5 ways to strengthen your contact center customer experience

Being responsive to customer needs is no longer enough, your contact center experience has to be one step ahead. Over half your customers have even higher expectations than they did a year ago - so if your CX hasn't moved on in the last 12 months you're already sub-standard in their eyes. How do you build a more effective contact center experience? Here are five strategies that might just help.

1.

Be one step ahead of customer expectations.

2.

Be both frictionless and momentous.

3.

Be part human and part machine.

4.

Be omni-channel not multi-channel.

5.

Be prepared for the future.

A level set

Building an effective customer experience strategy for your contact center is full of challenges. Customers relentlessly expect new and different experiences, and the continuous innovation in CX tools and technologies make legacy modernization a moving target. Unsurprisingly almost 80% of contact centers believe their customer service systems aren't fit for the future[1], probably because defining tomorrow isn't in their gift: it's the preserve of a future that features the expectant customer and the rise and rise of the digital snap in.

Why is CX so important to contact centers? Simple. It can increase customer retention and most critically provide competitive advantage. 62% of companies view the customer experience delivered by their contact centers as a competitive advantage[2].

How do you build customer loyalty and difference in such a dynamic operating environment? Knee-jerking is not a strategy for success, nor is betting on predictions nor a cast-iron plan. Neither is starting with a new technology like bots and AI, or a business outcome like self-service.

A different perspective.

The answer lies in building your customer experience plans around a few critical strategic building blocks and using them as your true north: to navigate the expectant customer and the relentless stream of new CX technologies. This way your contact center experiences will be seamless and consistent, yet still be agile and responsive.

Axim sees five critical foundation stones of a more effective contact center experience strategy. Here we introduce them, contextualize their importance and relevance, and outline the ways you could adopt them.

1.

Be one step ahead of customer expectations.

Being responsive to your customer's needs is no longer enough, your service delivery has to be one step ahead: it must exceed expectations. Microsoft tell us that 56% of customers have even higher expectations than they did even a year ago. It says that if you haven't moved your CX on in the last 12 months you're already sub-standard in the customer's eyes.

Your customers expect each interaction to have the minimum effort on their behalf and the maximum on yours, they want perfect machine-led interaction and strong emotional connection in equal measure, they want great self-service but not to be treated like a number. And they are voting with their feet: almost 89% of customers have stopped doing business with a company after experiencing poor customer service. It's no surprise then that in the 2017 Global State of Customer Experience Survey nearly 25% of CX practitioners cited 'rising customer expectations as one of the top three industry trends.

The contact centre industry endorses this. When questioned by CCW on their biggest priorities for 2018, contact center professionals placed four customer-focused initiatives in their top six.

Reducing customer effort	39%
CX automation (for engagement, e.g. chatbots)	37%
Improving Voice of customer/intelligence strategy	34%
Customer journey mapping	33%
Improving agent experience	33%
Using customer insights to personalize CX	31%

So how do you keep up with your customers wants and demands?

Grow your customer intelligence – Constantly understand what your customers expect. Start by analysing your digital touch points with your customers and the sort of customer insight you could elicit from them, then build a process to gather, analyse and action that data. Mature your Voice of the Customer strategy (this is a top three contact center priority for 2018[4]). Sweat your customer feedback surveys more: don't just look to scores and ratings but employ more analytics to draw out more customer insight. And increase your investment in customer journey mapping and optimization. Look to more personas and constantly review the journeys of your key audiences as more channels constantly spawn.

Measure customer satisfaction – Undoubtedly it's something you already do but organizations are looking to do more of it: solutions that measure customer satisfaction and loyalty are investment priorities for 65% of businesses[3]. Look beyond the rational metrics you're already measuring to metrics that are driven by emotion, because experiences convey rational and emotional value. Look beyond NPS as well. And look to Customer Effort Scores, Word of Mouth Brand Advocacy indices.

Listen to customer sentiment – Don't just focus on how your customers are rating you, listen to what they're saying about you: are they pleased, neutral, angry or in love. Look to deliver more tangible insight to how your strategies are impacting customer sentiment and your core business metrics: how satisfied are they with you? Will they continue to use your products and recommend you to friends? Are they more likely to engage with you and how frequently?

How do you better tap into customer sentiment?

Whilst tracking customer sentiment across all customer-facing experiences is important (you need unbiased data and customers engage with brands differently depending on the channel) focus is critical and mobile is an increasingly important engagement point: you will hear from a large percentage of your customers at a faster rate. The data speaks for itself: almost 70% of digital media time came from mobile last year, and the high likelihood is that your average customer has already gone mobile.

What should you track? Again focus is key.

Social monitoring	Social monitoring: It's a 2018 investment priority for almost half of contact centers[4]. And it's a means to get an instant pulse of sentiment, to connect with influencers, and detect trends.
Willingness to recommend and brand advocacy ratings	Like NPS
In-app ratings	Placed with thought throughout the app and triggering emotional ratings.
Direct customer feedback	Look to measure the customer sentiment that is registered in your digital customer contact channels, think customer support emails and chat functionality.

Invest in customer management tools – Continue to grow your suite of customer experience management tools, the chances are your competitors are doing the same: Investment in customer experience management tools is a priority for 55% of contact centers in 2018, and customer service management tools an investment priority for 50%[4]. It won't be a one year wonder: the global spend on CX management is forecast to be nearly $17bn by 2020, (it was $5bn last year)[5].

What do we see as the building blocks of an effective CX management investment strategy?

1.	Be forensic: look to every interaction between your customer and the organization throughout the full customer lifecycle, and take a 360° view of your customer with up-to-date data. .
2.	Integrate them into your CRM platform and create a strategy that optimizes all the interactions and fosters loyalty.
3.	Place the emphasis on personalization strategies by investing in tools to increase business intelligence and advance your customer data analytics: think mobile marketing and geo-location-based services.
4.	Increase empathy using emerging technologies like emotional analytics.
5.	Look to new types of knowledge management systems as the conduit to more seamless customer service and the means to empower agents more.

2.

Be both frictionless and momentous

The 'frictionless' revolution isn't going away any time soon. The increasingly expectant customer expects you to do the heavy lifting, not them. The industry clearly gets it, reducing customer effort is the number one customer experience priority for contact centers in 2018[4]. The second biggest priority is automated engagement tools. It's no surprise, by 2020 customers will manage 85% of the interactions with an enterprise without a single human interaction[6].

But it's not just about self-service, customers demand memorable experiences too. They want emotional relationships not just functional delivery. They rate personalized service and experience as the most important dimension to customer-centric brands and an emphasis on 'unforgettable' customer experience as third[6]. Over half of consumers are likely to switch brands if a company doesn't try to personalize communications to them[7]. More than 60% will switch loyalties if they're treated like a number instead of an individual.

Squaring this circle will be one of the most challenging objectives of 2018 and beyond. We see a series of corners that businesses will need to turn.

Be counter-intuitive.	Don't see frictionless and momentous as mutually separate. Instead see frictionless and momentous as two sides of the customer-centric coin, and let them both work in synergy.
Focus on tailoring experiences specific customers.	Don't look to deliver a generally great experience; deliver the right experience for each given customer at each given moment (drawing on the more extensive use of customer journey mapping and the increased investment in the CX management tools to build your personalization strategies).
Create a third dimension in your customer journey mapping.	Go beyond process and interaction points to a rationale/emotional dimension: recognize when a customer wants to be wowed and work to a wow. But when they want a quick resolution work to streamline the support process. Then focus your customer experience strategies, and your customer services delivery to these focal points.
Concentrate digital transformation on digital-driven engagements	That tangibly and measurably add value to the customer, like web, social and mobile strategies to expand touch points; chatbots to revolutionize CX, and self-service, low-touch options that actually work.

3.

Be equally focused on humans and machines

The rise and rise of machine-delivered service is relentless as self-service intensifies; as bots, machine-learning and virtual agents become more real; and as AI matures. Clearly these are all central to any future-proof contact center. But its only half the picture.

We're witnessing the re-birth of humans in the work place not the death of work. When a bunch of CMOs were asked to envisage the most important future trend, the most common answer was a new and more meaningful co-existence between human workforces and intelligent technologies: in essence a hybrid workforce.

Making people and machines more meaningfully co-exist will be a key challenge this year and the years to come. But how can you achieve it?

1.	Start by defining what can be most efficiently and accurately delivered by the machine, and by identifying when the greatest value can be achieved by the right human intervention. How? By fusing business process optimization and customer journey mapping.
2.	Understand where it is realistic and advantageous to bring emotional connection and empathy to machine-driven customer service
3.	Focus agents on fewer interactions, on high value selling, on becoming problem solvers and brand ambassadors.
4.	Invest in the agent experience as much as new technologies. Focus on improving coaching and training; increase the quality of knowledge; make systems, channels, workflow and CRM easier; and make metrics clearer and more transparent.
5.	Rethink the agent model for a new world. Develop new skill sets, acquire new talent, and build any place, any time work place models.

4.

Be omni-channel not multi-channel

It's been on the cards for a few years but omni-channel will trump multi-channel in the next 18 months. The majority of businesses have one or two channels in place, yet almost 50% expect to offer their customers a multitude of channel choices, and 32% are planning to achieve a true omni-channel model3. Digital transformation is at the heart of this, enabling businesses to prioritize email engagement, live chat, social media and mobile engagement.

But we must speak up for voice. The voice channel is by no means dead. Voice represents the no 1 channel investment focus for 2018, and more than 60% view live agent telephony as a priority this year[4]. It is a recognition that voice is still often the default channel, that for many it is the customer experience, and that new technology may be robust but it cannot replicate all facets of voice.

What then are the most effective foundation stones to true omni-channel?

A guiding light not a technology strategy	true omni-channel starts with a vision: the unwavering intent to deliver a seamless, effective customer experience wherever the customer chooses to engage? People, process and technologies will draw on this and be measured on their delivery of it – by businesses and customers.
A cultural driver	In the continual effort to better manage call volumes, efficiency and productivity don't allow customer experience to take a back seat to digital solutions, and upset the balance between human interaction and automation.
An omni-channel strategy around a holistic view of the customer	Look to their wants, why they call, where the present operational failures lie, and how customer interactions could be better managed.

Segment your customers and match them to the channel	Using customer journey mapping, then align the five distinct channels to the right customers and optimize them at the right time in the customer journey. What is the value of this focus to your organization? Companies with the strongest omni-channel customer engagement strategies on average retain 89% of their customers[8], and omni-channel shoppers have a 30% higher lifetime value than those who shop using only one channel[9].
Look beyond the contact center to the next generation of omni-channel	Channel-less. Look to how the contact center can better contribute to a seamless customer experience that recognizes no channels and one individual customer. Identify your role in creating a single view of the customer; look to how you can amass and not just consume consumer data; and explore how the contact center can harness contextualized and personalized intelligence to deliver more meaningful service and more resonant experiences.

Is this light years away? No. Your customers already expect it: 75% of consumers say they want a consistent experience wherever they engage[7].

5. Be ready for profound change

This thinking is designed to help you mobilize your contact center to meet a changing business and customer landscape. But in the next 5 years change will need to be more profound. Contact centers will likely transition beyond a customer experience focus to a customer experience hub.

The logic goes like this: In an increasingly complex, connected world the contact center is best placed to become the interaction hub of the digital enterprise – responsible for support, interaction, education and data gathering. It will not require refinement it will demand revisionism and radical new thinking.

The millennial self-service generation will give way to a new cohort who will be more creative, will communicate across an array of existing and new channels but also in a new visual language.

They will expect to co-create their experiences with the enterprise.

The notion of consumer will change from people to smart objects driven by the rise of the IoT and automatically asking for help and support – and supported by smart bots who will apply known fixes, run diagnostics and search knowledge bases for resolutions.

Omni-channel will expand to become channel-less: reflecting that customers don't differentiate between a channel they simply expect seamless experiences wherever and whenever they interact with an enterprise – and an enterprise with them. The unifying forces will be a hybrid-fusion of intelligent data management, more emotionally-driven technology and empathy analytics.

We're ready when you are.

Sources: [1] DimensionData / [2] Deloitte / [3] The Global State of Customer Experience 2017 / [4] CCW / [5] TouchPoint / [6] Gartner/ [7] Salesforce / [8] Aberdeen Group / [9] Google.

About Axim

Enterprise communications can longer be average, they must be brilliant. The key is operational excellence. Axim helps you achieve it. We optimize and de-risk architectures, make cloud migrations frictionless, ensure seamless CX delivery, and increase data potency. The result? We're helping organizations to cut cost and risk, grow revenues and efficiency, and increase customer service and satisfaction. To learn more visit **www.aximglobal.com**

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