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THE EXPERIENCE IMPERATIVE:

Customer Experience Executives
Share Their Stories

IN COLLABORATION WITH
northhighland
WORLDWIDE CONSULTING

Introduction

Understanding who your customers are, collectively and as individuals, has never been more important. Companies that prioritize customer experience report higher revenue, lower costs, increased customer loyalty, more engaged employees, and, in some cases, healthier communities.

Customers today have unprecedented power in the global marketplace. New digital and social technologies let potential customers research products, services, and pricing with greater efficiency, and telegraph their delight or disappointment with companies in real time. Barriers to entry have been lowered, and new, often surprising, competitors are offering consumers a noisy array of options. Now, your company's authority in the marketplace has less to do with traditional business strengths like distribution, intellectual property, manufacturing, market share, and information, and increasingly with the reality of your customers' experience with your company.

Understanding who your customers are, collectively and as individuals, has never been more important. Companies that prioritize customer experience report higher revenue, lower costs, increased customer loyalty, more engaged employees, and, in some cases, healthier communities. But the process of adopting these strategies is highly iterative, and inextricably linked with the employee experience and, for that matter, anyone who might be involved in an organization's operational value chain. The work doesn't have to be complex, but everyone must be on board. And as companies become more adept at leveraging customer behavior insights for problem solving, growth, new product development, innovation, and leadership development, they are better prepared to chart their own futures.

For this research brief, we interviewed Chief Customer Officers (CCOs), CEOs, and other customer experience (CX) executives across multiple industries.

What emerged in our conversations were stories of how leaders are addressing CX challenges and capitalizing on CX victories within their organizations. As one technology CCO shared, "Letting go of a system that we know we don't fully understand yet creates uncertainty and fear, both because the playbooks are different and the skills required to thrive in a customer-focused organization are different." He sees it as a tremendous opportunity.

In this report, we share five key themes that arose from our interviews with CX executives:

- The Emerging Role of the Chief Customer Officer
- Leadership and the New Metrics
- The Rise of the Collaborative Team
- The Power of Story
- Creating the Future

The experiences shared in these candid conversations offer a rare opportunity to understand how the work of CX transformation actually plays out when real business objectives and real people—customers, employees, stakeholders, and other constituents—are involved.



Alex Bombeck, Global Customer Experience Leader, North Highland



A New Role Emerges: The Chief Customer Officer

The growth in the number of chief customer and/or experience officers (and related staff) is a key indicator of an important trend: Companies are getting serious about reorganizing their operations around customer needs.

The role of the Chief Customer Officer (CCO) is a relatively new, increasingly common addition to the C-Suite. According to the CCO Council, a trade group, some 22% of Fortune 100 companies and 10% of Fortune 500 companies have created the position. “The job, and the discipline associated with it, was often poorly defined,” says Jeanne Bliss, the founding customer experience officer at Lands’ End, Allstate, Coldwell Banker, and Microsoft. To be successful, she says, the lead chief customer professional in any organization must simplify how the organization works together to achieve customer-driven growth, engage the leadership team, and connect the work to a return on investment. The CCO develops mechanisms to bring the voice of the customer to every department, and find tangible ways for every job function to successfully rethink the

work from a customer-focused perspective. “I have long called the Chief Customer Officer the ‘human duct tape’ of the organization,” she says.

The Chief Customer Officer cannot and should not work in a vacuum. The presence of other dedicated customer experience employees—who are either trained in the discipline or who develop expertise through practice—is essential to help companies define and understand the lives of their customers, overcome institutional barriers, and deliver measurable value. With access and accountability to the CEO, the CCO has a unique opportunity to ensure that customer focus is supported from the top through resource allocation and the institutionalization of customer-focused initiatives.

CCOs and their associates should consider five essential actions that can help them move their work forward. In the examples below, even small changes can inspire big benefits.

Create Urgency.

Donna Peeples, Founder & Chief Customer Engagement Officer, Motivated, former Chief Customer Experience Officer, AIG

When Donna Peeples was tapped to create the first-ever global complaint policy with her former company in 2013, the company was deep in recovery mode. "At the time, AIG was in 130 countries around the world, all with different regulatory compacts, different cultures, different products and services," she says. And there was no universal definition for a "complaint," or even a "customer." She had one year to make it work, and quickly realized that she needed to get buy-in across the company for the effort to work at scale. She formed cross-functional advisory boards, and customized her pitch and calls to action for every market. She kept in close contact with everyone. "We could never underestimate that we were running a campaign, and we had to be out there every day shaking hands and kissing babies."

Be the Voice of the Customer.

Sanjeev Sisodiya, Chief Customer Success Officer, Persistent Systems

One of Sanjeev Sisodiya's first acts as the new (and first) CCO of Persistent Systems was to change the way the company reported success internally. It used to be simply a transactional measure: "Like many sales organizations, we have an internal list of new customers. Every time there is a deal win, an email goes out that celebrates the work we've won, who the competition was, the nature of the work, and the value of the deal." Sisodiya flipped that, and created the customer success announcement. "Now, once the work is done, we send an email that talks about the outcome of the work, the value the customer derived, and how we made an impact on our customer's business."

Understand your Return on Investment.

Jerry Wilson, former Chief Customer and Commercial Officer, Coca-Cola

In his 24 years at Coca-Cola, Jerry Wilson held many different jobs. But as the former Chief Customer and Commercial Officer, he spent more than 70% of his time in the field, meeting with customers, bottlers, and suppliers, and understanding the company's sustainability efforts. "It's a relationship-building job, of course. The role can inform innovation, research and development, acquisitions—all kinds of things. But at the end of the day, it's a revenue-growing job." Wilson benchmarked their efforts against the overall beverage category, year after year. "Were we growing revenue faster than the rate of the beverage category? That links directly to the organic growth of the customer."



Q: Who owns the customer?

A: Everyone.

It can be tempting to think the appointment of a customer experience officer means the voice of the customer has found a home. The customer-centric journey is, in fact, one that everyone in the company must take, with shared understanding and commitment, and accountability across the leadership and every job function. Everyone is responsible for the customer.

Inspire Employees by Aligning Around Customer Experience.

Jonathan Earle, Head of Strategy, Planning, Innovation & Experience, Telefónica UK

When Jonathan Earle's team began to formalize customer-centric thinking in the organization, they expected some resistance. Some senior product managers, who had been on board since the early days of the company, were openly skeptical of the new direction. But new training brought skeptics and believers together with new ideas for embedding customer insights into their daily jobs in simple ways. "In a world where barriers to entry are so low and there is so much choice, not having the customer at the heart is a suboptimal strategy."

Link to Purpose.

Lara Lee, Senior Vice President, Customer Experience Design, Lowe's

"The home improvement space itself has a lot of deep emotional ingredients, which is good fodder for us to work with experience design," says Lara Lee. "Home is the container for your most important memories, your aspirations. It's a lot about transforming your space and also yourself and the people you care about in the process." But it's also good fodder for culture change. Lee embraced the Lowe's purpose statement—Help people love where they live—and made sure that the bigger purpose of Lowe's underpinned the work that she was asking the organization to take on. "The spirit of our people comes back to us again and again. Empower them and liberate them to spend the time on the things that matter, and they'll get it right." But culture change is challenging work. "There's a lot of mess and failure that can lead to inertia without the fuel to push past it. Purpose is the fuel."



Leadership and the New Metrics

Smart companies use customer-focused measurements and analytics to redesign their products, processes, services, and employee positions and responsibilities. Smart leaders make sure employees are given access to the tools, skills, and information they need to grow and be accountable in a customer-centric environment.



Metrics are an essential tool for managing any thriving business. All the executives we interviewed were familiar with traditional customer loyalty or happiness indicators, such as the Net Promoter Score, which many management experts consider to be a leading indicator of revenue growth. But as a CX management tool, the score, which is calculated by responses to the question, “How likely is it that you will recommend [Company Brand] to a friend or colleague?” felt insufficient for most.

The executives we spoke with tend to describe their organization’s strategy for measurement as an evolving journey. One finance industry CCO said that because of their CX work, “We now have a roadmap as to how we are going to get more sophisticated about what we are measuring to improve the customer experience. It’s long-term. We expect our measures will change and evolve over the next three years and beyond.” For many organizations, an important area of

consideration will be compensation. “We are asking people to work a different way, across silos and collaboratively,” another interviewee said. “We will need new ways to chart their growth and link that to compensation.”

So how do these CX experts measure success? Measures that are core to the business, such as growth, revenue, and customer loyalty goals, must be set from the top. “If you’re not working toward a clear, measurable business impact, then it’s not going to work,” one interviewee said. But smaller, more iterative initiatives launched within an organization should embrace custom measures designed to help understand the impact of the work, specifically where it relates to solving a customer problem or making the customer experience better. It is the job of the organization to provide necessary training and remove roadblocks that prevent all employees from taking an active role in co-creating customer experience improvements.

In the following examples, our interviewees express a common belief that customer insights could and should be gathered on a continual basis. Though the means varied—surveys, focus groups, research, digital “listening posts,” and employee feedback—all believed that relevant customer data was rich fodder for both innovation and inspiration.

Understand Customer Frustration and Build Better Products.

Nick Frunzi, CCO, Esri

“We do measure Net Promoter Score, but we don’t see it as an actionable score,” says Nick Frunzi, the CCO of Esri, a billion-dollar geolocation software and services business. “It’s just a good data point.” What it doesn’t do, he says, is reveal what part of the experience that a customer didn’t like. Gathering deeper insights, he says, has helped the company design smarter solutions to address customer frustrations large and small.

He cites three key listening posts that help him better understand customer issues. The first is tech support, which logs over 120,000 contacts per year, and rates customer satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 5, with five being the highest rating; “Anything lower than a 2.5 gets a call.” The second is their salespeople, who don’t work on commission.

“They have the time to really listen to their customers and feed those experiences back to us.” The last, and most useful, he says, has been a new customer-focused website, myesri.com, which was designed to address real customer needs, wishes, and complaints received through their listening channels.

“We didn’t launch the site for ‘call deflection,’ which is a common reason to do it,” he says. “Before the site, you had to go to six or more web properties, and even then you might not be able to get someone on the phone.” The commitment to getting the website right has translated into more collaboration internally, happier customers, and significant savings.

Re-Think Customer Success Through Metrics.

Fred Voccola, CEO, Kaseya

When Fred Voccola joined Kaseya as CEO in the summer of 2015, he decided the IT management services company needed a new metric and a new customer success team to ensure the organization embraced CX in a truly meaningful way. “We think of it as a measurement 2.0 model,” he says. They collect all the traditional customer experience measures, but, he says, “we wanted a key performance indicator [KPI] that we were accountable not to Kaseya’s measure of success, but the customer’s measure of success.” That number, says Voccola, is the stated growth goals of each customer—a number the company is in a position to track. “Our customers use our products to grow their own businesses. So, we take all their individual goals—let’s say customer X wants to grow 17% this year, and customer Y projects 12%—and aggregate them into one KPI that we are accountable to.” That figure sits atop the dashboard that Voccola tracks daily. “I look at that number before I look at sales,” he says.

Many Kaseya customers have been with the company for years. “We need to understand and be committed to their growth,” Voccola says. The metric is also reviewed by the board on a monthly basis to help drive short-, medium-, and long-term decision-making. Voccola’s customer success team is training all key staff in the metric: how it is derived, why it matters, and how each employee should use it as a touchstone in their work. The metric provides a shot of energy across the organization. “We look at it like a NPS, customer satisfaction score, and renewal score all rolled into one,” he says.

Make Customer Insights Part of Every Conversation.

Jonathan Earle, Head of Strategy, Planning, Innovation & Experience, Telefónica UK

If you want to pitch a new product idea at Telefónica O2, you had better be prepared. “The first question that gets asked in any meeting is, ‘What is the customer insight?’” says Jonathan Earle, the Head of Strategy, Planning, Innovation & Experience for Telefónica UK.

Telefónica UK, a mobile telecommunications company with 24.8 million customers in the UK, is awash with data about who their customers are and how they live. Their insights into customer behavior, coupled with research on sales, future product development, and customer feedback, are being embedded into an organization-wide way of thinking that will help the company leverage coming technology developments—like smart appliances—into new, customized products and services.

To make sure more employees are better prepared to use these insights effectively, Earle and his team introduced a customer-centered design program in 2015. More than 200 key people from a variety of functions have gone through the training, including program managers, IT professionals, analysts, and digital services specialists. The training offers clear guidance regarding how consumer experience thinking and data should be integrated in workflows, prototyping, proof points, and internal feedback.





The Rise of the Collaborative Team

How companies are dismantling silos by encouraging cross-functional teams to work, and be rewarded, in new ways.

The CX executives interviewed for this brief were in agreement on many points, but one stood above the rest: The most powerful way to engage an entire organization in the important work of aligning around the customer is to get people from different functions and departments to work together on meaningful assignments.

“It is a natural way to generate real understanding of what drives other functions,” one CEO shared. “Suddenly, people realize that the solution they were delivering to solve a customer complaint was just causing a different problem for customers and colleagues down the line.” And the ideas that are generated tend to be more creative and efficient, and have a better chance at long-term impact.

Cross-functional teams work best when they have clear goals and when participant concerns are addressed clearly and with empathy. Employees return from these teams better equipped to build on their CX learning going forward, and leverage their newly enhanced internal network to better accomplish and enjoy their work.

Our interviewees were also united on another aspect of the cross-functional team: The work can be anxiety-producing for participants. The sidebar and anecdotes below offer simple tips to set up a team for success, help people maximize their contributions, and turn participants into advocates for CX transformation.

Work Through Resistance to Create Real Value.

Jenn Moore, Vice President, Exchange Markets, Health Net

In many cases, the addition of cross-functional teams can feel like a big ask, particularly in a fast-moving business environment, says Jenn Moore, Vice President, Exchange Markets at Health Net, which provides healthcare services to more than 6.1 million people.

The launch of the ACA and related healthcare exchanges had created a swirl of new opportunity for Health Net, specifically in California. Moore's customers have complicated lives: They are the working poor, struggling to make ends meet even with government subsidies. Many speak primarily Spanish. "Many of us who are thinking about the customer service delivery mechanisms can't relate to what they go through on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis," she says.

So Moore's initial steps into the lives of her customers included survey, focus group, and research work that identified a broad set of issues that were vexing new customers and impacting the business, like confusing billing and re-enrollment processes. Armed with a hit list of issues, Moore instituted rapid cycle improvement (RCI) teams—Six Sigma-based cross-functional teams designed to share expertise, identify areas of improvement, and deepen the commitment to the customer across the organization.

"I insisted that we meet one day a week, in person. All day," says Moore. She required people to fly in for the volunteer assignment. The pushback was immediate, from managers who didn't want to give up staff, to team members unhappy to be working with people from functions who competed for resources, or made their daily work lives more difficult. She also unearthed some deep inertia. "I heard a lot of, 'It won't make a difference anyway; we don't have any resources.'"

Moore made the case explicitly for each team: the magnitude of the problem she was trying to address; the scope of the solution she was looking for; and the specific business value she expected to generate. Her results have been encouraging on many levels, from immediate improvements to a growing

How to curate a cross-functional team

SEEK A DIVERSE GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS.

Vary by job title, department, and degree of subject matter expertise. Be mindful of diversity in all its expressions, including age, race, gender, nationality, orientation, and other key characteristics. These teams should be considered a development opportunity. Consult with human resources to align your efforts with theirs.

BE AWARE OF INFORMAL NETWORKS.

Rarely is an organizational chart a sufficient blueprint for how work gets done in an organization. Identify and invite individuals with informal power, as well.

GET SUPERVISOR BUY-IN.

It's not just the team members who serve. Before you tap anyone's direct report, be sure that their supervisor understands your goals. Embrace their needs and concerns.

SET CLEAR AND REASONABLE PARAMETERS FOR SUCCESS.

Most of the work that team members will perform falls outside their normal jobs. Many are justifiably nervous about wasting time, or how their work will be evaluated. What's in it for them?

NAIL THE KICKOFF.

The first meeting sets the stage for the often difficult work to come. Open a space to talk about expectations and anxieties, answer questions, and create safe mechanisms for feedback. Consulting partners can be invaluable for breaking the ice and keeping the meeting on track.

CELEBRATE THE WORK PUBLICLY.

Make sure the outcomes, including individual achievements of the participants, are shared in meaningful ways.

culture shift. "We're seeing customer insights and issues come up more and more in our normal operations," she says. She's also seeing leadership bloom. "I get feedback from the people who go through these teams that they've built relationships across the company that help them do their work more effectively. Out of our very first RCI, two people got promoted to vice president—one from manager to director."

Cross-Functional Team Members Become Advocates for CX.

Founder & Chief Customer Engagement Officer, Motivated, former Chief Customer Experience Officer, AIG

When Donna Peeples was asked to evaluate the need for a customer service strategy for AIG, she understood the enormity of the task. The company had nearly been destroyed by the economic downturn and had to be highly responsive to regulators.

“We needed a policy and set of procedures that overarched the many countries and markets we operated in,” she says. It wasn’t just an emergency, it was an opportunity. “We needed to make the case that a deeper understanding of the customer could ultimately improve our processes, technology, and people, and deliver better service.” She created a series of advisor groups to help her team understand the nuances in every market, evaluate the need for a customer complaint function, and shape any customer-related mechanism that would be put into place. “I called them the UN of customer relations,” she said.

But in addition to their input, she says, “they were also a great way for me to help get the word out into the marketplace and business units.” Peeples, who had been tapped from outside AIG, was strategic in her choices, asking both experts and department heads to serve, but also people who were powerful in informal networks. “This work formed the

“Well, here’s a newsflash: The customer doesn’t care what department they’re talking to, what the function is, or what tech you’re using. They only care that they have a need and they want it answered.”

Donna Peeples, Founder & Chief Customer Engagement Officer, Motivated, former Chief Customer Experience Officer, AIG

foundation of senior leadership’s decision to move ahead.” She found the learning provided by the advisory groups was a harbinger of best practices to come. “The customer cuts a swath across the entire organization, but we tend to compartmentalize and think about things in our own verticals,” she says. “Well, here’s a newsflash: The customer doesn’t care what department they’re talking to, what the function is, or what tech you’re using. They only care that they have a need and they want it answered.”



The Power of Story

How content, communications and technology can build trust with customers, and empathy and engagement with employees.

Technology is an extraordinary tool for listening to, creating, and amplifying meaningful communication. But in the hands of disciplined CX practitioners, technology becomes an indispensable ally to understand customer needs in deeper, more personal ways—and, in some instances, in real time. All of our interviewees talked about the power of storytelling to foster a connection between customers and the company, and spur creative thinking in employees. All relied on a variety of technology and techniques to find and communicate customer stories, from ethnographic work and focus groups to the monitoring of social media conversations, both inside and outside the company.

One striking feature of this focus on stories is that the most valuable nuggets are not always linked to a marketing or sales function. In fact, stories large and small, and storytelling as a professional art, are increasingly relied upon as a natural CX reinforcement loop. One executive said that an important part

of her work now is ensuring that stories of internal success—those small but significant moments when a customer insight is turned into a measurable win—are being captured and shared with their 10,000 employees as widely as possible in newsletters, trainings, and all-hands meetings led by the CEO: “We want to raise up our own employees, who are starting to solve customer problems at every level, as heroes, not just the executives.”

The interviewees stopped short of declaring this to be a golden age of storytelling, but their enthusiasm is infectious. Technology can appear to make storytelling easier, but, in fact, it’s the quality, not the quantity, of the contacts that matter. In the examples below, two executives used stories from and about the customer in very different ways. But the overarching theme is clear: If you are listening to your customer through a lens of empathy and understanding, better relationships, products, and business outcomes result.

Turn your customers into advocates on social media.

Most companies are using social media in increasingly effective ways to conduct surveys, perform customer service functions, and promote their products. But to turn a customer into an advocate requires a deeper level of engagement and a legitimate two-way conversation.

- **Make sure your social media professionals are trained, authorized, and empowered to advocate for the customer within your organization.**

Public conversations with no clear resolution will turn a potential advocate into a detractor.

- **Find ways to tap the expertise and enthusiasm of your customers.**

Satisfied customers will look for ways to help shape your company. Create meaningful opportunities to crowdsource ideas for new products or services, or invite customers to contribute their voices and images in marketing campaigns. Stoke conversation by sharing what's generated on microsites and social platforms.

- **Embrace and enhance the advocacy your customers are already performing.**

Customers today are creative about using products in surprising and unintended ways (think Mentos and Diet Coke) and are adept at publicly sharing tips on how to customize, adapt, or fix a product if it breaks. Smart companies find ways to acknowledge these passionate consumers on company-branded forums and in the social media ecosystem.

Leverage Customer Conversations Internally.

David Mingle, Executive Director, Global Connected Customer Experience, GM

Among his many roles at GM, David Mingle, Executive Director, Global Connected Customer Experience, oversees the Global Social Center of Expertise. "We use social pretty aggressively," he says. "We've mobilized over 500 social practitioners globally using a common set of tools with which they can listen deeply and at scale." Mingle uses his team to support potential sales, help with service or other issues, and engage with car buffs and brand enthusiasts, many of whom interact with the social team on a first-name basis. The ability to listen to customers on a broad scale has generated stories that have both spurred action on behalf of customers and helped to support a CX way of thinking within GM.

Mingle offers an example from 2014: His social team started noticing conversations among unhappy buyers of a new type of truck introduced that year. In the warm-weather states, the steering wheels were becoming unbearably hot. Mingle's team was able to capture that feedback early and feed it back into the system—one which he says is now increasingly prepared to act across silos to respond to customer needs. "We were able to make a spec change early enough to avoid a warranty or customer-satisfaction issue." Mingle says this is a perfect example of how storytelling at this level is both public and personal. Every interaction that successfully assists a customer with a product, sales, or service becomes a potential story to share inside the organization, he says. And for the customers who are watching the conversations play out, "a neural connection gets made that we are responsive."

Maximize CX by Telling the Customer's Story.

Jennifer Ramirez, Vice President, Global Customer Experience, Western Union

"Customer experience is all about changing human behavior," says Jennifer Ramirez, who leads Customer Experience and Transformation at Western Union. For the past four years, she's been responsible for framing and executing their "transformation agenda," a mandate from the CEO to rethink how the people who send and receive cash experience the transaction. Storytelling, as it turns out, is making a big difference.

Insights gleaned from research, focus groups, and comprehensive field visits have helped her team develop a unique training that lets employees experience Western Union through the personas of archetypal customers.

"When you walk through a transaction as, say, 'Rodrigo, the safety-first cash sender,'" says Ramirez, "you see new opportunities to work differently on the customer's behalf." Some 15% of the company's 10,000 employees have already been trained this way, and the experience is being integrated into human resources. "By the time you join us, you will have walked in the shoes of the customer in a real way."

Ramirez is already seeing this type of empathy making an impact. Consider fraud protection, a significant issue for both the company and the customer. "So, when 'Grandma' shows up and wants to send money to Nigeria, how can the person behind the counter talk to her to make sure she's not about to become a victim of fraud?" Drawing on the training and the new customer experience principles Ramirez's team put into place, designers and compliance experts were able to work together to create and beta-test new training for retailers, including conversation prompts on the transaction terminal, and new messaging and help cards in retail locations, all geared toward starting the conversation about fraud prevention.

"In corporate America, we can hurt ourselves over and over again if we try to solve long-term problems too much in the abstract, or too much in the future."

**Lara Lee, Senior Vice President,
Customer Experience Design, Lowe's**

Creating the Future

Using customer-derived insights to chart a competitive roadmap for your company; and how customer-focused companies help leaders make better short-, medium-, and long-term strategic decisions.

CX thinking lends itself powerfully to the challenging work of forecasting into the future. “When you really know who your customers are,” one CCO told us, “it gives you new ways of thinking about who they will be in the future. What resources should we allocate today to generate products that will continue to meet their needs over time?”

Moving the customer into the center of the equation doesn’t minimize the need to examine hard costs like those associated with staffing, commodities, or manufacturing, but instead reframes those analyses through the lens of customer insights. “Many times customers know more about what needs to

change than you do,” the CCO of a global consumer brand said. “Ideally, all the work an organization does to assess customer experience should translate into investment strategies at a very high level.”

That raises, he believes, questions that all CX-savvy companies need to ask: “How do you continue to be the voice of the customer in a decentralizing operating structure? How do you influence future thinking well beyond your direct reports?” For the interviewees, the journey to address those and many other questions informed an innovation process that was both iterative and unique to the organization.



From a Warehouse to a Stage.

In her quest to transform Lowe's into a customer-centric organization, Lara Lee decided to think about fashion. "Determining where we as a company should be 'trend-forward,' versus mainstream, is something we think about a lot," says Lee. Getting meaningful customer response is an essential part of that process.

Among Lee's projects was something she calls the "seasonal pad." It began in 2014 as a display showcasing outdoor-living tableaux: Halloween, Thanksgiving harvest, and Christmas scenes. It was a dramatic deviation from the usual store layout, which was set up for warehouse efficiency. "We have a fabulous trend and design team that works hard to understand trends in the world," says Lee—things like color, texture, and home decorating. But a big part of the fashion business for Lowe's—seasonal lighting, patio furniture sets, garden supplies, decorative fixtures, and, of course, Christmas trees, wreaths, and other outdoor features—was merchandised in standard bays, in heavy boxes tucked into rows of gray steel shelves. It was very difficult for customers to envision products, let alone shop.

Lee worked closely with store operators on the design and implementation of the seasonal pad, which she envisioned as a homey stage. "They took a leap of faith with us, because they believed that maintaining that space would take more labor, not less." Not only did it take less work, sales jumped immediately. Now, Lee's team is developing ways to turn the pad into a more immersive storytelling experience. Lee identifies the pad as an example of a "quick win" in which lessons are learned, insights are gleaned, trust across functions is deepened, growth occurs, and the customer develops a deeper reliance on Lowe's.

As the organization's transformation into customer-centric thinking matures, Lee is looking down the road, but cautiously: "In corporate America, we can hurt ourselves over

and over again if we try to solve long-term problems too much in the abstract, or too much in the future." Instead of asking yourself what your digital strategy should be, she says, ask yourself, "What do you want it to do for your customers?"

For Lowe's' major lines of business, that means starting with the jobs that the customers are trying to accomplish. "What are the emotional and psychological needs that they are trying to get met? How do we respond to the kitchen remodeler who needs design, but not construction help? Or the person who's upset because their door just got kicked in, and they need to replace it before dark?" By institutionalizing these insights, long-term moves become clearer. "Now we can talk digital strategy," she says.

"Letting go of a system we know for one that we don't fully understand yet creates uncertainty and discomfort. Both because the playbooks are different and also because the skills required to thrive in a customer-focused organization are different."

Sanjeev Sisodiya, Chief Customer Success Officer, Persistent Systems

Conclusion

The CX experts we spoke with had one personal characteristic in common—a visceral passion for doing the work. “Employees want to do the right thing for customers, at every level,” one senior vice president said. “The energy that is unleashed is enormously gratifying.”

Part of the passion comes from linking even simple work, like tweaking a call-center script or a graphical user interface, to a larger purpose of happier customers. It scales from there. “It became a natural part of my job to think about ways we could benefit the lives of our customers in larger ways,” said one CCO of a consumer products company. “It extended to meaningful conversations about the way we worked with suppliers on worker conditions, the way we impacted the environment through packaging, the way we used natural resources,” he said.

Considering those bigger impacts were not merely a way to telegraph good corporate citizenship. Those considerations became a serious line of thinking that linked the work that everyone in the company was doing to the human needs of customers, communities, and the planet we all share.

With persistent effort, and a commitment to small, powerful steps, organizations of any size can begin to leverage deep customer insights to open new markets, spur revenue growth, create new and better products, and inspire employee loyalty—and, of course, happier customers. Over time, the customer experience process of measurement, collaboration, co-creation, and iteration should be embedded in every part of the organization.

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