

The digital era, the driving force behind customer-everything

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The brand-centric approach of yesterday is quickly being replaced by customer-driven everything, where customers are dictating the style, quantity and mediums that marketers must use to reach them and win their business and loyalty...

In the digital era, a number of technology trends, most notably big data, social enterprise, cloud computing, and mobility, have resulted in the epicentre of marketing's focus in the modern business becoming the customer.



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Today, customers are bombarded with information from myriad online and offline sources, from the moment they wake up and check their social networks on their mobile devices, until such time as they go to bed. These potential clients no longer rely on advertisements and in-store salespeople to help them decide on a purchase, they simply Bing it, read online reviews and comparisons, and ask their friends for recommendations over social networks.

When a customer has a bad customer experience, they are quick to voice their disappointment over social networks, and in this space their dissatisfaction always holds the potential to get amplified and go on to cause serious reputational damage to a company's brand and eventually lead to customer defection. Positive experiences, on the other hand, lead to satisfied customers that turn into loyal customers.

Creating a compelling customer experience in the cloud-first, mobile-first era

The days of companies simply relying upon availability and pricing to win, serve, and retain customers are over. In order for businesses to enhance their customer experience, they must look to product innovation and differentiation as well as experience.

Even established enterprises have seen their market share cannibalised by start-ups that disrupt industries by bringing innovative products and services to market first. To prevent this, companies need to reinvent their product offerings to see off these kinds of disruptive challengers and maintain or even grow their market share.

Innovation also extends to novel ways of customer interaction and service delivery, for instance Nedbank worked closely with the Microsoft Enterprise Strategy Team to integrate Microsoft's platform for unified communications, Lync, into their branch environment. This enabled customers visiting at peak times to use online banking, supported by a call-centre based video banker, as a viable alternative to waiting for an available cashier. Ultimately, the bank managed to reduce waiting times by more than 40% at peak operating hours.

Using big data to walk a mile in the customers' shoes

The ability to identify and anticipate customer wants and needs in a market context, determines the future of an enterprise. For companies to simplify their customer experiences, they require context-based insights.

Well-applied market, customer and competitive information can put the right products in the right markets at the right time, and also help bring in more customers, which allow the business to advance its marketplace position. The most progressive enterprises will track sources of customer information and combine the data with intelligence from other sources that include real-time conversations on social networks, for example.

The Red Robin restaurant chain in the United States tested a new hamburger across the chain by providing their frontline waiters with mobile devices on which to input customer feedback. This kind of testing, feedback, and response would normally take between 12 and 18 months to be completed when using traditional means, but by using this novel approach, the company was able to get a new, improved burger on to the menu within four weeks.

The digital era's version of from "the horse's mouth"

The use of social networking websites has become pervasive within virtually every facet of the consumer's personal and professional lives. As such, consumers also expect to engage with their favourite brands over these channels in order to get information on products and services, as well as gaining access to a channel of communication that is much more immediate when it comes to addressing customer complaints.

Social networking channels are not just useful for CRM purposes though, but also allow for greater productivity amongst the staff and management of an enterprise, since the network can be used to get questions answered quicker and find resources faster. Furthermore, the network can serve as a forum for collaboration by facilitating group discussions and file sharing, which enables employees to crowd source ideas and team up for success.

Standard Bank opted to employ the enterprise social network, Yammer, to stay relevant as a business, keep pace with the market, understand the needs of the customer, and crowd source the best ideas to meet those needs. As a result, the bank was able to make a culture shift towards becoming a much more dynamic organisation, unifying its geographically dispersed workforce, and extend the reach of external networks due to utilising Yammer to connect with outside partners and experts for richer communication.

In the end, the key to obtaining a competitive advantage in the digital era is for enterprises to understand the preferences of their customers. In addition, businesses have to digitally transform their business by adopting the right devices and services in order to be able to respond quickly to changing client demands as well as the disruption unleashed by innovative competitors.

Doing so will put businesses on a course to achieving success in the new customer-centric reality, as they will learn more about their customers, deliver the experiences that today's smart shoppers demand, and get more involved with the new forms of communication that consumers favour. Ultimately, businesses will be able to personalise the customer experience, differentiating their brands, and most importantly build customer loyalty in the digital age.

ABOUT NIR TENZER

As Microsoft South Africa's Marketing and Operations Director, Nir Tenzer is responsible for the company's entire corporate and product marketing activities, including leading the product Business Groups, the Go-to-Market activities, the Customer and Partner Experience, all compete initiatives, as well as the company's business operations.

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