretending” to care. The company might measure customer satisfaction at the company’s touch points but doesn’t really know what customers do end-to-end, how they make choices, and how the overall experience makes them feel.

These characteristics stand in stark contrast to businesses that appear immersed in their customers’ lives and, as a result, deliver a very personal, human experience. As consumers, we recognize these businesses. They range from the small and local (e.g., your favorite restaurant or local retail establishment) to scale businesses like Chick-fil-A, Zappos, Nordstrom, Apple, and many others.
PERSONIFYING CUSTOMERS: EMPATHY IN ACTION

To sustain the delivery of a positively and profitably distinctive experience, organizations need to adopt a discipline for personifying customers. Personifying customers often requires structured ways to counter any tendency to objectify customers and to build empathy—identifying with or experiencing vicariously the situations, feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another—into the core processes of customer discovery, design, and delivery:

• **Empathic Discovery.** Most of what companies know about their customers tends to be descriptive and data driven: who they are, where they live, what they’ve purchased, how long they’ve been a customer, etc. There may be a segmentation analysis that groups customers by observable characteristics or even attitudes. In most cases, however, there is no rigorous framework for personifying customers in a way that brings them to life for the organization and, in the process, builds empathic understanding. This includes structured ways to answer new questions about these people: What situations are they in? What’s important to them and what are they trying to accomplish? How do they evaluate alternatives and make choices? What do they do outside of the limited set of contacts with our business? What emotional states influence their behavior?

• **Empathic Design.** Empathic design leverages empathic discovery to create products that allow customers to accomplish the goals that are important to them more easily or more fully. This includes designing products and services that customers love because they’re meaningful and make them feel good. Customers may not even know they desire these products, services, solutions, or modes of interaction because lack of familiarity with the possibilities offered by new technologies or being locked into a old mindset makes it difficult envisioning them.

• **Empathic Delivery.** Customer service is often a monologue: it’s about technical delivery, standards, and execution. The company decides what to do and how to do it. Well-designed and executed customer service usually does a good job of meeting customers’ baseline needs and expectations. Empathic delivery, on the other hand, is a dialogue: it’s about watching a customer’s experience with every sense and following up with a thoughtful and appropriate response that demonstrates that you really care and are on their side. It enables the organization to surround products and programmatic services with a personal touch.

A robust approach to Empathic Discovery and Design is described in more detail in our white paper titled, “An Introduction to Design for Behavior.” Here, because it forms the last requirement to go beyond better sameness, we will address the third process: Empathic Delivery.

EMPATHIC DELIVERY: EMPOWERING THE ORGANIZATION TO DELIVER A SIGNATURE EXPERIENCE

Sadly, empathic delivery is rare in the business world. Processes, policies, metrics, resource constraints, and more deeply entrenched unwritten rules often get in the way. Since empathic delivery cannot be fully scripted, it leads to significant implications for the employee experience. Employees must have enough “elbow room” to do the right thing for customers. This requires a deliberately designed pattern of interventions in the employee experience, including recruiting, integrating, training, communicating, measuring, and rewarding employees. It also involves surfacing the unwritten rules that may be driving employee behavior into patterns inconsistent with the desired customer experience.

Not surprisingly, putting empathy into action requires a tightly integrated perspective on customers and employees. You can’t treat customers with empathy without doing the same for employees. This is one of the reasons that many of the companies that appear on Fortune’s list of best places to work are businesses that deliver an outstanding customer experience.

Creating outstanding experiences for customers every time is certainly possible. Companies like Zappos, Starbucks, Amazon and many others focus on creating distinctive experiences based in large part on an empowered frontline. These organizations create employee experiences based on an overall management system that harnesses their employees’ full potential to create positive emotional connections with customers.
Paradoxically, however, the key to creating an empowered frontline is not the front line. The behavior of frontline employees is an outward expression of the organization’s core processes and tools, management systems (including funding, performance measurement, incentives, etc.), and leadership alignment. This deeper system is reinforced by an entrenched array of “unwritten rules” that drive the real behavior of the organization.

**A (VERY) SIMPLIFIED PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEM**

In many cases, frontline employees are as much the victims of a broken organizational system as are customers. Frontline employees are often stuck in the tension that exists between frustrated customers with needs they can’t address and a rigid system that makes it very difficult for them to do the right thing for those customers. Customer experience design must therefore consider fundamental questions about the purpose of customer service and frontline employees. Are they in place to solve customer problems that your company’s product or service creates and that prevents customers from gaining the value they expect from your product? Or is their role to serve as the gatekeeper to make sure that customers don’t submit fraudulent claims or take advantage of the company? When these purposes are at odds with the design of the customer experience, no one benefits.

Delivering an outstanding customer experience requires empowering employees to perform at their fullest. One approach to encouraging this behavior, developed by Vineet Nayar, CEO of HCL Technologies, has been described as servant leadership. Servant leadership is diametrically opposed to the traditional hierarchical approach to management, in which leaders are served by the people they have reporting to them. This approach requires leaders to remove barriers and make resources available so employees can deliver to their maximum ability. Servant leadership enables frontline employees to make better decisions and create a better experience for customers. It also promotes forward thinking at all levels.

**GETTING THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE RIGHT**

The experience customers have is a direct reflection of the employee experience. Delivering a signature customer experience requires a signature employee experience. Fulfilled and empowered employees pass along their experiences to customers via a “generative” process. Leaders create generative experiences by hiring the right
people for the right job, personally reinforcing a culture of respect and trust, rewarding commitment to serving others, creating opportunities for growth, and demonstrating values with which people can identify. Companies have traditionally hired for hard skills, past performance, and other professional credentials. Increasingly companies competing on the strength of their customer experience are hiring based on soft skills—empathic capabilities and positive attitudes that can’t easily be taught. People with strong soft skills enjoy interacting with others, demonstrate enthusiasm, and tend to smile a lot. There is a growing recognition that it may be easier to teach the hard skills to people that naturally possess the soft skills.

Zappos, for instance, has seen unprecedented business success by creating very happy customers based on a commitment to happy employees. Zappos places such a premium on hiring employees with the right attitude that they offer new recruits a $1,000 bonus if they chose to quit at the end of the first week of their four-week immersive training. This makes sense since only if only the employees that aren’t committed enough to what Zappos stands for will take the money. A hire that takes the offer clearly doesn’t show the commitment or passion required—information Zappos would prefer to find out as early as possible.

Regardless of the formalized training, policies, and procedures, the actual behavior of people within an organization tends to be driven by a set of unwritten rules that, to employees, seem like the sensible ways to behave. Common unwritten rules might include: “Don’t ever admit you’ve made a mistake.” or “Make sure you please your boss and don’t worry too much about the customer.” We also worked with a company and surfaced an unwritten rule that got phrased, “Don’t knock over the first domino.” This got translated to mean, if we do something once for one customer, we’ll have to do it all the time for everyone. The safest thing was to avoid ever diverging from the script. Every company has unwritten rules like these that are highly inconsistent with delivering the kind of empathic customer experience the organization might intend to deliver. The issue is that these rules operate just below the surface of conscious awareness and, in most cases, are never discussed.

In some cases, a tightly-scripted call center approach is determined by limited types of interactions in specific industries, e.g., Financial Services, Insurance, Healthcare. However, these should be treated as exceptions rather than the norm. Generally, simpler is better. For example, Nordstrom’s is famous for having only one rule for employees: Use good judgment in all situations. While this may be too loose for many organizations, some level of freedom is necessary to respond to everyday situations. Beyond creating a more effective customer experience, giving front line employees the ability to solve problems puts him in the position of hero, a role that boosts self-esteem and a feeling of being valued.

**A FEW FIRST STEP TOWARDS EMPATHIC DELIVERY**

While the process of alignment can be complex, here are a couple of initial steps that can help orient the organization to deliver a signature experience with empathy and authenticity:

- **Provide empowerment funding for front-line employees.** For example, we talked with a bank recently that has authorized tellers to fix customer problems without seeking permission up to $50.00 per day. It makes sense to provide guidance and training on what are acceptable and unacceptable uses of these funds. It also makes sense to celebrate role models who are doing it well and fine tune the training as new situations arise.

- **Begin to identify the unwritten rules you must address.** Monitor feedback from front-line employees on the most common service issues and have them help identify the policies and “unwritten rules” that are getting in the way of delivering outstanding service.

- **Engage the front line in ideation.** Encourage new concepts & ideas. Empowered employees will feel more so when they know that their opinions and ideas are accepted and respected. While not all ideas will be used, new & innovative methods often result from empowering your staff to make certain decisions.

- **Make sure senior management is spending time on the front lines seeing how things are really going.** This should be a continuous, regular set of experiences for them that provide direct customer feedback through observation and not filtered through the company management chain.
Beyond the specific prescriptions described above, we also recommend addressing this challenge more programmatically through the integration of customer and employee experience design. More information on this topic is provided in our white paper titled, “Getting the Employee Experience Right.” Generally this process includes:

- Ensuring you understand what customers expect and want when they contact you
- Describing the experience you intend to deliver to customers
- Identifying the organizational and individual behaviors required to generate that experience
- Identifying what current processes, management systems, and unwritten rules that must change in order to produce those behaviors
- Determining how these structural and cultural components are reinforced by the current employee experience
- Designing specific employee experience interventions that address those barriers.

In practice, employee experience interventions can include changing target hiring profiles, recruiting practices, new employee incorporation, mentoring, performance management, measurements and rewards, communications, management expectations, and executive alignment. Many of these things are done today independent of customer experience design. A more holistic perspective that integrates and aligns both perspectives will allow you to design these interventions more effectively and more profitably.

In the course of our work, Customer Innovations has learned that employee experience alignment can easily be 2/3rd of the overall effort. In many ways, figuring out how to influence customers is the easier part; figuring out how to change deeply entrenched organizational behavior can be the greater challenge. If you’d like more insight into integrating customer and employee experience efforts, please feel free to refer to our white paper titled, “Getting the Employee Experience Right: Creating Employee Experiences that Drive Business Growth.”
SUMMARY AND KEY QUESTIONS

Moving beyond better sameness requires a fundamentally different way of the thinking about the nature and design of influential customers experiences. In order to create a competitively relevant improvement, you need to do something that actually grabs the customer’s attention and positively influences how they feel and what they do. It starts with recognizing some of the shortcomings of the most common approaches to understanding and designing experiences.

There are three important aspects to moving beyond better sameness. Highly influential experiences must...

...focus on influencing specific customer behaviors that drive business results...  
“Outcomes Driven”

*How does the experience influence behaviors that create the greatest performance improvement?*

...create a meaningful, memorable, and differentiated experience...  
“Signature Experience”

*What differentiated and compelling experience will influence these behaviors?*

...and deliver it in a way that builds trust and demonstrates you authentically care.  
“Empathically Delivered”

*How will you align the organization to demonstrate you care and build trust with customers?*

If you need help moving your customer experience efforts beyond better sameness, please let us know. We can be reached at: info@customerinnovations.com