The Anatomy of a Customer Interaction

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By

Colin Shaw

Introduction

Many organizations have hit a plateau in their Customer Experience programs. While many gains were initially realized in the performance for the primary metrics measuring Customer Experience Improvement Program's progress they have subsequently stopped. They no longer climb at the rapid rate they once did. Many organizations are pleased with their results thus far but realize there is still a long way to go. They have not realized the results they want, but there is a glass ceiling that they bump their head on trying to get them.

Understanding customer behavior is critical for today's Customer Experience professional. In *The Intuitive Customer: Seven Imperatives for moving your Customer Experience to the next level, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016),* my latest book with co-author Professor Ryan Hamilton of Emory University, we use seven imperatives to explain why people behave the way they do in your experience. These imperatives are the tenets of our new world philosophy. They serve as the clues to taking your Customer Experience to the next level.

If you are to maximize your interaction with customers then you should first understand what this interaction looks like. Examining customer interactions and taking them apart piece-by-piece demonstrates how customers behave. Analyzing the interaction in detail helps you affect meaningful change in your organization. Many times, this exercise results in modifying the way that your customer-facing teams interact with customers.

Let me give you an example that may highlight the importance of understanding an interaction. When I arrive home at night, I shout "hello" to my wife Lorraine. Within a one-word response I know how Lorraine feels, happy or sad. How? I process the verbal and nonverbal clues Lorraine communicates to me. I then interpret these clues based on my understanding of her. If she is feeling sad, then I know what to do to improve her mood. Perhaps more importantly, I also know what not to do to make her feel worse! Depending upon how I am feeling I can also react differently. It's not wise, but I am just saying I could.

My point is any interaction with a customer is the same. When a customer walks into your store or calls you on the phone, your subconscious is already picking up messages about their body language, voice, tone, etc. In other words, you are processing the verbal and nonverbal clues the customer communicates and interpreting them based on your previous experience with customers.

It's clear that you can learn to observe these verbal and nonverbal clues in customers, how to interpret them, and understand how your customer is feeling entering the experience. Therefore, it's also clear that you can learn to influence customers into feeling the emotions that you want them to feel. When you can create the proper emotional experience for your customers it forms a positive memory which the customer recalls in the future, when they need your product or service again.

Employee training on recognizing these initial verbal or nonverbal clues and the ability to interpret what they mean is vital. One trait many organizations share is a lack of training for customer-facing people to recognize these verbal and nonverbal signals and how to respond to them. As a result, the opportunity for successful (and enhanced) interaction is lost. Training customer-facing employees how to do this is called Memory Maker Training. Derived from the goal to create a positive memory for the customer, team members learn how to evoke positive emotions from customers who may have been either feeling negative or neutral coming into the experience.

The basis of this training is to understand the **Anatomy of a Customer Interaction** (Figure 1). This illustration shows the stages of an interaction and what part each of the participants play in the outcome.

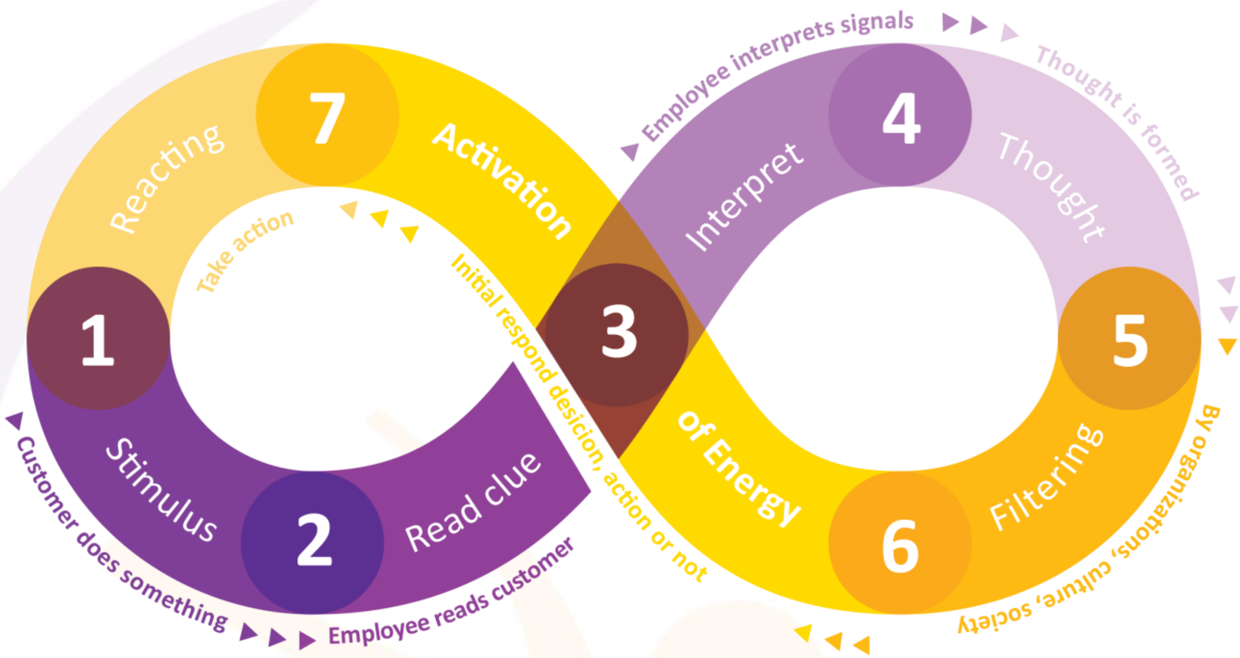

Figure 1: The Anatomy of a Customer Interaction

Step One: Stimulus

The interaction begins with some form of stimulus the employee receives from the Customer, meaning a customer sends a verbal or nonverbal signal to the employee. It is easy to miss, particularly when the stimuli are nonverbal; it could be a look the customer gives you or a phone call you receive with distracting noise in the background. Sometimes it could be seeing a customer exhibit some form of subtle behavior not directed at the employee, e.g. a furtive look at a product or, in a retail context, the customer having their head up looking for assistance, aka the “Prairie dog.”

Step Two: Read the clue

The employee then reads the customer's communication, whether verbal or nonverbal. We know that much of this communication is unintentional. It can take the form of a lifted eyebrow, revealing surprise or doubt about something. It can also be a sigh during the conversation betraying that the person is at the end of his or her tether with the situation. It can even be touching a product that indicates interest in a purchase.

Step Three: Interpret

Once the employee receives the signals, he or she then interprets the customer's signals forming an early thought within a nanosecond. Some of this is in the conscious mind; some of it is subconscious.

Step Four: Thought

When the employee's thought is formed, it is governed by psychological reactions that combine to make a decision about the signals received. This process includes rational and intuitive thinking. The two types of thinking combine, sometimes cancelling each other out, sometimes building upon one another to produce conclusions and possible next steps.

Step Five: Filtering

Now, the employee considers the appropriate reaction. In other words, employees need to know how to control their reaction. To be successful in this effort, employees must understand what to do—and what not to do! Societal and organizational expectations influence the employee's ability to filter his or her reaction.

Societal expectations present the "normal" social practice for dealing with the situation. In England, politeness exists as an essential part of the culture. Therefore, the way I react to an experience versus how a person from another part of the world would respond could be very different.

The orientation of an organization also exerts a strong influence on the employee's reaction filter. The employee considers what his or her manager would expect. If the organization is customer-centric, putting the customer at the center of everything they do, then the way the employee reacts might reflect that orientation. If the organization is operationally centric, putting the goals of the organization first and foremost, then the employee will have a different reaction.

Step Six: Activating

When the employee makes an initial decision to respond a certain way, it demonstrates the concept of activation energy, or the amount of energy it takes to start something. Usually used to denote the moment when the minimal amount of energy is present to initiate a chemical reaction, activation energy also describes what happens in an exchange between employees and customers every day.

Having enough activation energy to start something right requires employee engagement. The employee must be connected enough with your organization's mission to make the effort to take the desired action. For example, ask yourself how many times have you been sitting on the couch and had a passing thought to get up and exercise. Now consider how many times you decided against it. We stay seated because although we know we should exercise, the activation energy is not at a sufficient level to get us off the couch. This same decision process occurs in the moment where an employee decides to act. Employee engagement is what gets them off the couch and exercising, the mission of delivering your desired Customer Experience.

Step Seven: Reacting

The employee takes action. It could be replying to what the customer has just said. It could also be a physical act of doing something such as walking behind the counter and getting a box the customer has requested. It could also be giving an intentional subconscious message such as using body language to communicate messages to the customer. For example, if the customer told you about their computer problem, and you hold your head to one side with hands on your chin looking thoughtful, you convey you are considering what they said. Again, training people on how to do this is key.

You might have noticed that this interaction is depicted by an infinity curve. We chose the infinity loop because this can go on and on. The customer might say something to the employee, who then passes through this curve, and within a second or two is giving a reply to the customer (Step seven: Reacting). The customer then responds again (back to Step one: Stimulus) and then the employee goes round the loop again.

It is important to optimize this interaction with customers and, through this interaction, build loyal customers. We realize that many organizations have yet to approach the emotional context of their customer's behavior. Many have not begun to explore how the emotions their Customer Experience evokes drive or destroy value for their experience and subsequently either drive or destroy loyalty in their customers. For those companies, we will continue to preach the importance of embracing these concepts. We will eventually reveal the truth to them that their Customer Experience is more emotional than rational!

However, for those companies that have already embraced the idea that the Customer Experience is irrational, understanding what moments occur in a customer interaction is crucial. You will then have a better idea of how to improve these moments. These moments are little things, to be sure, but the little things add up to big changes in your metric scores for your Customer Experience program and take your Customer Experience to the next level.

To understand how you can train your front line people on how to understand how they are feeling entering the experience and how to convert them to feeling your desired emotions, please look at our Memory Maker Training.

Additional Resources

You may be interested in reading some of our other blogs and white paper material.

How To Measure Customer Emotions

Changing Customer Behavior With A Little Nudge

White paper: The 7 Key Ingredients of A successful Customer

White paper: The Walkie Talkie Model Of Customer Experience

Webinars: Are Customer Emotions & behavior The Future Of CX

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Beyond Philosophy, USA

+1 (866) 649-6556 | +1 (813) 936-4000

550 North Reo Street Suite 300

Tampa, Florida. 33609

Beyond Philosophy, Europe

+ 44 (0) 207 993 8459

London, United Kingdom

www.beyondphilosophy.com