It's time to get personal with your customers if you want to ride the current economic wave

Customers today demand empathetic, personalised and 24/7 instant support from every business they interact with. The companies who nail this customer experience will be the ones to succeed but the key is to not overcomplicating things.

Temps de lecture : minute

30 November 2022

Today, consumers and business buyers judge a company as much on the customer experience they provide as they do on the products they sell. Empathy, personalisation and instant, round-the-clock support have emerged as the cornerstones of customer service – and by default, have become critical to success.

Yet such offerings are easier said than done at the best of times, let alone in the midst of economic certainty. Data from <u>Salesforce's State of Service</u> report, which surveyed more than 8,000 customer service professionals worldwide, found that not only are service teams facing increasing customer demands, but they're having to meet these demands with fewer people and lower budgets. In the past year alone, the report shows that the service industry has seen a 19% turnover of staff.

In short, these teams have never been so critical, yet have never been so stretched – effectively needing to do a lot more with significantly less.

How did we reach this state of service

The general trend of digital transformation has a lot to answer for when it comes to fuelling increasing customer demand. Yet there is also an indirect knock-on effect that comes with the ubiquity of digital tools and connectedness. A vast increase in choice.

Customers today are spoiled when it comes to choosing products and services. They're also being targeted from all angles. In such a sea of content and marketing, these consumers have to spend more time and effort cutting through the noise. Brands that understand their unique needs and speak to them where and when they are, are able to reduce this mental load and thus are seen more favourably.

What's more, there are now a dozen channels through which these customers can, and want to, interact with businesses. These include the still-popular channels of phone and email, as well as the increasingly popular channels of video and chat support, apps, discussion forums and so on. This spreads the interaction points thin for brands and their customer service teams.

On the service and brand side, there have simultaneously been significant shifts in how teams measure their customer experience. Part of this shift has been in response to changing customer demands, and others are in direct response to the economic changes being seen more widely.

Customer satisfaction, revenue, retention, and response times, are still critical but the Salesforce report also shows an increased focus on metrics that signal efficiency. Tracking case deflection was found to have jumped by 20% since 2020, for instance. First contact resolution, and customer effort tracking both also increased.

Yet at the same time the number of service organisations tracking

customer satisfaction has decreased dramatically. Thus suggesting teams are having to prioritise cost and time saving metrics over the customer experience. At a time when customer experience is key.

With such trends around choice and connectedness showing few signs of slowing, it's becoming even more critical for businesses to face these challenges head-on if they're to ride the economic wave, both in the short and long term.

Below we explain why the key to this lies in your company's information sharing and collaboration processes, and we provide five ways in which companies can meet increasing customer demands without the need to sacrifice resources, productivity or morale.

Get personal

The most effective way to better address your customer's needs is to better understand them in the first place, and this comes from greater transparency.

In the Salesforce State of Service report, the highest-performing sales professionals were found to have one major thing in common when it came to offering personalised, empathetic service – they were more likely to report having a complete understanding of their customers' needs.

In practice, what this means is that there must be measures in place, whether that's through the software you use or the processes you have in place, to ensure all departments can seamlessly talk to each other.

Marketing should be in regular discussions with sales teams to learn what the customers' pain points are. Knowing which features, tools or products resonate most can help inform their campaigns.

Sales teams need to communicate with customer service teams to learn

about both positive and negative comments that arise. Being able to highlight popular, well-loved features can help get sales over the line, as can addressing potential criticisms head on before a purchase is made, which can reduce the instances of complaints after the fact.

Simply knowing that a marketing campaign is going live, or the number of sales that have been completed in any one week can even help customer service teams better manage resources and be more prepared for a potential increase in interactions.

At the heart of such collaboration is _CRM software_. CRM stands for Customer Relationship Management and it's a technology that helps businesses deepen relationships with customers, service users, colleagues, partners and suppliers. This in turn streamlines processes allowing firms to increase sales, improve service, and increase profitability.

Of those surveyed by Salesforce, 62% said their departments shared access to the same CRM software and data in order to become more connected, and this cohesiveness reportedly empowered them to better treat customers as individuals.

Work as one

Another reason to create strong cross-department relationships is to avoid customers having to jump through hoops to get a resolution.

Customers today want to feel like they're communicating with cohesive companies, rather than separate departments. In fact, as many as 83% expect to resolve complex problems through a single person – a difficult need to meet generally, due to resource pressures, let alone in siloed companies.

When customers have to repeat or re-explain information to different representatives it doesn't just cause delays and create brand friction, but it wastes that customer's time. This is the opposite of empathetic and personalised service and demonstrates to customers that the brand doesn't understand their wants or needs.

Sharing information and putting policies in place via a shared CRM system or similar can create transparent, open and business-wide processes to help prevent this. It's also a way of giving the impression that a customer is dealing with a single person throughout their complaint.

This is because, with CRM systems, you can see everything in one place via a simple, customisable dashboard. This dashboard can tell you a customer's previous history, the status of their orders, any outstanding customer service issues, and more.

Stay focused

Building stronger connections between departments then has an additional benefit – it keeps your teams focused on what matters. This is where your information sharing and collaboration proceses come into full effect, when the metrics used by each siloed department are fed into the company's bigger-picture outlook.

This can be in the form of a shared dashboard that allows all teams to track their own metrics within the wider context of the business. This could be in the form a daily or weekly newsletter that highlights key achievements or drops in performance. It could be regular huddles between the team leader where they outline what their teams are currently focused on.

However the information sharing and collaboration occurs, the art of sharing how each team's performance directly impacts and supports one

another can help identify bottlenecks, boost efficiency and keep the customer experience front-of-mind.

A further point on measurement. Adopting metrics that give greater insight into the efficiency of service teams can help identify bottlenecks in processes and help highlight areas for improvement. Yet they should not be tracked to the detriment of other key metrics, and they should not be looked at in isolation. For instance, boosting efficiency in one department without any context of its wider impact won't be as effective if those efficiencies are leading to great customer dissatisfaction elsewhere.

After all, if you don't provide your customers with the experience they expect today, there will be no-one to improve efficiency for tomorrow.

Do more with less

So you now know the importance of having a more connected, cohesive company but what does that look like, in reality? The answer lies in automation.

In terms of efficiency and doing more with less, automation is the Holy Grail for businesses in this economic climate. AI-powered _business process automation tools_ can gather key information for agents and recommend next steps. They are increasingly a part of customer service toolkits to the point where the number of decision makers using AI has doubled in the past two years.

Automation and the use of AI doesn't need to be overcomplicated, either. Simply adding basic rule-based automations to workflows – such as automatically triggering an email to customer service teams when a marketing campaign goes live, or automating responses to certain complaints can have a significant impact on both the customer, and employee expectation. Without having to stretch resources too thin.

The beauty of business process automation tools is that they can handle both simple and complex processes and can be designed to fit around a businesses unique workflows. In the Salesforce report, the adoption of automated tools was found to correlate directly with how well the teams ranked their performance. Among the benefits that such automation provides, its ability to save time, reduce errors and connect agents with other departments were seen as the most business-critical benefits.

Don't forget the employee experience

For all the talk of improving the customer experience, the corresponding employee experience is often missed out of discussions on improving service. There has been found to be a link between service employees who are empowered and motivated to do their jobs, and the level of customer experience those businesses provide.

This comes back, again, to information sharing practices and collaboration and the effective use of leading CRM systems. Making employees feel part of something bigger can help them take more pride and responsibility for their work. They can see how their good service can impact sales, boost the effectiveness of marketing campaigns and more.

It also comes down to training. High customer expectations and the diversification of engagement channels call for service employees to have a wide wide range of both hard and soft skills. Extensive product knowledge, clear communication, and listening were ranked as the strongest service skills in the State of Service report. Whereas composure, empathy, and persuasive speaking — while strong — were seen as needing the most improvement.

Improving the employee experience also stems beyond the role itself. There have been a slew of initiatives at service organisations since the pandemic and among the most popular are flexible schedules, wellness

benefits, and career development improvements.

With service teams taking an increasingly visible and important role in the success of their businesses, it's critical for everyone from the board to the field to understand the qualities that will set them apart from the competition. Better connected teams, empowered by technology, underpinned by strong processes and training programs will not only be the ones that weather the current storm, but they'll be the ones at the helm of the ship.

Find out more in the Salesforce State of Service report.

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