Customer experience happens in the contact center

Learn how to optimize every experience and build loyalty, with insights from Shaun Smith

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About Shaun Smith

Shaun is a leading consultant in helping organizations differentiate through customer service and deliver their brand through their people. He is an inspirational presenter and respected author with a wealth of worldwide practical experience. Shaun has been a key catalyst in expanding management focus from the tactical issues of customer service to the much wider and strategic issue of customer experience. He has developed some of the latest thinking and practice around this subject, helping organizations worldwide to create a compelling customer experience that achieves brand differentiation and long-term customer loyalty. Published in May 2006, Shaun's new book, "See, Feel, Think, Do – the Power of Instinct in Business" argues that the pendulum has swung too far toward "managing by the numbers" and away from "leading from the gut." For more information, visit www.shaunsmithco.com.

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Your brand on trial in the contact center

Contact center leaders are canny and battle-tested enough to know that each and every customer touch is a test of the service organization as a whole. But not everyone realizes that each and every customer touch is a test of the entire brand and its promise to that customer. All the advertising, promoting, manufacturing, marketing, and selling are challenged when a customer and your representatives make a connection. That one experience will be the culmination of all the time, money, and materials invested by both parties – and the outcome of that encounter will be the memory the customer has of your company and therefore his/her propensity to return.

When your brand goes on trial, the only way to succeed is to deliver the kind of experience that transcends the ordinary and the everyday, and reaffirms the company's entire brand premise. In the contact center, the front line of so many businesses, revenue is made and lost every day not on price or performance, but by the quality of the customer experience.

It may sound like a huge burden to place on the shoulders of an individual contact center agent and that is exactly the point – managing the customer experience is not about abdicating responsibility for customer satisfaction to your front-line people. The organization and its management are on the line every time the customer joins a call. Customer experience expert Shaun Smith of Shaun Smith + co, former Head of Customer Service, Sales, and Marketing Training for British Airways and more recently, VP of Customer Experience for the Forum Corporation, warns against looking at customer interactions as compartmentalized moments in time. "Experience is every firm's value proposition because no company can avoid delivering a total experience. A customer cannot not have one" he says. "The million dollar question is: 'Was the experience the one you intended?'"

Like it or not, consciously or not, customers evaluate their business relationships every time they touch your company. Learning to manage the experience every time the phone rings or the inbox chimes is an essential skill to maintain and build business with customers who are empowered to be brand-agnostic and effortless switchers.

"Managing the customer experience is a complex undertaking, which requires strategic choices to be made, new competencies to be developed, and the management will to execute."

- Shaun Smith

Four components of the successful experience

Customer experiences are not created in a vacuum. They evolve from industry conventions, customer demands, executive orders, peer exchanges, and expert advice, just to name a few influences. But up until recently, what the brand wants to stand for has not directly influenced the way that service is delivered in the call center. But that is changing fast. From a time when few outside the halls of the Bell System could fathom running a large, coordinated customer service effort, there are now thousands of world-class independent customer service organizations. Everybody has access to the same technology and lists of "eight effective habits" or "12 steps to success." So relying on technology or expert advice alone to craft your customer experience is a losing strategy – those tactics are too easily copied. Doing what you have always done in the contact center (or worse, what everybody else appears to be doing) will not differentiate your brand. "Managing the customer experience is a complex undertaking, which requires strategic choices to be made, new competencies to be developed, and management's will to execute," Smith says.

Smith cites four criteria that are the base for any solid, sustainable customer experience management effort. A positive, managed customer experience must be consistent, intentional, differentiated, and valuable. The contact center faces unique challenges in following each of these directives, but meeting them head-on is critical if the customer experience is truly a priority.

1. **Consistent**: Your customers are not interested in the many complex layers of technology and analysis required to manage each and every call they make. All they are interested in is their own experience, and it is disastrous to that experience if they believe the quality of that call is subject to a roll of the dice. Consistency at the agent level is about more than simply giving everybody access to the same screen pops, call scripts, and escalation protocols, however. It requires being able to identify and anticipate the needs and interests of a customer, and ensuring that the right steps are taken – every time – to satisfy those requirements in a timely, predictable manner, and in a way that is "on-brand." In practical terms, consistency does not rule out the very human possibility that some agents will be better than others, but it does throw complacency into sharp relief. A customer's experience will begin no better than his worst fears about the quality of the exchange. Customers do not care if it is the agent, the database, or the IVR to blame. Inconsistencies and lamentable misses will damper the experience – and returns from that customer.

Consistency is a hallmark of organizations as high-tech as Amazon, whose shopping cart interface has become a web standard, and as everyday as McDonalds, where replicable taste and process is the fundamental strength of the business. In the contact center, consistency hinges on the organization's ability to know everything relevant about the customer, regardless of the contact channel or agent handling the interaction. The integration of flexible, powerful customer information systems that are easy to use by both agents and customers alike can go a long way toward supporting consistency. But just as McDonald's found, consistency is no longer enough.

2. **Intentional**: The contact center must be able to clearly articulate and understand the customer experience it is trying to create and preserve in order to carry it out. Furthermore, the procedures and policies of that service organization must be specifically geared toward meeting the needs of the customer and, by extension, protecting the customer experience. That is the failure of many CRM implementations; management assumes that technology will drive the customer experience, whereas, in fact, the opposite should be true. The customer experience must be designed first and then implemented throughout the organization. Note that this should not be interpreted to mean that the best customer experiences must always be directed from on high. Individual agents or teams may have developed their own, undocumented, but still intentional methods of delivering a superior experience but these must be developed within the framework of the brand strategy – otherwise well-intentioned anarchy will result. Be on the lookout for customer experiences that outstrip the norm, and consider whether there may be an intentional aspect to them that could be used in the larger contact organization. Calculated intention can be expressed as a way of using channels that serve a clear purpose and deliver clear value to both the customer and the company. ATMs have been a successful, and intentional, part of the banking customer experience for decades.

Four components of the successful experience

Figure 1

3. **Differentiated:** "Simply put, if your customers cannot discriminate between the experience they achieve with your company and that of a competitor, they won't distinguish." If they cannot distinguish you from your competitors, you will feel it in the form of a significant, quite possibly unconscious, lack of loyalty. The experience you deliver to your customers must produce a feeling on some level that no other organization can do quite the same thing for its customers as you can. Skeptics may believe that this factor is based entirely on issues of product and pricing, but such an assumption misses the entire impact of the customer experience. Nothing saps the joy of feeling part of a singular, irreplaceable community than a customer experience that is bland and run-of-the-mill. If Harley-Davidson treated its customers like a faceless quick-lube shop treats its clients – as an anonymous assembly line of vehicles and owners – it would not be the brand and customer experience standout it is today. No organization can afford sameness in its customer experience unless it is happy to allow price to become the determining factor.

4. **Valuable:** In a sense, this is the validating step after the first three directives have been considered. Once a consistent, intentional, and differentiated strategy is devised, the question must be asked – will implementing this strategy produce value for both the company and the target customer base? For example, First Direct, an online U.K. bank with 1.2 million customers, wins a new customer every six seconds. The bank spoke to their most loyal customers and asked them what they valued most about First Direct. The research identified that being able to engage with a real person was an important driver of satisfaction. As a result, First Direct's advertising agency created an ad that featured a customer speaking of her experience of calling First Direct and getting through to a real person, any time of the day or night and getting the kind of help that most call centers can only dream of. The ad's engaging message and apparent empathy struck a chord with target customers. Customers have become its biggest advocates because of the value they receive. And by "value" we are not talking here about relative price, but the whole experience they have of the brand. Perhaps it's no coincidence then that 36% of First Direct's customers come to them through referral.

Complacency: the enemy of the customer experience

If your contact center operation is not being constantly evaluated and improved on the four crucial areas of customer experience, you may be missing a powerful opportunity. Some companies are content to rest on the laurels of anecdotal praise and the occasional survey that shows a generally positive customer assessment of service quality. "One of the interesting things to realize is that the reason customer service is such a challenge is not because it's bad, but because it's pretty good," Smith says. "Most of the time, unless you're unlucky, your customer service is at least 'okay.' This is the challenge. When has mediocrity ever been a strategy for differentiating?"

Numerous studies and surveys indicate that middling-to-positive customer service ratings from customers have scant impact on loyalty. "Research has found that 80 percent of customers who switch suppliers expressed satisfaction with their previous supplier. Service is an entry price for the game, but it doesn't win the game," Smith says. Only a superlative experience, one that cannot be replicated by competitors, wins long-term battles for retention and loyalty.

Technology can provide some insights surveys cannot. Sophisticated self-help systems for example can answer customers' questions practically before they know they have them. On the agent desktop, technology can help keep agents organized, on-task, and in-sync with the goals of the organization and with each other. And it can help agents expedite the contact process by streamlining the diagnosis and resolution process.

But technology should never replace judgment and basic customer care principles at any level. "The cold, mechanical hand of technology will only get you so far. The warm hand of humanity is required to maximize the business potential of technology," Smith says.

That means keeping your service professionals front and center in the service experience, lest a highly clonable IVR or website become the only distinguishing factor of your customer experience. It does not mean dumping the sole responsibility for customer experience at the feet of the rank-and-file agents manning the phones. "It's not about exhorting your front-line customer service people to be nicer – they're probably doing as much as they can," Smith says. "It's about being really clear about who your customers are, what they value, and what your brand stands for, and designing the processes and training your people to deliver that every day."

How to be a customer experience standout

It's no coincidence that a number of the companies delivering an unmatched customer experience are among the newest. Relative newcomers such as Amazon and Prudential's youth-leaning Egg brand in Britain have been able to start from ground zero with modern technology and no institutional legacies. These companies know very clearly who they are and who they are trying to serve, and clearly communicate that both to the marketplace and to their own employees.

"Building that brand platform means articulating a promise to customers that makes very evident what they can expect from you, and why they should come to you," Smith says. But building a customer experience around safe objectives or simply doing business the way it has always been done is unlikely to score points and create lasting value. Aggressive goals, which may not have clear paths to success, are the sort of unique offerings that successful companies can put forward. Amazon nearly went bust trying to source one million titles – but Amazon wanted to be the place where you could get any book. It was a proposition that could be communicated to the marketplace, and it became a successful one.

In the contact center, that means doing more than simply meeting last year's service levels or attaining an industry average. It means creating a distinctive experience the customer cannot duplicate anywhere else. "If your processes adopt a cookie-cutter approach and people are forced to adhere to a system, it takes away any of the personality and personalization there could be," Smith says. That is where so many companies shortchange
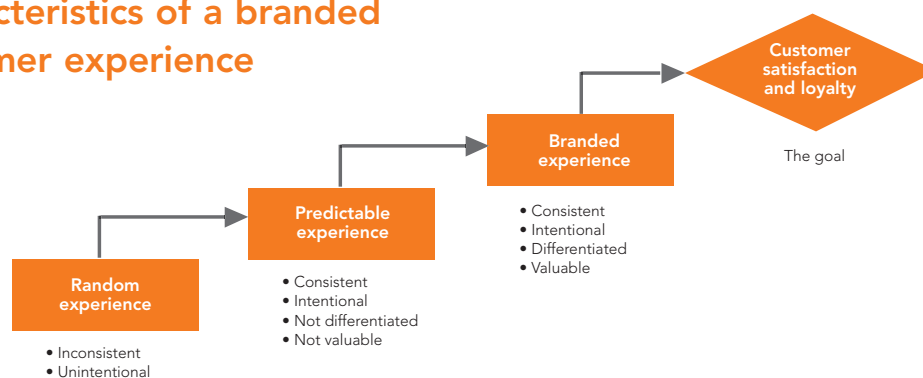
Characteristics of a branded customer experience

Random experience
- Inconsistent
- Unintentional

Predictable experience
- Consistent
- Intentional
- Not differentiated
- Not valuable

Branded experience
- Consistent
- Intentional
- Differentiated
- Valuable

Customer satisfaction and loyalty
The goal

Figure 2
Source: "Managing the Customer Experience – Turning Customers into Advocates," Shaun Smith and Joe Wheeler, 2002

the customer experience by tying it to conventional wisdom "best practices," which place too much emphasis on sameness and assumes customers want to be treated the same no matter where they may take their business. In fact, Smith believes that "in the absence of a clearly articulated strategy, copying other companies' best practices is bad practice."

Rather than focusing energy on devising rigid processes and procedures, Smith advocates spending the lion's share of research time on determining who your best customers are and identifying ways to create a captivating experience for them. "That's not what most companies do – most organizations have a very loose understanding of their customers and what they're after, but they have very tight control over the processes," he says. "The very best brands – the ones who have the most enthusiastic customers – are very tight about who their customers are, what they value, and most importantly, what the brand promises. They can then afford to be looser about procedures, giving employees more freedom to deliver that promise in the best way for that particular customer. If you make it so cookie-cutter that you reduce it to a mechanistic experience for customer and employee both, it leads to turnover – you create the problem you were trying to avoid."

Customers take notice when they receive an experience that is clearly not delivered by the book. Smith cites a service interaction between smoothie-maker Innocent Drinks and a customer whose discarded bottle fermented in a trash can and exploded all over his office cubicle. Any responsible company could have simply sent him a free coupon. A curmudgeonly company could have simply cited that its drinks are meant to be kept cold and that fermentation is an obvious side effect. Innocent not only responded with a case of free drinks, but sent the customer a personalized message chastising his "very badly behaved smoothie for re-decorating his office," putting a smile on a regrettable situation and creating a memorable customer experience. This raises another important issue and that is tone of voice. The best brands have a tone of voice that they use to communicate to customers in a way that is also differentiated. Google has one; so does Apple, The Geek Squad, and Southwest – and they are all different. Unless the call center reflects that tone of voice, you might just as well outsource it and trust the experience to luck.

Designing the new experience – routine transaction in a contact center

	First impression	Wait time	Complete my transactions	Exit the contact center
Core	• Personal greeting or automated attendant that directs caller to the appropriate queue	• Pleasant music with intermittent announcements asking for continued patience	• Rep greets customer with "How can I help?" • Transaction completed accurately, quickly	• Rep asks, "Is there anything more we can do for you today?" • Rep thanks customer using customer name
Differentiated	• Greeted with direct access to a knowledgeable agent (especially VIP customers) • A short and simple automated attendant menu ALWAYS with an option to talk to a human and ALWAYS with self-serve, IVR options	• Estimated hold time with option to leave callback number • Priority queuing for VIP customers to minimize wait time • Pleasant – even entertaining – on-hold source	• Rep offers suggestions when appropriate • Customer never asked for the same information twice • Comprehensive understanding of customer history across all channels • When service is not met (when a great customer has to wait too long or an issue cannot be immediately resolved) send a goodwill offer	• Customers are sent a follow-up e-mail or provided with an 800 number for feedback with an incentive to respond • Any open issues are "followed up" as promised in a timely manner by phone, e-mail, fax or other methods of the customer's choice
Enablers	• CTI • IVR • Automated attendant	• Priority queuing • Callback queuing and routing • Intelligent, skills-based routing • On-hold source/ announcement flexibility	• Unified agent desktop for 360-degree customer view • Multi-channel, universal queue • Analytics for understanding preferences and trends	• Process and technology for feedback and capture • Agent empowered and trained to interact with customers across product lines or seamless escalation process

Figure 3

Adapted from "Managing the Customer Experience – Turning Customers into Advocates" Shaun Smith and Joe Wheeler, 2002

Performance metrics can be used to determine which agents are best delivering your brand message. Coordinated desktop applications also make it possible for agents to take the best possible action to resolve each customer encounter, in a way that can be tracked and executed on by the rest of the organization. Put simply, there's no point in having aggressive agents willing to do anything to get the job done if they cannot clearly record the results of a call or ensure that it is acted upon.

Some customer-experience factors have nothing to do with technology, but everything to do with attitude. HSBC's FirstDirect, the UK bank mentioned earlier, holds "fancy dress" days in its call center, when agents outfit themselves to the nines and conduct business. "Nobody sees the agents but themselves, but it creates a sense of fun, and at the same time, helps them engage with the brand values. That shows up in the customer experience, even if the customer isn't aware of the reason."

Note that creating a sublime customer experience expressly does not mean that you must execute on each and every dimension at a higher service or satisfaction rating than your competitors. "If Southwest Airlines were to do a customer service survey, they might find that to improve Southwest, they should offer food and advance seating, and transfer baggage. But if they did all of that, they would go out of business or at the very least cease to create a great customer experience for their most profitable customers!" Smith says. "For Southwest customers, what's of value to them is the speed, frequency, and low cost of service." It is a powerful reminder that satisfaction ratings and customer experience are not necessarily directly correlated. A superior experience need not score a perfect 10 in all avenues of performance if those attributes are of lower importance to the target customers – but you had better be scoring 10 on those that are.

It really does happen in the contact center

Customer experience, and by extension the ongoing business relationship with any customer, lives and dies at the point of contact. All the glossy advertising in the world cannot compensate for a consistently weak experience. "Surveys find that only 26 percent of a purchase decision is influenced by advertising. By far the factors more frequently cited are personal experience and referrals," Smith says. "Advertising gets you onto the shopping list, but it doesn't keep you there."

Ideally, advertising serves to establish a promise and an expectation for a unique and appealing customer experience, which is then confirmed and reinforced every single time the customer touches the organization. In fact, the contact center is on the hook, yet uniquely placed, to sustain the customer experience regardless of changes elsewhere in the organization. "The average tenure of CEOs in large corporations in the US and UK is about 18 months, so what you get when you have such rapid turnover is executives desperately trying to hang on and meet stock market expectations, which results in an incredible amount of short-term thinking and risk aversion," Smith says.

The best customer experiences are delivered by companies that have so deeply embedded their brand message and customer priorities in their DNA that each and every agent can present the best the company has to offer even in a transitional period of short-term thinking. They create self-sustaining customer communities who are so focused on their interaction with each other that they forgive the occasional mishap, and see it as an opportunity to actively engage with the company and make improvements because they believe their patronage is truly valued.

Where do you focus?

There is a disconnect between consumers' ranking of what leads to an excellent experience and where companies invest to create an excellent experience.
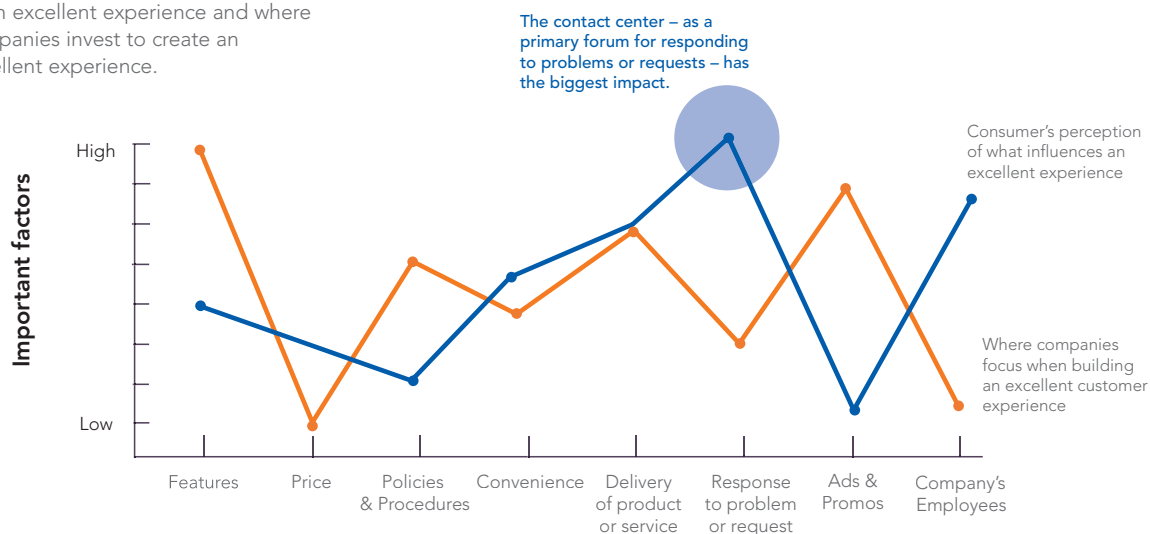
The contact center – as a primary forum for responding to problems or requests – has the biggest impact.

Consumer's perception of what influences an excellent experience

Where companies focus when building an excellent customer experience

Important factors — High / Low

Service attributes: Features · Price · Policies & Procedures · Convenience · Delivery of product or service · Response to problem or request · Ads & Promos · Company's Employees

Figure 4
Source: Forum Corporation, 2001

No barriers

Achieving that goal requires a customer service commitment that completely denies the existence of barriers. The customer experience will surely break down if the different communities that make up an organization do not understand the role they must play to build and maintain it. This means paying more than lip service to the concept of customer centricity – it requires aligning the internal organizations that provide the "care and feeding" of customers to achieve the same goal – building and maintaining the environment that provides the right service to the right customers and creates value for those customers they cannot get anywhere else. "Really strong brands have marketing, customer service, and human resources all working as one around a common agenda, which is the customer experience," Smith says.

Marketing's contribution is the articulation and refinement of the brand promise, using advertising and outreach to communicate the virtues of doing business with your company and setting it apart from competitors and pretenders. The customer service organization must be prepared, on a monthly, daily, weekly, and hourly basis, to deliver on that promise to customers, with the right training, systems, and most importantly, management support to make the right decisions by each and every caller.

HR's role in this process cannot be overlooked. Look at the global market for customer service personnel as an opportunity, rather than a negative. HR should focus on bringing people into the organization that will be a natural fit for the customer experience, who can believe in the company's brand mission, and who will use every tool and opportunity at their disposal to preserve that experience whenever possible.

Summary

The contact center's role in a customer experience management strategy cannot be underestimated. Consumers perceive that a company's ability to respond to a problem or request has a higher influence on an excellent experience than any other attribute, as shown in Figure 4. That puts the contact center front and center in creating that experience – consistently, intentionally, but in a manner that is differentiated and adds value.

Your customer experience can never be better than the people you place on the end of every telephone call, e-mail, or web chat. Only they have the unique opportunity to strengthen your relationships every time a customer reaches out, and that can only happen if they are given the tools and trust to make every contact the right contact. "It is about having people who like people, who have personalities, and are willing to engage with customers and get beyond the form-filling," Smith says. "You need a working environment where people are naturally curious and interested in doing business with your customers – not where they are driven by management to pick up the phone within three rings every time."

About Cincom Synchrony™

Cincom Synchrony simplifies the complexities of today's contact center to enhance the customer's experience, while simultaneously optimizing agent and operational efficiency, and driving better decision-making. By uniting multiple applications, systems and resources into an intelligent agent desktop, along with multi-channel interaction management, Synchrony provides inbound and outbound environments with a high-value, low-cost contact center solution. For over seven years, Synchrony has been hard at work in contact centers around the world and is backed by Cincom's three decades of experience, and deep domain expertise for rapid and continuous return on investment. For more information, visit www.cincom.com/synchrony.

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